

NORWAY

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Norwegian national qualifications framework (NQF) developments were triggered by the 2008 European qualifications framework (EQF) recommendation and its inclusion in the Treaty of the European Economic Area (EEA) in March 2009 (EEA Joint Committee, 2009). Following extensive preparatory work involving main stakeholders, a comprehensive Norwegian national qualifications framework (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring* (NKR)) was adopted by government decision in December 2011 ⁽¹⁾.

The NKR consists of seven levels and covers qualifications from general, vocational and higher education. The question of opening up to non-formal qualifications (for example, awarded by the private sector) has been extensively discussed. A committee of stakeholder representatives discussed the topic during 2014-15 but a clear solution has yet to be agreed.

The NKR was referenced to the EQF in June 2014. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) has been appointed as national coordination point for the EQF.

A Government decree (*Forskrift*) defining the overall position of the NKR in relation to different areas of education and training is currently being prepared by the Ministry of Education and will, depending on consultation proposal and adoption by the Parliament, come into force in 2017. Given the adoption of the above, the NKR has reached operational status.

Policy objectives

The NKR aims at describing the existing national education and training system in a transparent way to make it more understandable, at national and international levels. Focusing on improving transparency of qualifications, the

⁽¹⁾ The Norwegian qualifications framework for lifelong learning; adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research on 15 December 2011, updated in April 2014:
http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/Norsk_utdanning/NKR/20140606_Norwegian_Qualifications_Framework.pdf [accessed 16.2.2017].

NKR is not seen as a tool for reform. The framework should increase mobility, contribute to more flexible learning pathways and promote lifelong learning. The objectives below are listed in the background document to the 2011 Government decision:

- (a) focus on learning rather than teaching and instruction;
- (b) focus on learning outcomes rather than learning inputs;
- (c) make it easier for individuals to plan learning progression;
- (d) describe differences in learning outcomes requirements between different levels;
- (e) support lifelong learning;
- (f) make qualifications more easily understandable to the labour market and to society in general;
- (g) clarify to individuals what kind of general knowledge, skills and competences they have acquired;
- (h) aid recognition of qualifications across national borders;
- (i) ensure that competences are better utilised, by each citizen and by society in general.

The NKR is expected to strengthen the (already extensive) use of learning outcomes in Norwegian education and training. The level descriptors play a key role in clarifying the similarities and differences between qualifications and their relationships. The framework is seen as a point of reference for the development of individual qualifications. The new decree (see above), emphasises this point and is supposed to ‘...make it possible for the learning outcomes of individual qualifications to be based on the learning outcomes descriptors existing at a particular level’ ⁽²⁾.

For the moment, the NKR only covers qualifications established through national legislation and awarded by publicly recognised and accredited education and training institutions. A working group, including stakeholders from education and training and the labour market, was set up in late 2013 to consider possible procedures for including certificates awarded outside the traditional, formal education and training sector. The group was not able to agree on a single

⁽²⁾ Translated by the author from the consultation document on draft regulations on NQF and the referencing to the EQF (8.7.2016):
<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/horing--forskrift-om-nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk-for-livslang-laring-og-om-henvisningen-til-det-europeiske-kvalifikasjonsrammeverket-for-livslang-laring/id2476646/>

approach to be pursued but presented two partly opposing models ⁽³⁾. While one model refers to the NKR as primarily linked to the existing formal education and training system, the other suggests opening up to the non-formal sector where the framework forms part of a broader 'national competence strategy'. The lack of progress in this area is partly linked to different views on whether there is a need in the labour market and society for such an opening up, including an acceptance of the inclusion of part-qualifications into the framework. The disagreement reflects different views on how to ensure the transparency and quality of qualifications covered by the framework and whether 'external' qualifications should be judged using the same or different criteria as existing formal qualifications.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The NKR adopted in December 2011 introduces a framework of seven levels, reflecting the structure of existing formal education and training in Norway. Levels are described through the concepts knowledge (*kunnskap*), skills (*ferdighet*) and general competence (*generell kompetanse*). This approach was already adopted for the higher education framework and is broadly accepted among stakeholders. While the EQF influence is admitted, the main difference lies in the term 'general competence' which refers to the kind of transversal, overarching competences of the learning objectives adopted for upper secondary education: ability to apply knowledge and skills in different situations by demonstrating ability to cooperate, by showing responsibility and ability to reflect, and ability in critical thinking. Using the term 'competence' in isolation would, according to the proposal, lead to confusion.

