



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2022

**NORWAY**



# European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022 – Norway

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## 1. Introduction

This report is part of the European inventory of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Since 2009, Cedefop has been carrying out a systematic mapping and analysis of NQF developments in countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process. These reviews, done in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, have directly supported the development of operational and sustainable NQFs. The report offers a detailed description of the structure and scope of the Norwegian NQF, and its objectives, functions and institutional arrangements, along with data on the framework's implementation and its impact on broader policy areas.

The Norwegian NQF for lifelong learning (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring NKR*) was referenced to the EQF in 2014, alongside its self-certification to the qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). It is structured into seven levels and includes all levels and types of formal education and training. The NKR uses knowledge, skills and general competence as level descriptors, and is at the operational stage.

## 2. National context

### 2.1. Policy context

In Norway, tertiary educational attainment is among the highest in Europe (55 % in 2021, compared to the EU average of 41.2 %). In 2021, participation in initial vocational education and training (VET) was 36.9 % <sup>(1)</sup>, which was lower than the EU average (48.7 %).

In 2016 the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (*Kunnskapsdepartementet*) proposed a revision of all curricula for primary and secondary education and training. The goal of the revision was to renew the subjects, giving more time to the [core curricula](#). The curricula have been gradually introduced since 2020–2021. The NKR is mentioned in the 2020 White Paper [Skills reform: lifelong learning](#) (*Kompetansereformen: lære hele livet*). General competence is defined in the NKR, and the government will ensure that all parts of the education system prepare individuals to learn throughout life. In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Research started work on a new White Paper identifying

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<sup>(1)</sup> More information on secondary education can be found [here](#) (in Norwegian).

future needs for skills and competences <sup>(2)</sup>. It is expected to be presented to the parliament in spring 2023. The White Paper will address policies with the aim of pointing out the most important skills needs in future working and social life, and helping to ensure that citizens throughout the country have access to education. The report will also cover the following priorities in education:

- (a) supporting individuals in accessing essential competences;
- (b) updating education provision and making it more flexible;
- (c) assisting businesses in remote areas to recruit competent workers;
- (d) promoting inclusive education.

## **2.2. NQF legal basis**

The NKR was adopted by the education ministry in December 2011 and, following amendments of the relevant laws relating to education and training, further legally defined in a regulation in December 2017 (Norwegian government, 2017a).

## **3. NQF objectives and functions**

The NKR aims to describe the existing national education and training system in a transparent way, to make it more understandable at the national and international levels. Focusing on improving the transparency of qualifications, the NKR was originally seen as a communication and information tool rather than as a tool for reform. However, through its focus on learning outcomes and integration into the regulation of higher education and higher vocational education, an important dimension of the NKR – underlined in the 2016 and 2017 White Papers on higher vocational education and higher education, respectively – is its integration into the quality assurance of education and training. More specific objectives include:

- (a) improving communication and mobility within the education sector and between that sector and the labour market;
- (b) offering a description of what a pupil/apprentice/graduate is expected to know, understand and be able to do after the successful completion of learning;
- (c) aiding the comparison of qualifications from other countries, via the EQF and the QF-EHEA;
- (d) opening the way for the development of new instruments for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

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<sup>(2)</sup> More information on the adoption can be found [here](#) (in Norwegian).

The NKR defines descriptors, i.e. standards and levels for learning outcomes in all accredited programmes in education and training, thus playing a key role in clarifying the similarities and differences between qualifications. Furthermore, the NKR is closely associated with quality assurance in education and training and with developing curricula.

## 4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

### 4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

A structure of seven levels has been adopted. The numbering of the seven levels starts at level 2 to ensure a structure that is aligned with the levels of the EQF. Levels 5 and 6 have two sublevels each, with different level descriptors: sublevels 5.1 and 6.1 accommodate full qualifications that do not represent level completion at levels 5 and 6, respectively, whereas sublevels 5.2 and 6.2 represent full level completion. The learning-outcome-based level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge (*kunnskap*), skills (*ferdigheter*) and general competence (*generell kompetanse*). At level 4, two parallel sets of level descriptors have been developed – one for vocational education and training and one for general education – both representing full level completion.

