

FINLAND

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Work on the Finnish national qualifications framework (NQF) has taken longer than originally foreseen. It started in August 2008 and, following two public consultations in 2009 and 2010, the government presented a proposal to parliament in autumn 2010. According to this, the NQF would cover officially recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training and higher education) at all levels. After a change of government in 2011, the original proposal was slightly revised and resubmitted to Parliament in May 2012 (Act on a national framework for exam-based and other competences). Due to resistance within parliament, this proposal was never taken forward and put up for voting. Following elections and yet another change of government, a third proposal was submitted to parliament in mid-2016 (Act on a national framework for qualifications and other competence modules) and came into force in January 2017. These delays have also affected the referencing to the EQF, which is now planned for spring 2017.

The law (as with the proposals from 2011 and 2012) outlines a comprehensive framework covering the full range of national qualifications, including those awarded outside the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (for example related to defence, police and border-guards). The law also allows part qualifications (competence-modules) to be levelled and included in the framework. While these will not be included in the first phase of framework implementation, starting from 2017, a phase two is envisaged where this will happen.

A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed in 2005 and now forms an integrated part of the NQF. Finland has decided to carry out the referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the European higher education area as one process.

Policy objectives

The framework, the law states ⁽¹⁾, not only supports increased transparency of qualifications but can be used as a tool for strengthening the overall consistency of (learning outcomes based) qualifications across different education and training sectors.

This objective corresponds with the proposals from 2011 and 2012. All three focus on officially recognised qualifications awarded within the remit of the Ministry of Education (general, vocational education and training, and higher education) as well as on qualifications awarded by other public bodies, for example related to the armed services, police, prison and rescue services. The framework opens up for the levelling and inclusion of ‘competence modules’, also seen as part-qualifications, which can play a particularly important role in the following areas:

- (a) in regulated professions, where there are legal requirements for certifications beyond initial education and training. This is the case for professions in the health and social sectors and also for teachers, divers and various groups within the construction sector;
- (b) in all areas where there is need for increased competences and specialisations beyond initial education and training. The NQF proposal refers to the need to improve the visibility and valuing of ‘specialisations’ beyond initial education and training. These specialisations are a significant part of the existing Finnish lifelong learning landscape, in vocational training, higher education and in liberal adult education.

While the new framework seeks to describe existing qualifications in a better and more transparent way, its role as a tool for development is underlined (excerpt from the NQF law):

‘The framework makes it possible to identify and further develop the strengths of the education system while also correcting shortcomings in the system. The framework forms a foundation which can in applicable parts be utilised when planning qualifications and preparing national core curricula, qualification requirements and local curricula. The descriptors of the framework levels will help clarify the differing learning objectives and requirements for various qualifications and education providing certain eligibilities by describing them in a more consistent manner. The framework will focus attention on competence and learning outcomes, both in terms of planning education and student assessment. The emphasis on learning objectives will help develop education and training so as to improve learning outcomes. More

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.finlex.fi/sv/esitykset/he/2016/20160204.pdf>

consistent descriptions of learning outcomes at different qualifications levels will facilitate education providers in developing the identification and recognition of prior learning within the qualifications system. The framework can also be used in support of determining the level of competence modules not included in the framework, which will facilitate recognition of non-formal and informal learning.'

The objectives set for the new Finnish NQF are interesting as they combine a focus on transparency of qualifications with an explicit focus on system-development, explicitly using the framework as a tool for the gradual improvement of the quality and relevance of qualifications.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The learning outcomes (competence) based approach is broadly accepted and used by all areas of Finnish education and training; it underpins most qualifications to be covered by the framework.

The NQF law (as with the 2011 and 2012 proposals) introduces an eight-level framework reflecting the knowledge, skills and competence components introduced by the EQF. While the descriptors have been inspired by the EQF they have also been adopted to suit the national context. The explicit distinction between knowledge, skills and competence used by the EQF is dropped and replaced by one 'integrated' column summarising the requirements for each level. This is seen as more in line with the way learning outcomes actually are written in Finland. Table 1 shows the components used to define and describe levels in the Finnish NQF.

Level descriptor in the Finnish NQF

Knowledge	Levels 1-8
Work method and application (skills)	
Responsibility, management and entrepreneurship	
Evaluation	
Key skills for lifelong learning	

While the requirements for knowledge and skills are closely aligned to those of the EQF, the descriptors related to competences reflect national objectives in these areas (for example related to key competences). A good illustration is the

descriptor for level 4, where personal and social competences are described in the following way (NQF law, p.39):

- 'Takes responsibility for completion of his/her tasks and works in a safe and responsible manner within a work community. Works in an economical, productive and systematic manner, taking other actors into consideration. Is able to supervise routine tasks performed by others. Has the ability to work in an entrepreneurial manner in someone else's service or as an independent entrepreneur. Evaluates his/her competence and scope of duties and improves actions relating to work or studies. Develops himself/herself and his/her work.
- Has the ability for lifelong learning. Communicates diversely and interactively in various situations and produces varied and also field-specific texts in his/her mother tongue. Acts according to the ethical principles when in interaction with different people in learning and working communities and other groups and networks.
- Can communicate at an international level and interact in a second national language and at least one foreign language.'

