

FINLAND

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

Work on the Finnish national qualifications framework (NQF) started in August 2008. A national committee comprising all main stakeholders presented a first proposal in June 2009. Following two public consultations in 2009 and 2010, the government presented a proposal to the Finnish parliament in autumn 2010. According to this, the Finnish NQF will cover officially-recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education) at all levels, and can be described as comprehensive. The framework is also intended to open up (gradually) towards competences acquired outside the existing formal qualifications system, for example linked to continuing training in the labour market.

Following a change of government in 2011, the original proposal was slightly revised and resubmitted to parliament in May 2012 (Finnish Government, 2012). In its proposal the government expected the Act to be in force by 1 January 2013. As no progress was made by parliament, this deadline was not met and it is currently not clear if and when the framework will be taken forward. The momentum created during initial stages of the work (2008-12) seems largely to have been lost and there is currently only limited discussion on how to move into an operational stage.

A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed in 2005, but has not been taken forward separately and will form an integral part of the NQF. Finland has decided to carry out the referencing to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the self-certification to the European higher education area as one process.

Main policy objectives

Work on the Finnish NQF was directly triggered by launch of the debate on the EQF in 2004-05. While Finnish stakeholders supported the idea of a European reference framework, they originally saw little added value from an NQF in Finland, pointing to the transparent character of the existing education and training system and what was seen as relatively limited further benefit of a framework. This scepticism has largely been replaced by agreement that the

framework has a long-term role to play in helping to increase international transparency and improve effectiveness and clarity of the qualifications system.

Transparency and comparability of qualifications, at national and European levels, are core objectives of the draft NQF. This is to be achieved by describing all existing qualifications coherently and by using a consistent conceptual approach. This will illustrate the relationship between different qualifications and clarify how individuals can make progress within the system and how they can build pathways based on experience and/or formal learning. Recognition of prior learning is emphasised as an important feature of the NQF and as a necessary element in a strategy for lifelong learning.

Several stakeholders have underlined that the framework provides an opportunity to strengthen overall consistency of use of learning outcomes across education and different institutions. Explicit level descriptors may help to clarify what is expected from a qualification and can improve overall quality of Finnish education and training.

As well as officially-recognised qualifications (general, VET and higher education) at all levels, the framework will also cover official qualifications awarded outside the Ministry of Education and Culture's remit, for example, related to the armed services, police and prison and rescue services.

The framework introduces a concept of 'extensive competence modules' to be able to address acquired learning outcomes not part of the qualifications system. These competence modules cover a broad area and occur in many professions and at all levels. The government proposal distinguishes between two main areas where these 'modules' will be relevant:

- (a) regulated professions, where legal requirements for certification beyond initial education and training exist. This is the case for professions in the health and social sectors, as well as for teachers, divers and various groups within the construction sector;
- (b) 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 visibility and valuing of 'specialisations' beyond initial education and training. These specialisations form a significant part of the existing Finnish lifelong learning landscape (in vocational training, higher education and in liberal adult education).

By gradually including certificates and qualifications operating outside initial education and training, the hope is to improve their visibility and conditions for lifelong learning. The plan is that these 'extensive competence modules' will be covered only gradually by the framework and it remains to be seen how this will

be dealt with in practice, not least with respect to quality assurance arrangements.

Stakeholder involvement

Development of the Finnish NQF during the period 2008-12 involved a broad range of stakeholders. While initiated and coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the working group responsible for preparing the NQF proposal consisted of the following: the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Employment and Economy, Defence Command Finland (Ministry of Defence), Finnish National Board of Education, Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland, Confederation of Finnish Industries, Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Finnish Confederation of Professionals, Association of Vocational Adult Education Centres, Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, Vocational Education Providers in Finland, Finnish Association of Principals, Finnish Council of University Rectors, Finnish Adult Education Association, National Union of University Students in Finland and the Union of Finnish Upper Secondary Students.

The range of stakeholders included in the working groups signalled an inclusive approach seeking as strong an ownership as possible from the start. Higher education institutions have supported development of the NQF and have contributed to the framework design. This reflects the 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 levels) and by the increasingly important competence-based qualifications approach applied for 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 integral part of the new comprehensive NQF.

Implementation of the framework

Following a change of government in 2011 the Ministry of Education resubmitted the NQF proposal to parliament. The main changes to the proposal were linked to levelling particular qualifications, and the original and somewhat controversial proposal to place some specialist vocational training qualifications, including one for riding teachers, at level 6 were removed.

Lack of adoption by parliament has stopped preparations for implementation. It has not been possible to identify why adoption of the framework has been delayed.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

Broad acceptance of the competence-based approach underpins Finnish NQF developments and relative lack of conflict over linking general, vocational and higher education qualifications.

The government proposal now being discussed by parliament introduces an eight-level framework reflecting (but slightly adjusting) the knowledge, skills and competence components introduced by the EQF. The descriptors have been inspired by the EQF, but adopted to suit the national context; this is particularly so for competence, where additional aspects like entrepreneurship and languages have been added. This may help strengthen dimensions of key competences and lifelong learning. Including the aspect 'evaluation' specifies that individuals must be able to reflect on their knowledge, skills and competences and to judge how to improve them. The descriptors for levels 6 to 8 use the same basic approach, but also largely reflect descriptors of the earlier proposal for a higher education qualifications framework. Table 1 shows the components used to define and describe levels in the Finnish NQF.