Table 1. Main NQF level descriptor elements defining levels 2 to 8 in Norway

| Level descriptor elements  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Knowledge  | Skills   | General competence   |
| Understanding of theories, facts, concepts, principles and procedures in a discipline, subject area and/or profession. | The ability to apply knowledge to complete tasks and solve problems. There are different types of skill: cognitive, practical, creative and communicative. | The ability to use knowledge and skills in an independent manner in different situations in study and work contexts, by demonstrating the ability to cooperate, the ability to act responsibly, and a capacity for reflection and critical thinking. |

Source: Cedefop (2018).

### 4.2. NQF scope and coverage

The NKR covers all formal qualifications from general, vocational and higher education. It is not open to non-formal and informal qualifications (Section 9). Most formal qualifications are included en bloc for each type of education programme. Qualifications in the NKR generally represent full attainment of a formal education or training level, except at level 3, which includes partially completed upper secondary education and training. Shorter modules of formal learning in the formal

educational system are included in accordance with the education programme level.

Table 2. **Norwegian qualifications framework (NKR)**

| NKR level | Qualification type   | EQF level  |   |
|-----------|--|--|---|
| 8         | Doctoral degree ( <i>PhD, DPhil, PhD in artistic development work</i> )  | 8  |   |
| 7         | Master's degree ( <i>Mastergrad</i> )<br>Master of arts<br>Master of business administration (MBA)<br>Master of international business (MIB)<br>Master of technology management<br>Master of laws<br>Candidata/candidatus medicinae<br>Candidata/candidatus medicinae veterinariae<br>Candidata/candidatus psychologiae<br>Candidata/candidatus theologiae<br>Diploma for general teacher education programme ( <i>Vitnemål fra allmennlærerutdanning, Vitnemål fra grunnskolelærerutdanning</i> ) | 7  |   |
| 6.2       | Bachelor's degree ( <i>Bachelorgrad</i> )  | 6  |   |
| 6.1       | University college degree ( <i>Høgskolekandidatgrad</i> )  |  |   |
| 5.2       | Diploma for vocational college education (1.5 to 2 years, 90–120 credits) ( <i>Vitnemål fra fagskoleutdanning</i> )  | 5  |   |
| 5.1       | Diploma for vocational college education 0.5 to 1.5 years, 30–90 credits) ( <i>Vitnemål fra fagskoleutdanning</i> )  |  |   |
| 4         | A. Certificate of upper secondary vocational education and training ( <i>Vitnemål fra videregående opplæring, yrkesfaglige utdanningsprogram</i> )<br>Craft certificate ( <i>Fagbrev</i> )<br>Journeyman certificate ( <i>Svennebrev</i> )   | B. Certificate of upper secondary general education ( <i>Vitnemål fra videregående opplæring, studieforberedende utdanningsprogram</i> ) | 4 |
| 3         | Document of competence for partially completed upper secondary education ( <i>Kompetansebevis</i> )  | 3  |   |
| 2         | Certificate for primary and lower secondary education (10 years) ( <i>Vitnemål fra 10-årig grunnskole</i> )  | 2  |   |
| —         | Not part of the NQF  | 1  |   |

Source: European Commission and Cedefop, 2022.



### 4.3. Use of learning outcomes

There is a broad consensus in Norway on the relevance of the learning-outcomes approach. One important reason for using learning outcomes is to encourage curriculum consistency at the national level.