The example shows that, while the aspects of 'autonomy' and 'responsibility' are highlighted (as in the EQF), explicit reference is also made to the ability to work as 'an independent entrepreneur', to be able to 'evaluate and reflect on own activities', to pursue 'lifelong learning', 'to communicate and interact with others', 'to act according to ethical principles' and 'interact using other languages'.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

A broad range of stakeholders ⁽²⁾ was involved in the early, preparatory stages of the NQF developments. The delays encountered with the legal proposal between 2012 and 2016 meant that systematic dialogue on the role of the framework stopped. The relaunch in 2016 was supported by broad consultation.

⁽²⁾ Initiated and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the original (2008) NQF working group consisted of the following: The Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Defence Command Finland (Ministry of Defence), Finnish National Board of Education, Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (AKAVA), Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK), the Association of Vocational Adult Education Centres (AKKL), Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE), Vocational Education Providers in Finland (KJY), Finnish Association of Principals, The Finnish Council of University Rectors, Finnish Adult Education Association, The National Union of University Students in Finland and the Union of Finnish Upper Secondary Students.

It is significant that higher education institutions have supported the development of the NQF from the start and have contributed to the framework design. This seems to reflect the existing Finnish education and training system, where interaction between general, vocational and higher education and training institutions seem to operate more smoothly than in many other countries. This may be explained by the role played by non-university higher education (promoting professional training at bachelor and master level) and by the increasingly important competence-based qualifications approach applied in vocational qualifications at levels corresponding to 4 and 5 of the EQF. This approach, gradually developed since the 1990s, is based on the principle that candidates without a formal training background can be assessed for a qualification. Finnish VET qualifications also give access to all forms of higher education. A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed from 2005 and is now an integrated part of the new comprehensive NQF.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽³⁾

Validation leading to formal recognition and certification in Finland is embedded in formal education and training systems. Validation in CVET (competence-based qualifications (CBQs)) has the longest history of over 20 years and it is well established and steered by detailed legislation and policies as well as quality assurance mechanisms. However, validation arrangements are also in place in IVET and higher education (both first and second cycle studies) and are developed through national measures, legislation and development projects, and are steered by legislation.

Typically, the validation arrangements in formal education include the four phases of validation listed in the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽⁴⁾ (identification, documentation, assessment and certification), but the processes and methodologies differ between education

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

⁽⁴⁾ Council of the European Union (2012). Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1-5. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

sectors. In all sectors the common denominator is increased cooperation with working life, especially concerning the identification and assessment phases.

Validation in the third sector is not defined by legislation, but its role is related more to identification and documentation of competences. The third sector also has a crucial role in terms of cooperation with the validation organisers (for example as work life assessors).

The strengths of the Finnish validation arrangements lie in cooperation between all stakeholders. The social partners are strongly involved in all aspects, from designing the content of qualification requirements to individual validation procedures. Transparency and cooperation promote trust and high market value for the system: employers see qualifications gained through validation as equally valuable or trustworthy as the qualifications gained through school-based learning.

The education provider decides how guidance is organised but it must be provided according to the needs of the learner. However, it has been pointed out that the guidance procedures embedded in validation arrangements leave room for further development: 'It is not adequately defined, what the guidance should entail, what the aim of guidance in the validation process should be, what the competences of the guidance providers in validation should be. From time to time, the qualification system appears to be mechanistic and focus on the recognition and certification process instead of individual and professional development' (Karttunen, 2015).

NQF implementation

The 2016 proposal envisages NQF implementation in two phases. In the first, to be implemented immediately after legal adoption of the framework, all formal qualifications under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and other public administrations (such as police and armed forces) responsible for the award of qualifications. The aim is also to include in the framework specialist training (competence modules) in medicine and dentistry. The second implementation phase could see an opening up of the framework to qualifications and competence modules outside the scope of the first phase. The ministry will initiate further development work in this area as soon as the Act enters into force. The current proposal gives no details on this opening up, but a possibility is to involve the private sector and allow for the inclusion/levelling of international qualifications.

Referencing to the EQF

Given that the NQF enters into force in January 2017, Finland will reference to the EQF late spring 2017.

Important lessons and future plans

This Finnish NQF could become a tool for long-term development of the education and training system and the qualification system. The introduction of learning-outcomes-based levels is seen by stakeholders as an instrument for increasing qualifications consistency. While learning outcomes are used widely in almost all education and training sectors, their interpretation varies, risking inconsistencies between institutions and sectors. The NQF is seen by some stakeholders as a reference point for improving the overall quality and relevance of Finnish qualifications.

The delays encountered since 2012 have resulted in a loss of national momentum. The relaunch of the legal process makes it possible to continue the extensive work carried out between 2008 and 2012. A legal adoption alone will not ensure the future of the framework: there is an urgent need to restart dialogue with stakeholders and make sure that trust and commitment develops.

Finnish national qualifications framework

NQF levels	Qualifications
8	Licentiate Doctor Specialist medical doctors, dentists and veterinarians General staff officer examination
7	Advanced vocational higher education Master
6	Vocational higher education qualifications Bachelor
5	Specialised VET qualifications Basic qualification for air traffic controllers Vocational qualification for construction production Qualification for police officer Qualification for officer, rescue services

NQF levels	Qualifications
4	Upper secondary education, general and vocational Certificates for prison warders Certificates for police Certificates for rescue workers Certificates for professionals working in alarm-centres
3	(Older) vocationally-oriented basic education and VET
2	Compulsory education certificates
1	

Source: National Board of Education (NBE).

Further sources of information

Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture: <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/?lang=en>

Finnish National Board of Education; acts as EQF national coordination point:

<http://www.oph.fi/qualificationsframework>

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

References

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Finland* (forthcoming).

Karttunen, A. (2015). *How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe*. Finland country report. Bertelsmann Stiftung.