The three descriptor elements are further specified as follows:

⁽³⁾ Placement of qualifications from non-formal education in the national qualifications framework. Report from the working group, 2015:
<https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5d48c0acb6554abc862807a9743e8d99/nkrrapport.pdf>

Level descriptors in the Norwegian qualifications framework

Knowledge	Skills	General competence
Types and complexity: is it theoretical or practical knowledge, within a subject or a profession? How complex and comprehensive?	Types: is it cognitive, practical, creative or communicative?	Challenges regarding change: in which areas of education and work? How predictable and changeable situations.
Understanding: ability to contextualise knowledge.	Problem-solving: how complex are the tasks to be addressed at a particular level?	Cooperation and responsibility: extent to which candidate takes responsibility for own and others' work.
	<i>Communication: with whom, at what level of complexity, by which means?</i>	<i>Learning: extent to which candidate takes responsibility for own learning and competence development?</i>

Source: Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012.

There is broad consensus in Norway on the relevance of the learning outcomes approach. *Kunnskapsløftet*, a wide-ranging reform started in 2004 and implemented in 2006, has been of particular significance and implied comprehensive redefinition and rewriting of curricula objectives at all levels of basic education and training: primary, secondary and upper secondary compulsory education and training, years 1 to 13. Finding its main expression in a national core-curriculum, addressing all levels of education and training, the learning outcomes approach has started to influence assessment and evaluation forms, particularly in VET. An important reason for using learning outcomes is to encourage curriculum consistency at national level. While adaptation is possible at local level, national consistency is important for reasons of quality and also to support validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Adopting the qualifications framework for higher education has also triggered extensive revision of study programmes in higher education, aiming to introduce and apply the learning outcomes principle in all institutions and programmes. Post-secondary education and training (*fagskole*) have only recently started to apply the learning outcomes principle in descriptions of their programmes. This has largely been triggered by the development of level descriptors in the NKR (level 5). The priority given in Norway over many years to validating non-formal and informal learning has also increased awareness of the potential of the learning outcomes approach.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The development and implementation of the NKR have been based on broad stakeholder involvement. All main education and training stakeholders, as well as representatives from the labour market parties, have been involved at all levels through the entire process. Stakeholders have generally been engaged in, and committed to, the process, although sometimes expressing different opinions on the role, profile and future direction of the NKR.

While representatives of the different parts of the formal education and training system (including students) have been fully involved in development and implementation, awareness of the framework among individual institutions is still limited. A longer term objective (supported by the proposal for a new decree) is to promote the framework as a reference tool for developing and reviewing programmes and qualifications. As stated by NOKUT, the national quality assurance agency, the descriptors provide a starting and reference point for pedagogical and methodological developments ⁽⁴⁾.

The involvement of labour market stakeholders in developing the NQR has been significant and is closely linked to discussion on opening up to the non-formal sector. Norwegian social partners generally see the NKR (and the EQF process) as important and as a way to strengthen the dialogue between education and training and the labour market. Some representatives of trade unions and employers ⁽⁵⁾, however, express frustration regarding the failure to agree on opening up to 'external' qualifications and criticise the Ministry of Education for not fully exploiting the potential of the framework. These stakeholders see the framework as a key tool in a broader national competence strategy where the interaction between education and training and the labour market is seen as a key issue.

While the Ministry of Education is responsible for the overall development and implementation of the framework, NOKUT, the national agency for quality assurance in education and training, acts as national secretariat for the NKR as well as taking on the role of national coordination point (NCP) for the EQF. NOKUT currently employs (the equivalent of) 1.5 full-time staff to support NQF/EQF related work. NOKUT is also responsible for the main web

⁽⁴⁾ NOKUT 2016: <http://www.nokut.no/no/fakta/kvalifikasjonsrammeverk-og-laringsutbytte/>

⁽⁵⁾ Interviews on October 2016 with Benedikte Sterner, Norwegian Trade Union Confederation (LO), and Tormod Skjerve, National Employer's Conderation (Virke)

presentation of the NKR ⁽⁶⁾. While highly informative regarding the structure and content of the NKR, it is only partly designed to address end-users, be these learners or employers. It is not, for example possible to move from the general descriptors of the framework into the specific qualifications and their learning outcomes. The role of the NKR as a map of, and entrance point to, Norwegian qualifications is this not fully exploited.

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

There are laws and regulations on validation of non-formal and informal learning for each level of education and training covered by the NKR. Validation arrangements are based on shared basic principles across all sectors. One of these principles is that the validation process should be voluntary and of benefit to the individual. Nevertheless, while participation in validation is voluntary, the legal framework guarantees the rights of individuals to undertake it.

Validation is one of several competence policies in a continuing process of setting up a national strategy. This may result in increased attention to validation of prior learning as an important element in adult competence development. Validation, known in Norwegian as *realkompetansevurdering*, is clearly defined in the education sector, where it is used as a specific term in laws, regulations and guidelines. In the validation system of the education sector in Norway, prior learning includes formal, non-formal and informal learning, even though formal learning is not assessed in the assessment phase. In Norway, formal learning is viewed as a part of a person's total competences and included in the term prior learning.