Table 1 **Level descriptor in the Finnish NQF**

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

Source: Finnish Government, 2012.

Level descriptors in the government proposal do not distinguish between different dimensions of learning outcomes, even if they have been identified in preparatory work. The aim was to create a holistic description for each level.

The background document for the government proposal illustrates the main principles for placing qualifications at particular levels and how the learning outcomes approach has been applied. Qualifications of the same type have been placed at the same level. This applies also to vocational qualifications (levels four and five). To ensure clarity of the education and qualifications system, all qualifications of a certain type would normally be placed at the same level in the framework. This is important as it signals a willingness to use the learning outcomes approach actively and an acknowledgement that this may lead to different level placement within one group or qualifications.

While creating no controversy at national level, placing the basic education syllabus at level 3 of the NQF has triggered intense discussion with the four other Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). They have now decided to place their primary and lower secondary education at level 2. Given that Finland at some stage presents a referencing report to the EQF, this particular choice will thus be of particular interest to several countries.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF ⁽¹⁾

Validation is well established in Finland, with detailed policies and legislation. Laws and regulations define validation for each education sector separately, with the same central message; validation is an individual right, independent of where learning has been acquired. There have been no changes in this legislation since 2010, but currently, a change in legislation regarding VET is proposed, with consequences for both the Vocational Education Act and the Vocational Adult Education Act. Objectives include clarification on validation and the draft proposal emphasises use of learning outcomes and flexibility in learning pathways. Enforcement is foreseen in 2015.

National strategy is in line with the upcoming NQF, with arrangements for validation in all education sectors and good links between sectors. Although the NQF is not yet legally enforced, it is relatively well known and used by practitioners and development of the NQF and accompanying work on a learning-outcomes approach for all levels has revitalised discussion on validation. The

⁽¹⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

NQF, with legislation for each sector/level, is seen as ensuring flexible pathways and comprehensive possibilities for validation, as any prior learning can be validated against a qualification in the NQF. The Finnish government's development plan for education and research 2011-16 discusses validation of non-formal and informal learning and recommends that it is developed in all sectors.

Validation procedures are embedded in formal education. In initial and continuing VET, it is possible to get a full qualification through validation. Such a qualification follows the same standards (national requirements described in terms of learning outcomes) and holds equal worth as a qualification from the formal education system. It is also possible to get certificates for units of a full qualification. An initial VET qualification at NQF level 4 (upper secondary) gives access to higher education irrespective of whether it is based on validation or achieved through the formal education system. In higher education, on the other hand, it is not possible to award a full qualification, but any number of credits can be gained through validation. Certification is identical for credits achieved through validation or formal learning. There are no national standards – institutions are responsible for developing their own curricula.

Although options for validation exist in all sectors of education, with a firm legislative basis, there are differences in approach and usage. In general upper secondary education, students have the right to have relevant competences validated, but the option is not widely used, as opposed to IVET, where a substantial recent increase in validation is reported. The area with the most comprehensive strategies and policies for validation is adult VET (competence-based qualifications). The private sector is involved in tripartite collaboration in validation, especially in IVET and the competence-based qualifications system, both at strategic level and in practice. In higher education, institutions are autonomous and decide independently on validation procedures. Some higher education institutions have opted out, while others work along similar lines as in IVET. Those that have adopted validation procedures have started developing learning outcomes-based curricula. Third sector actors/NGOs also play a role, providing information and guidance and, in some cases, also validation services and tools and learning outcomes-based certification.

Referencing to the EQF

The Finnish national coordination point for EQF (which is the National Board of Education) was appointed in June 2008, before work on the NQF started. Preparations for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF have been

going on in parallel to work on the NQF proposal itself. Due to the delays encountered, no information is available as regards future referencing to the EQF.

Important lessons and the way forward

This Finnish NQF could become a tool for long-term development. Introduction of learning outcomes-based levels is seen by stakeholders as an instrument for increasing qualification consistency in Finland. While learning outcomes are used widely in almost all education and training sectors, their interpretation varies, thus risking inconsistencies between institutions and sectors. The NQF is seen as something more than just an instrument for transparency; this transparency should be used as a reference point for improving overall quality and relevance of Finnish qualifications.

Success of the Finnish NQF will depend on the extent to which it becomes an instrument for gradual improvement of qualifications at all levels, including local and institutional. Will it, for example, become a reference point for assessment and validation practitioners; will it become a reference point for curriculum development; and will it influence the overall debate on quality assurance in education and training?

The delays encountered since 2012 have resulted in a loss of momentum at national level. If and when a parliament decision is forthcoming, it will be important to restart dialogue between stakeholders and invite them to influence creation of an operational NQF. Without such renewed involvement and engagement there is a risk that relevance of the Finnish framework for long-term developments will be reduced.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 20.10.2014]

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

The Finnish National Board of Education acts as national coordination point:

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

Table 2 **NQF in Finland – Draft proposal for placing qualifications**

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
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: Finnish Government, 2012.

List of abbreviations

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

References

[URLs accessed 20.10.2014]

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014: country report Finland*.

http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2014/87057_FI.pdf.Finnish

Government (2012). *Regeringens proposition till riksdagen med förslag till lag om en referensram för examensbaserat och övrigt kunnande [Government proposal for act on a national framework for exam-based and other competences]*.

http://www.o-ph.fi/download/141018_HE_laiksi_viitekehuksesta_toukok_2012_sv.pdf