

AUSTRIA

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

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 fields and forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal). Although there seems to be political agreement and support for implementation of the NQF from different stakeholders, including social partners (*Die Sozialpartner Österreich*, 2013) diverging views on certain aspects and technical details of the NQF have slowed down further NQF implementation. Several questions need to be resolved, notably legal basis of the NQF and the procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the NQF. A political decision on these issues is expected in the near future.

National qualification levels were referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and self-certified against qualification frameworks in the European higher education area in June 2012. However, only Bologna qualifications awarded in higher education and selected 'reference qualifications' from vocational education and training (VET) and a qualification from a prevocational programme are currently included in the NQF and linked to the EQF. This selection of 'reference qualifications' serves an illustrative purpose. Comprehensive and formal inclusion of qualifications and adoption of previous level proposals will commence once a political decision has been made.

The NQF has been under development since January 2007. With adoption of the NQF position paper by the council of ministers in late 2009, the Austrian NQF was officially launched. NQF development was characterised by joint cooperation between the Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, and by involving a broad group of stakeholders, as well as input from several research-driven pilot projects.

An important feature of the Austrian NQF is that levels six to eight 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 ⁽¹⁾. Dublin descriptors are used

⁽¹⁾ Development of a NQF in Austria (*Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich*), p. 7 [unpublished].

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 allocated based on NQF descriptors.

The NQF has been designed to promote transparency and guidance; there is no intention to use the NQF for any kind of regulation. The Austrian education system is already highly regulated in terms of what kind of qualifications give entrance to certain pathways in the education system 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.

The overall NQF implementation process is structured into three 'procedural corridors':

- (a) 'corridor one' deals with allocation of levels to qualifications awarded within the formal education system by the State and based on national legislation;
- (b) 'corridor two' focuses on development of quality-assured procedures to include qualifications from the non-formal sector (such as occupation-specific and company-based continuing education and training);
- (c) 'corridor three' develops approaches to validating learning outcomes acquired through informal learning.

Several issues remain to be resolved, one being inclusion of general education and respective school leaving certificates (academic secondary school (*allgemeinbildende höhere Schule-Reifeprüfung*) in the NQF.

Main 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 will have no regulatory function. The NQF's specific objectives are to:

- (a) assist referencing of Austrian qualifications to the EQF and thus strengthen understanding of these qualifications internationally;
- (b) make formal and non-formal qualifications easier to understand and more visible for Austrian citizens;
- (c) improve permeability between VET and higher education by developing new pathways and opening new progression possibilities;

- (d) reinforce use of learning outcomes in standard setting, curricula and assessment;
- (e) support lifelong learning and guidance and enable stronger links between adult learning and formal education and training;
- (f) recognise a broader range of learning forms (including non-formal and informal learning).

The NQF plays an important part in implementing a lifelong learning strategy (BMBF, 2011) that includes and assigns the same value to all contexts of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) (European Commission et al., 2014).

One important objective of the NQF is to strengthen the links between different subsystems by highlighting existing pathways/developing new pathways and opening up new progression possibilities; improved counselling is important and can be helped by the NQF. A national database for qualifications is currently under development to improve guidance and counselling by making qualifications and learning pathways visible and comparable based on their learning outcomes (NQF register).

Austria has a relatively high share of people from migratory backgrounds in the labour force and in education. Raising their participation, education outcomes, qualification levels and increasing equal opportunities remains a main policy challenge and is a focus of current reforms (European Commission, 2013).

Stakeholder involvement

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 close 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).

A national NQF steering group was set up in February 2007. This includes 23 members representing all the main stakeholders (all relevant ministries, social partners and *Länder*) responsible for qualification design and award. This group's main task is to coordinate NQF implementation, reference it to the EQF, and ensure that the framework reflects stakeholders' interests. One important topic of discussion was opening NQF levels six to eight to non-traditional higher education qualification, with VET stakeholders on one side and higher education on the other. Consensus was achieved in form of a 'Y-structure' opening the

highest qualification levels to non-academic qualifications. This was very important for parity of esteem of different learning contexts.

The NCP was set up as an organisational entity at the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (Österreichischer Austauschdienst) (OeAD). Its main role is to support development and implementation of the NQF in Austria, develop an NQF information system, including the NQF register, and become the main information desk for citizens and institutions.

Framework implementation

The Austrian NQF was formally launched through adoption of a position paper by the councils of ministers in 2009. Three sets of criteria for linking qualifications to NQF levels were developed:

- (a) qualifications must meet existing formal requirements (for example related to assessment procedures and proof of qualification);
- (b) assignment of a qualification to a level is made based on level descriptors;
- (c) a detailed description of the qualification, using an agreed template, has to be submitted (including qualitative and quantitative data about the qualification).

Based on this classification, a final decision is made on levelling (national coordination point for the NQF, 2011). Submission for registration is voluntary. Allocation criteria and procedures were tested intensively in 2011; results, however, did not yield the expected results. A revised model is now being discussed which will clarify procedures, competent bodies and their responsibilities (Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012b).

In addition, with a vision to developing a comprehensive and inclusive framework, criteria and procedures for allocating qualifications from non-formal learning contexts (corridor two) to the Austrian NQF were tested and simulated during 2013. A total of 15 qualifications provided by various adult education institutions were selected and analysed, focusing on learning outcomes and validity of the respective assessment and validation procedure. Results of this simulation will be used to elaborate further procedures, documents and criteria for allocating qualifications awarded outside the formal education system to the NQF.

