

AUSTRIA

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Austria has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the EU; early school leaving is below EU average. High participation in vocational education and training (VET), well adapted to the labour market, and high quality and relevance of VET courses offered are two main factors explaining this success. However, foreign-born students are much more likely to leave school and educational performance continues to be strongly dependent on parents' socioeconomic status (European Commission, 2016).

As a response to the European qualifications framework (EQF) initiative, Austria has designed a national qualifications framework (NQF) with an eight-level structure. It aims to include qualifications from all education and training subsystems and forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal). After several years of preparation, with intensive involvement of stakeholders and experts, the Austrian Parliament approved the Federal Act on the national qualifications framework ⁽¹⁾ in March 2016, meaning that the work towards full implementation can start.

Policy objectives

The main objective of the NQF is to map national qualifications, present them in relation to one another, and make implicit levels of the qualification system explicit, nationally as well as internationally. It has no regulatory functions and no effects on professional and other admissions. Its main objectives are communication and transparency.

The NQF's specific objectives are to:

- (a) strengthen transparency, understanding and comparability of Austrian qualifications internationally;
- (b) promote cross-border mobility;

⁽¹⁾ Published in the Federal Law Gazette 14/2016, Part I, issued on 21 March 2016.
https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2016_I_14/BGBLA_2016_I_14.pdf

- (c) make formal and non-formal qualifications easier to understand and more visible for Austrian citizens;
- (d) improve permeability between formal and non-formal sectors of the qualification system: develop new pathways, open new progression possibilities, and support lifelong learning;
- (e) progress the learning outcomes orientation;
- (f) promote the European dimension in higher education ⁽²⁾.

One important objective of the NQF is to strengthen the links and coordination between different subsystems by highlighting existing pathways and developing new ones to open up new progression possibilities ⁽³⁾. The NQF Act is based on the essential principle that mapping qualifications is intended for information and transparency purposes. The NQF is non-regulatory and has no legal effect on vocational and other authorisations.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NQF has eight levels. The decision on number of levels followed broad consultation and a study providing information on implicit hierarchy in the national qualification system, using statistical educational research and statistical frameworks (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and research, 2011). National qualification descriptions (curricula, training regulations, legal acts) were analysed to feed into preparation of level descriptors: these are defined as knowledge, skills and competence. Reference qualifications are used to illustrate levels of learning outcomes.

The learning outcomes orientation is being strengthened across education and training as learning outcomes are central to positioning qualifications in the NQF. Many qualifications are already learning outcomes oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions and work continues. Several initiatives are designed to strengthen this orientation. In general education and VET, educational standards have been

⁽²⁾ See explanations to the act (in German):
https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXV/II/_00999/fname_498915.pdf

⁽³⁾ Further information on these objectives can be found on the Austrian Parliament's on-line service on legal innovations (in German):
<https://www.help.gv.at/Portal.Node/hlpd/public/module?genetics.am=Content&p.contentid=10007.180581>

introduced. In general education, core subject areas (German, mathematics and English) are described in terms of learning outcomes.

In school-based VET, learning outcomes are defined in VET educational standards ⁽⁴⁾; this has been implemented in a step-by-step approach in recent years. Educational standards for VET schools and colleges define 'content' (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), 'action' (cognitive achievements required in particular subjects), and personal and social competences related to a specific field. In March 2009, the General Directorate for VET at the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture started a project (curriculum design, learning outcomes orientation) which aims to integrate educational standards into VET curricula. Some curricula for VET colleges have been revised and learning outcomes have been developed for each subject and the process continues. There was also a competence-oriented and standardised upper secondary school leaving examination (*AHS-Reifeprüfung*) and *BHS-Reifeprüfung* and *Diplomprüfung* during 2015/16; this aimed to increase transparency and access to higher education ⁽⁵⁾.