Knowledge promotion (*Kunnskapsløftet*) – a wide-ranging reform of primary, lower and upper secondary education and training, which began in 2004 and was implemented in 2006 – has been particularly significant; it required the comprehensive redefinition and rewriting of learning objectives at these levels. This has been continued in the new revision of the curricula, curricular renewal (*Fagfornyelsen*). The learning outcomes have been rewritten to include more in-depth learning and better understanding. The [new curricula](#) were fully implemented by the end of 2021 (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

All higher education institutions were requested to adopt learning outcomes in line with the descriptors for levels 6 to 8 of the NKR in all study programmes by the end of 2012. A major restructuring project of national curriculum regulations in health and welfare programmes, entitled RETHOS, is being carried out. The learning outcomes are being formulated in accordance with the NKR and national and international regulations. The Ministry of Education and Research is the project leader, and is cooperating with the Ministry of Health and Care Services, the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion and the Ministry of Children and Families.

For vocational college education (*fagskole*), level 5, the deadline set for the implementation of learning outcomes was the end of 2014, as work at this level started later than in higher education. In 2014 and 2015, the [Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education \(Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen, NOKUT\)](#) engaged an expert panel to assess the learning outcomes proposed in select applications for the accreditation of new study programmes in higher vocational education. This has helped the vocational colleges to develop and use learning outcomes in all programmes. NOKUT also performed a substantial evaluation of learning outcome descriptions of several higher education study programmes. Compliance with the NKR is included in the law on higher education and the law on higher vocational education. Compliance with the NKR and the use of learning outcomes is also included in the regulations on NOKUT's external quality assurance and control of the quality of vocational college education and of higher education (Norwegian government, 2017b). This means that learning outcomes are assessed as part of all accreditations and reaccreditations of study programmes.

#### **4.4. Quality assurance arrangements**

The NKR is also an important part of quality assurance mechanisms, and is intrinsically connected to the systematic work on quality in education. Quality assurance of qualifications in the formal education system is ensured through the legislation on all education levels in the system. The NKR has been incorporated into these laws and regulations by explicitly referring curricula and study programmes to the relevant level descriptors.

As quality assurance at primary and upper secondary levels is embedded in the legal framework, the state is responsible for inspecting all activities stipulated in the education act. The education ministry has delegated this responsibility to the [Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training \(Utdanningsdirektoratet, UDIR\)](#). UDIR is responsible for developing and supporting inspections, to ensure unified inspection throughout the country and to provide guidance on legislation.

Quality assurance in higher education follows the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area. Thus, higher education institutions have the main responsibility for the quality of their own educational provision, and it is the responsibility of NOKUT to ensure that all institutions follow the legal requirements and provide education of high quality. Quality assurance in higher education is a precondition for the accreditation of educational provision and of institutions. Accreditation is mandatory and universal for all formally recognised higher education. The accreditation formula combines institutional and programme accreditation. NOKUT undertakes periodic reviews of the systematic work on quality assurance and quality improvement at the higher education institutions. Institutional accreditation gives universities and university colleges certain rights to self-accredit programmes. New provisions that go beyond the self-accreditation authority of accredited institutions must be accredited by NOKUT.

NOKUT accredits vocational college education programmes and supervises quality. Vocational colleges can, under certain conditions, receive self-accreditation rights for subject areas.

## **5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement**

The Ministry of Education and Research has the overall responsibility for the development and implementation of the NKR. The [Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education \(NOKUT\)](#) is the national coordination point (NCP) and provides information and guidance, along with running NQF-related projects. It serves as an information centre, coordinates activities relating to the NKR and the

EQF and is responsible for the main web presentation. NOKUT is also responsible for coordinating the NQF for levels 5 to 8 (higher education and higher vocational education). UDIR is responsible for the coordination of NQF levels 2 to 4. NOKUT is an agency under the Ministry of Education and Research, and is independent in all matters relating to accreditation and quality assurance. NOKUT's role is to ensure the quality of higher and vocational college education. Project work is financed through designated EU funding of NCP activities, including 25 % self-financing. Other NKR tasks are financed through ordinary NOKUT budgets.