Validation is regulated by national laws in the education sectors. National regulations and guidelines set up general frames for local provision of validation in the counties or in the higher education institutions. Responsibility for local provision in primary, lower and upper secondary education is decentralised to county education administrations. Other national regulations and guidelines apply

⁽⁶⁾ NOKUT: <http://www.nokut.no/en/Facts-and-statistics/The-Norwegian-Educational-System/The-Norwegian-qualifications-framework/>

⁽⁷⁾ 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., 2016).

to post-secondary VET colleges and institutions in higher education, where each learning institution has more autonomy in defining validation procedures.

The Norwegian validation system is established in the formal education sector, so learning at the workplace (or third sector) is validated with reference to the learning outcomes requirements adopted for this sector. As validation is regulated by law, it is a visible part of national strategies and arrangements.

Outcomes of validation of prior learning in Norway are formally recognised as equal to other formal documentation of learning; certification from validation is issued from the same institutions as certificates acquired through formal learning. In post-secondary VET and higher education, each institution provides validation procedures based on the learning outcomes of the relevant study programme. Each institution is autonomous and so there are no general procedures for validation of competence at NQF/EQF levels 5 and above.

NQF implementation

Adoption of the proposal for a framework decree will mean that the NKR has, reached full operational stage; this is rapid progress given that the first development phase, from 2006 to 2009, was fragmented. The process consisted of a series of different initiatives (in higher education, vocational education and training and tertiary VET) going on in parallel and with limited coordination. This improved from 2009 onwards when the Ministry of Education, reflecting input from stakeholders, stated an intention to work towards a comprehensive framework for lifelong learning and to merge existing strands of work into a single approach. Clarifications leading to referencing of the NKR to the EQF in June 2014 concluded this first stage and made it possible for the NKR to move into an operational stage. While the (originally) planned opening up of the framework to 'external' qualifications has been partly put on hold, the core framework as referenced to the EQF in 2014 is generally referred to as a permanent and fully integrated part of the Norwegian education and training system. Further implementation of the framework will require that individual institutions become more aware of it and that it starts being used as a reference point for development and review of qualifications. It also requires that agreement is reached on the role of the framework in a broader national competence strategy linking education and training and the labour market.

The 2011 Government decision on the introduction of the NKR (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011) stated that evaluation of the framework should take place after six years (in 2017). Some stakeholders have

questioned the wisdom of adopting a framework decree prior to this evaluation, potentially excluding further deepening or broadening of the framework.

Referencing to the EQF

Norway referenced to the EQF in June 2014 (combined with the self-certification to the QF-EHEA).

While the EQF advisory group considered the link between the NKR and the EQF to be transparent, some questions were raised regarding the levelling of qualifications at levels 5 and 6, particularly the relationship between the certificate for post-secondary VET (level 5.2) and the partial bachelor (level 6).

The Norwegian qualifications framework (NKR)

NQF levels	Qualifications		EQF levels
8	PhD degree		8
7	Master degree		7
6	Partial bachelor (short higher education)	Bachelor (Bologna first cycle)	6
5	5.1 Certificate of completed post-secondary VET 1 (<i>Fagskole</i>)	5.2 Certificate of completed post-secondary VET (<i>Fagskole</i>) 2	5
4	4A Certificate of completed general upper secondary education	4B Certificate of completed vocational upper secondary education (<i>Fagbrev</i>)	4
3	Certificate of partially completed upper secondary education and training (<i>Kompetansebevis</i>)		3
2	Certificate of primary and lower secondary education		2
1	Not part of the NQF. No qualifications included.		1

Source: NOKUT, 2012.

Further sources of information:

NOKUT (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) is the national coordination point: <http://www.nokut.no/no/Fakta/Det-norske-utdanningssystemet/Nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk-for-livslang-laring/> [accessed 4.3.2015].

The referencing of the Norwegian qualifications framework for lifelong learning to the EQF and self- certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area:

http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/Norsk_utdanning/NKR/The_referencing_report.pdf

University of Oslo (2012). *Referencing Norwegian qualifications framework (NKR) levels to the European qualifications framework (EQF). Extension of the technical report to the Norwegian referencing group* [unpublished].

Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research:

https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utdanning/voksnes_laering_og_kompetanse/artikler/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk/id601327/ (not available in English).

List of abbreviations

EEA	European economic area
EQF	European qualifications framework
EU	European Union
NKR	Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring [national qualification for lifelong learning]
NOKUT	Nasjonalt kompetansesenter for utenlandsk utdanning [Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education]
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training
Vox	Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning

References

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