In apprenticeship (dual system), a training regulation is issued for each profile by the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. The regulations are largely written in learning outcomes and are currently under reform to strengthen the outcome orientation of apprenticeship training. Each consists of an occupational competence profile (*Berufsprofil*), with related activities and work descriptions, and job profile (*Berufsbild*), with knowledge and skills to be acquired by apprentices ⁽⁶⁾.

In higher education, implementation of the learning outcomes approach is clearly linked to the Bologna process and Dublin descriptors. Higher education institutions have already described their programmes and qualification profiles in learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) established under university autonomy (Cedefop, 2016) but implementation differs across higher education institutions.

⁽⁴⁾ A description of VET educational standards can be found in the project handbook, *Bildungsstandards in der Berufsbildung*.

http://www.berufsbildendeschulen.at/fileadmin/content/bbs/Handbuch_BIST_15.10.2015.pdf

⁽⁵⁾ <https://www.bmb.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/reifepruefungneu.html>

⁽⁶⁾ https://www.bmb.gv.at/schulen/bo/umsetzung/dielehre_18624.pdf?4k99xc

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

From the beginning, the Austrian approach has been characterised by active stakeholder involvement and occasional conflicting views on the NQF's role. The General Directorate for VET at the Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs initiated the process and is responsible for coordinating NQF development and implementation in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, which is responsible for higher education. Social partner organisations have played an active role in the process (Klenk, 2013).

The NQF Act establishes the governance structure and processes. It defines the responsibilities of institutions and bodies involved in implementation. The Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (*Österreichischer Austauschdienst (OeAD)*) will function as the main implementation coordinating body. Its tasks include, according to Article 5 of the Act:

- (a) the formal and content-related verification of the request for qualification mapping;
- (b) keeping a public NQF register with mapped qualifications, including description of a qualification and its learning outcomes, NQF level and the name of the provider;
- (c) setting up a list of those with expertise for any content-related verification of request for qualification mapping.

The NQF Act also envisages two bodies:

- (a) the NQF advisory board (*NQR-Beirat*), consisting of seven experts; this will advise the NQF coordinating body on examination of allocation requests;
- (b) the NQF steering group (*NQR-Steuerungsgruppe*), consisting of 30 members representing all the main stakeholders (all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education and Länder). The key task of the NQF steering group is to provide advice to public authorities responsible for education and training and qualifications at all levels, particularly the two coordinating ministries: the Federal Ministry of Education and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. Further tasks include approval of operational and appeal procedures and content-related issues (such as adoption of the NQF manual). The broad representation is meant to reflect stakeholder interests. One important topic of discussion is opening NQF levels 6 to 8 to non-traditional higher education qualification, with VET stakeholders on one side and higher education on the other. When the NQF was designed, the consensus was achieved in form of a 'Y-structure' opening the highest qualification levels to those awarded outside

higher education institutions. This was very important for parity of esteem of different learning contexts.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁷⁾

A validation strategy has been in development since 2013, with establishment of a working group comprising relevant federal ministries (education, research and economy; families and youth; labour, social affairs and consumer protection; health; defence and sports), social partner organisations (chamber of labour, chamber of commerce), youth organisations (Austrian Youth Association), adult education (Austrian Conference of Adult Education), Universities Austria and Austrian Association of Universities of Applied Sciences. Their work has been strongly linked to development of lifelong learning policies, development of the NQF, and implementation of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). The 2012 recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012) has also played a role in establishing the strategy. With the approved NQF Act in March 2016, a second implementation phase on inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NQF will be developed.