## 6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

### 6.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

The NKR indirectly provides a basis for the recognition of prior learning (validation of non-formal and informal learning). Arrangements relating to the validation of prior learning have a thorough legal basis and are referenced to the learning outcomes of qualifications in the formal system for education and training and the NKR.

In Norwegian legislation and practice, validation comprises all prior learning: formal, non-formal and informal. In terms of validation, there is no distinction between these different kinds of learning, as it is not seen as useful to categorise in which arena the learning has taken place (Ure, 2019).

Responsibility for the provision of primary education and of lower and upper secondary education (NKR levels 2 to 4) is decentralised to municipality and county education administrations respectively, and the validation of prior learning is based on the learning outcomes described in the curricula.

### 6.2. Credit system

There has been no national decision on the implementation of credits under the European credit system for vocational education and training. The possible implementation of this system was assessed in a public consultation in 2015, involving major stakeholders such as the social partners. The conclusion outlined several possible strands of action, but no measures have yet been initiated. The European credit system is used only as a project tool for cross-border mobility in VET.

### **6.3. Recognition of foreign qualifications**

On 1 January 2023, the Enic-Naric office was [transferred](#) from NOKUT to the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (*Direktoratet for høyere utdanning og kompetanse*, [HK-DIR](#)).

HK-DIR uses the NKR indirectly to support the recognition of qualifications. As a consequence of the reorganisation of responsibilities in the field, there will be a public consultation on a new regulation on the general recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in spring 2023. According to HK-DIR, the recognition of upper secondary and post-secondary VET qualifications is challenging because of the great variation in vocational education and training systems at these levels.

## **7. NQF implementation and impact**

### **7.1. Stage of implementation**

The NKR has reached the operational stage, operating as a map of, and reference to, most nationally recognised qualifications. It is an important tool in the quality assurance of higher education and higher vocational education and supports the cross-border mobility of students. In the implementation of learning outcomes in higher education, it has provided a reference point for the development of the new curricula. Implementation structures and the main working methods and instruments are in place (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

### **7.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels**

NKR levels are included on diplomas from vocational college education. In higher education, NKR levels are included on the diploma supplement, which is issued automatically and free of charge to all graduates. NKR and EQF levels are included on certificate supplements in vocational upper secondary education and training. The Norwegian NQF regulation states that all new diplomas and certificates from the formal education system can indicate NQF levels, and that EQF levels can be indicated on supporting documents. There are no plans to introduce further demands (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

### **7.3. NQF dissemination**

NOKUT is working systematically on NKR dissemination through NCP projects. This includes project-specific communication, but also general and public information on the NKR. The information is targeted in particular at education providers and students, but also at society at large. Currently, NOKUT is focusing on the use of learning-outcome descriptions. The current project plans to develop

handbooks and guidance material for the development of learning-outcome descriptions, targeting education providers (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

#### **7.4. Qualifications databases and registers**

Norway has a national database ([Utdanning.no](https://www.uddanning.no)) covering all learning opportunities in formal education. The database provides information about education and training possibilities and programmes in upper secondary education and training, vocational college education, higher education, folk high schools (boarding schools without exams or grades), further and continuing education (flexible courses or education offers at all levels, often based on professional experience) and some further education programmes that do not award formal qualifications. In total, the database includes 7 555 qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The database has been developed to help students search for and navigate education opportunities and to help guidance councillors give advice. It includes information on which careers and occupations end users would qualify for, what salary to expect and to which institutions they could apply. The database includes, to a lesser degree, level descriptors and level indicators. Learning outcomes are not included in the database, and are instead normally published on the individual educational institutions' web pages. Programmes offered by the educational institutions in English are published on a separate website. The [Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research](#) (*Kunnskapssektorens tenesteleverandør, SIKT*), an agency under the Ministry of Education and Research, has been tasked with developing a qualifications registry.