The Austrian NQF has not yet reached the operational stage. Important next steps include agreeing on allocation procedures and a legal framework.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

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

Through implementation of the NQF, Austria is strengthening the learning-outcome approach across education and training: central to positioning qualifications in the NQF. Many qualifications are already learning-outcome-oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions. This is still ongoing work. Several initiatives are supposed to strengthen learning outcomes orientation. In general education and VET, educational standards were recently introduced. In general education core subject areas (German, maths and English) are described in terms of learning outcomes.

In school-based VET, learning outcomes are defined in VET educational standards, implemented on a step-by-step approach in recent years (BMBF, 2014). 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. Thus, some curricula for VET colleges have been revised and learning outcomes have been developed for each subject. This is still an ongoing process. In addition, Austria is preparing a competence-oriented and standardised Matura – upper secondary school leaving examination ('*Reifeprüfung*') as of 2014/15 – meant to increase transparency and access to higher education ⁽²⁾.

In apprenticeship (dual system), a training regulation is issued for each profile by the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. They are

⁽²⁾ <https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/reifepruefungneu.html> [accessed 21.7.2014].

largely written in learning outcomes and are currently under reform to strengthen the outcome orientation of apprenticeship training. It 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.

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 (Bologna follow-up group, 2012). Implementation differs across higher education institutions.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF ⁽³⁾

Austria does not have an overall national strategy on validation of non-formal and informal learning, although there are several initiatives and regulations that enable formal education and training institutions to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings, as well as initiatives outside the formal system that use validation of non-formal and informal learning. Work towards an integrated national validation strategy only started recently (2013) and is closely linked to both implementation of the Austrian lifelong learning strategy 2020 (BMBF, 2012) and the NQF. A working group was set up. Within the comprehensive NQF, learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning contexts should be given the same value as learning outcomes acquired in formal education and training. Work on all three 'corridors' is ongoing and results will feed into achieving the overall objective of implementing a comprehensive NQF, which makes learning from various learning pathways visible.

Almost all certificates and qualifications from the formal education system – 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, exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam, etc.) (European Commission et al., 2014). Validation is also used to obtain exemptions and shorten programmes (such as skipping grades for pupils in general education or VET who demonstrate relevant

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

achievements, shortening degree programmes at universities of applied science based on recognition of professional experience, etc.). There are also possibilities to gain access to higher education programmes in an 'alterative' way. *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP) and higher education entrance examination (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung*) (SBP) are both examinations that can be taken by graduates of specific apprenticeships ⁽⁴⁾, 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 the formal education system. It is also possible to acquire certificates/qualifications without any equivalence in the formal education system, such as 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 (European Commission et al., 2014).

Development work and pilot projects are being carried out to develop validation procedures and assign levels to qualifications acquired in non-formal contexts (corridor two) to NQF levels. The procedure is still under review and pending finalisation of piloting. Although still under discussion, it seems the procedure will be based in a voluntary formal application procedure that states reasons and furnishes proof for assignment of a qualification to a level. In addition, several quality assurance checks are being tested and designed.

Austria has also initiated several research projects to investigate the current status quo of validation of learning outcomes from informal learning (corridor three) and how they are (or not) aligned to the Council recommendation. Results will be the basis for national consultation that will lead to a national strategy, making use of the recommendation and the guidelines.

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.

⁽⁴⁾ Graduates from apprenticeship are sometimes granted access to universities of applied science without having to undergo BRP or SBP.

Table 1 **Level correspondence established between the Austrian qualifications framework and the EQF**

NQF	EQF
Level 8	Level 8
Level 7	Level 7
Level 6	Level 6
Level 5	Level 5
Level 4	Level 4
Level 3	Level 3
Level 2	Level 2
Level 1	Level 1

Source: Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012a.

Important lessons and future plans

First, one strength of 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. This broad process has made it clear that stakeholders hold different and sometimes conflicting views on the NQF's role. This is a main reason for the current lack of movement in NQF implementation. Austria has also a traditional strong separation between different segments of education, in particular between VET and higher education. Some higher education representatives consider NQF implementation might reduce this segmentation they are eager to preserve (Cedefop, 2014).

Second, Austria sees the NQF as a translation device to make qualifications transparent and comparable as well as a tool to improve validation of non-formal learning. It will not have regulatory functions. Implementing the NQF is closely related to strengthening learning-outcomes orientation in education and training, such as by revising VET curricula. NQF levels will also be explicitly mentioned in curricula and training profiles.

Third, regarding NQF level 5 there is a political discussion on whether the secondary academic school leaving certificate (general education) will be allocated the same level as the VET college *Reifeprüfung* certificate and VET diploma, which is assigned to NQF level 5.

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

Main sources of information

The Austrian NCP was set up as an organisational entity at OeAD.
<http://www.oead.at/nqr> [accessed 5.2.2014].

Table 2 The national qualification framework in Austria

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 <i>Reifeprüfung</i> 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
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> Pre-vocational school qualification <i>Abschluss der Polytechnischen Schule</i>		2
1			1

Source: Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012a.

List of abbreviations

BMBF	Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen [Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs]
BRP	Berufsreifeprüfung [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	Studienberechtigungsprüfung [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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