Throughout 2013, criteria and procedures for mapping qualifications from the non-formal learning context (adult education) to the NQF have been tested and simulated. In total, 15 qualifications provided by various adult education institutions have been selected and analysed, focusing specifically on aspects related to plausibility of learning outcomes, validity of the validation procedure, and quality of requests for the mapping of a qualification. Simulation was also used as a chance to test qualifications for 'NQF compatibility' as defined by criteria, such as size and sustainability of qualifications. Results have shown that terminologies need further sharpening (including qualification, qualification provider) and that many institutions awarding non-formal qualifications need further assistance in describing their qualifications in terms of learning outcomes in order to comply with NQF criteria. Results of this simulation will be used to set out procedures, documents, and criteria for mapping qualifications awarded outside formal education. As the draft procedure for mapping qualifications from the non-formal learning context to NQF levels has not been finalised, it will have to be refined after completion of this pilot phase.

⁽⁷⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al. (forthcoming).

A consultation document for the national validation strategy (including key objectives and measures) was published in 2015 and a national consultation process carried out. From this, a national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning has been drafted and will be expected to serve as the starting point for defining organisational structures and a detailed implementation plan in the first semester of 2017. According to the consultation document for developing the validation strategy, it should be closely linked to the NQF. In the long run, it should also be possible to obtain qualifications mapped to the NQF via validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The national validation strategy intends to provide a platform and framework for development and coordination of the many initiatives that have been devised 'bottom-up' and to provide potential users with an overview of relevant available measures. The national validation strategy brings clarity in terms of concepts and definitions, provides an overview of existing validation arrangements, serves as a basis for developing new initiatives, assuring their quality, and for training and developing professionals. A more coordinated and quality assured approach to validation intends to enhance stakeholder and society awareness of, and trust in, the outcomes of validation practices.

There has been no uniform framework to date for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning in Austria. Different acts and regulations include mechanisms and arrangements that enable formal education and training institutions (general education, vocational education and training, and higher education) to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings (for example, in the context of 'external exams'). Almost all qualifications (from school and dual systems, but not university degrees) can be obtained without participating in programmes or courses, but by passing the relevant exam (as 'externals') as required in the regular system. External exams are theoretically possible in all authorised Austrian education and training institutions for both general education and VET. Almost all certificates and qualifications from formal education – corridor one – (except for university degrees) can be obtained by 'external examination' without obligatory participation in education programmes (such as acquisition of *Hauptschule* qualification by adults, and exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam) (European Commission et al., 2016). Validation is also used to obtain exemptions and shorten programmes (such as skipping grades for pupils in general education or VET who demonstrate appropriate achievements, shortening degree programmes at universities of applied science based on recognition of professional experience). There are also possibilities to gain access to higher education programmes in an alternative way. *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP) and higher education entrance

examination (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung*) (SBP) can both be taken by graduates of specific apprenticeships, VET schools and early leavers of VET colleges that traditionally are not granted university access through their initial education. Preparatory courses for BRP are also offered outside formal education system. It is also possible to acquire certificates/qualifications without any equivalence in the formal education system: the professional title *ingenieur*; certificates issued by the Academy of Continuing Education in adult education; access conditions to regulated professions; or several other initiatives in the private and voluntary sectors. However, these non-traditional pathways are in limited use.

NQF implementation

The NQF has been formally established and the mapping of qualifications will start in autumn 2016. An important feature of the NQF is that levels 6 to 8 remain open to VET qualifications acquired outside HE institutions. A 'Y-structure' was adopted, introducing parallel descriptors to capture differences between higher education and VET qualifications at these levels. Dublin descriptors are used for qualifications related to Bologna cycles (bachelor degree, master degree, doctorate) and awarded by higher education institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) and university colleges for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*)). VET qualifications and qualifications from adult learning ('non-Bologna' strand) will be assigned to the appropriate levels, based on EQF descriptors.

The NQF has been designed to promote transparency and guidance; there is no intention to use it for any kind of regulation. The education system is already highly regulated in terms of what kind of qualifications give entrance to certain education pathways and access to occupations/professions in the labour market. While qualifications in general play an important role in Austria, the term as defined in an EQF context is not used consistently and is sometimes used to refer to 'curricula' or training programmes.

Mapping of formal and non-formal qualifications will follow a similar procedure.