#### **7.5. Awareness and use of the NQF**

The NKR is well known within government agencies and by the social partners (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). It is used by NOKUT in its quality assurance of higher education and higher vocational education. Any education institution that seeks to attain accreditation for a study programme is familiar with the NKR, as the learning outcomes of their programmes should be compared to the NKR level descriptors. The referencing of the curricula for primary and secondary education to the NKR was done centrally by UDIR. The NKR is therefore less known and used in these parts of the education system. An evaluation is currently being carried out to get a better picture of the awareness and use of the NKR (Section 7.6).

#### **7.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF**

In 2020, the education ministry tasked NOKUT with providing a feasibility study investigating the possibility of parallel sets of learning-outcome descriptions for

level 5 and above, and a possible change in the placement of higher vocational education in the NKR. The [report](#), published in November 2020, suggests two possible structures. The first has two parallel and separate descriptors for higher education and higher vocational education, and the second has a common set of descriptors (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). Building on this, NOKUT started the task of [evaluating the NKR in 2021](#), inviting stakeholders to an open-input meeting in connection with the start of the evaluation of the NKR. The central finding of the evaluation was that the NKR has had a significant impact as a tool for the regulation of higher education institutions (NOKUT, 2023). These institutions have accepted the framework and use it when developing and implementing education programmes. It has had less of an impact on the labour market and on promoting mobility and lifelong learning. The evaluation also documents that there is a gap between the aims of the NKR and its accomplishments. The report suggests that the implementation process of the NKR should mainly focus on one of the following aspects (NOKUT, 2023):

- (a) strengthening pedagogical work in educational institutions and supporting quality in education;
- (b) promoting transparency and communication between education and the labour market;
- (c) acknowledging and providing access to different forms of competence and areas of learning, thus promoting lifelong learning.

The evaluation also provides five recommendations for the development of the framework (NOKUT, 2023):

- (a) review its objectives;
- (b) reduce the regulatory role of the NKR in designing qualifications and clarify the level of autonomy of education institutions in developing programmes and learning outcomes aligned with the NKR level descriptors;
- (c) remove the sublevels and ensure that all qualifications are levelled accordingly;
- (d) include higher education qualifications at level 5 and higher vocational education at levels above 5, and investigate administrative models to implement this;
- (e) consider including formal qualifications that are not yet levelled to the NKR and opening up the framework to different forms of continuing and non-formal education.

### 7.7. Impact of the NQF

NKR has had a well-documented impact on the quality assurance of higher education, as it helped introduce the use of learning outcomes, which are required to be in line with the NKR (NOKUT, 2023). The learning-outcomes approach is widely accepted in education and training, and also among the social partners. Various mobility tools, including the EQF, provide common reference points between authorities and stakeholders in education and training (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

## 8. Referencing to the EQF

Norway referenced its national qualifications framework to the EQF in June 2014, along with self-certification to the QF-EHEA.

## 9. Reflections and plans

The NKR introduced learning outcomes to higher education and is integrated into the quality assurance system. Transferability and transparency have made it easier to have qualifications recognised.

The possibility of opening the framework to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training was the subject of a [report by a committee of social partner representatives](#). No agreement was reached. Nevertheless, the NKR is indirectly used as a basis in the validation of prior learning.

The structure that the higher levels of the NKR (5 to 8) should have in the future remains an open question. The first option is that there should be two parallel and separate learning-outcome descriptors for higher education and higher vocational education, and the second is that a common set of descriptors should be developed. Currently, the highest NKR level achievable through the VET system is 5.

## Acronyms

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| EQF    | European qualifications framework   |
| HK-DIR | Direktoratet for høyere utdanning og kompetanse (Directorate for Higher Education and Skills) |
| NCP    | national coordination point   |

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| NKR     | Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (national qualifications framework for lifelong learning) |
| NOKUT   | Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education)                |
| NQF     | national qualifications framework   |
| QF-EHEA | qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area   |
| UDIR    | Utdanningsdirektoratet (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training)                                       |
| VET     | vocational education and training   |

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[NOKUT.](#)

[Database of qualifications.](#)

[Database of study programmes.](#)