The mapping of formal qualifications follows as:

- (a) the responsible federal ministry or Länder government hands in a request for the mapping of a qualification to the national coordinating body – *Nationale Koordinierungsstelle* (NKS), *Österreichischer Austauschdienst* (OeAD) – which performs the mapping of qualifications to NQF levels, involving the advisory board;

- (b) the mapping is processed by the steering group;
- (c) the process is concluded with the publication in the NQF register.

The mapping process and criteria are further described in the NQF manual (NKS, 2016) adopted by the steering group in September 2016. The first qualifications mappings are expected in early 2017. The following indicators for implementation have been defined:

- (a) including major qualifications (such as initial school-based vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and master craftsperson qualifications by 2018);
- (b) alignment of curricula in formal education and training, in particular VET to learning outcomes orientation by 2020;
- (c) increase in cross-border mobility in VET for 20 % ⁽⁸⁾.

Referencing to the EQF

Austria referenced its national qualification levels to the EQF and self-certified to qualifications frameworks of the European higher education area in June 2012, preparing one comprehensive report.

Important lessons and future plans

One strength of the Austrian NQF development is involvement and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, representing all subsystems of education and training, as well as the social partners. Now formalised by the NQF Act, this broad group of stakeholders will be engaged in the implementation via the steering group, which includes all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education, and the Länder. The NQF aims at improved coordination of a national qualification system that has traditionally witnessed a strong separation between different segments of education, in particular between VET and higher education. Increased transparency of VET and non-formal qualifications is expected.

Austria also sees the NQF as a communication tool to make qualifications transparent and comparable internationally, as well as improving validation of non-formal learning. Integration of non-formal and informal learning, and a broad

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<https://www.help.gv.at/Portal.Node/hlpd/public/module?genetics.am=Content&p.contentid=10007.180581>

paradigm shift to learning outcomes, are seen as immediate challenges. Quality assurance and validity of standards will pose new requirements for qualifications providers.

The fact that the NQF was designed to be comprehensive is underlined by the following principles: adopted Y-structure of the NQF; working structure of three corridors; long-term inclusion of general education; and methodologies being developed for inclusion of non-formal qualifications and validation of informal learning (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012).

Further source of information:

The Austrian NCP was set up as an organisational entity at OeAD:
<http://www.oead.at/nqr> [accessed 12.2.2016].

Austrian national qualifications framework

NQF levels	Reference qualifications		EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree <i>Doktorgrade</i>		8
7	Master degree <i>Master- bzw. Diplomgrade</i>	Master builders <i>Baumeister</i> Civil engineers <i>Zivil Ingenieur</i>	7
6	Bachelor degree <i>Bachelorgrade</i>	Master craftsperson qualification <i>Meister</i>	6
5	VET college Reifeprüfung certificate and VET diploma <i>Reife- und Diplomprüfung der berufsbildende höhere Schule</i>		5
4	VET school qualification <i>Abschluss der Fachschule</i> Apprenticeship diploma <i>Lehrabschluss</i>		4

NQF levels	Reference qualifications	EQF levels
3	Secondary home economics school qualification (two-year course) <i>Abschluss einer Hauswirtschaftsschule</i>	3
2	Secondary home economics school qualification (one-year course) <i>Abschluss einer Haushaltungsschule</i> Prevocational school qualification <i>Abschluss der Polytechnischen Schule</i>	2
1		1

Source: Austrian EQF referencing report, supplementary information (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012).

List of abbreviations

BMBF	Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen [Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs]
BRP	<i>Berufsreifeprüfung</i> [examination providing access to higher education for skilled workers and graduates of three- and four-year full-time VET schools]
EQF	European qualifications framework
SBP	<i>Studienberechtigungsprüfung</i> [higher education entrance examination]
NQF	national qualifications framework
OeAD	Österreichischer Austauschdienst [Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research]
VET	vocational education and training

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