

NORWAY

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

Norwegian national qualifications framework (NQF) developments were triggered by the 2008 European qualifications framework (EQF) recommendation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union (EU), 2008) 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 for lifelong learning (*Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring*) (NKR) was adopted through government decision in December 2011 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011b).

A legal basis defining the overall position of the NKR in relation to the different parts of the education and training system is currently being prepared. Also taking the form of a government decree, this will further strengthen the framework.

The NKR consists of seven levels and covers general, vocational and higher education. It is envisaged that, in a second phase, it will be opened to the non-formal and private sectors; the procedures and criteria for this are currently (mid-2014) being discussed among stakeholders. The NKR has now entered an early operational stage, coordinated by the Norwegian coordination point for EQF (hosted by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) (*Nasjonalt kompetansesenter for utenlandsk utdanning*) (NOKUT)).

The NKR was referenced to the EQF in June 2014.

Main policy objectives

The NKR aims at describing the existing national education and training system transparently to make it more understandable, at both national and international levels. This should increase mobility, contribute to more flexible learning pathways and promote lifelong learning. The NKR will:

- (a) give a comprehensive and general description of what is expected from a learner after completing a qualification;
- (b) provide an overview of the inner logic of education and training systems and so support education and career guidance and counselling;

- (c) provide a description which will make possible comparisons with qualifications in other countries;
- (d) provide a better basis for dialogue with the labour market;
- (e) offer an opportunity to develop new instruments for valuing competences acquired outside the formal system.

More systematic use of learning outcomes is seen as a precondition for the NKR. Learning outcomes descriptors are supposed to clarify what is expected from any candidate who has successfully acquired a qualification of any type and at any particular level. This will help to clarify the similarities and differences between qualifications and the relationships between them.

The NKR is not seen as an instrument for reform. While it will describe Norwegian education and training, its intention is not to change it. The NKR is instead seen as:

- (a) an instrument/tool that education and training can use for evaluation and further development;
- (b) a platform for debate and dialogue.

The NKR will, for the moment, only cover qualifications awarded by publicly-recognised and accredited education and training institutions. A working group was set up in autumn 2013 to consider possible procedures for inclusion of certificates and qualifications awarded outside the traditional, formal education and training sector.

Stakeholder involvement

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 have been involved at all levels throughout the process. This involvement has continued into the current implementation phase. Overall, stakeholders have been engaged in and committed to the process, although sometimes expressing very different opinions on the NKR's role and profile. This involvement can be exemplified by the debate following presentation of the initial NKR proposal in January 2011. A total of 85 extensive responses were received, submitted by a broad range of stakeholders. The consultation process significantly influenced final design of and decision on the framework. Particular attention was drawn to its scope and challenge of opening up to private and non-formal qualifications. Different parts of the education and training system have been actively involved in the process, notably in design of level descriptors and debates following this. It is interesting to

note that the social partners, both employers and trade unions, have underlined the framework's potential for reform, in particular for lifelong learning. These stakeholders have, for example pushed towards an opening up of the NKR to the private sector and in some cases criticised the Ministry of Education for not fully exploiting the framework's potential. This engagement can be seen as positive as it signals a level of commitment.

Framework implementation

The NKR has now reached an early operational stage. This is remarkable as 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 (VET) 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 merge existing strands of work into a single approach. The clarifications leading to referencing of the NKR to the EQF in June 2014 concluded this (first) stage of the process and has made it possible for the NKR to move into an operational stage and take its place as an integral part of the overall Norwegian education and training system. Ongoing work on opening up the framework to the private sector will influence the next stage and demonstrate the extent to which the NKR stays a pure transparency instrument or whether its role as a reference point for reform can be taken forward (as wished by some stakeholders).

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NKR adopted in December 2011 introduces a framework of seven levels, reflecting the formal education structure 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 seems to be broadly accepted among stakeholders. While the EQF influence is admitted, the main difference lies in the term 'general competence' which refers to kinds 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 in Table 1.

Table 1 **Level descriptors in the NKR**

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.
	Communication: with whom, at what level of complexity, by which means?	Learning: extent to which candidate takes responsibility for own learning and competence development?

Source: Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012.

There is broad consensus in Norway on 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 a comprehensive redefinition and rewriting of curricula objectives at all levels of basic education and training (primary and secondary 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, in particular 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 development has to a large extent been triggered by development of level descriptors in the NKR (level 5). The priority given in Norway over many years to validation of non-formal and informal learning has also increased awareness of the learning outcomes approach's potential.

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

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (*Realkompetansevurdering*) has been on the Norwegian political agenda as part of the lifelong learning strategy since the 1990s. In the strategy for lifelong learning 2007 (Ministry of Education and Research), validation was one of the main priorities, and the government's initiative on lifelong learning 2009 states that the system for validation must be promoted and strengthened. In Norway, validation is integrated into the education system, and individuals have the right to have their prior learning and experience validated at all levels of education. The overall responsibility for validation lies with the Ministry of Education and Research. The Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox), cooperating with the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, works to promote and support a more uniform implementation of validation across the country, to improve synergy between different stakeholders and increase flexibility of learning pathways.

Existing curricula and study programmes are used as references/standards for validation, so the shift towards learning outcomes, promoted by the NKR, will influence the way validation is carried out. In basic education (ages 1 to 13), curricula have been learning outcomes-based for several years. Validation is performed by services at county or municipal levels. Learners can achieve a partial qualification at any level through validation. They then have the right to access further learning to achieve a full certificate. In upper secondary VET, adults can take the final craft or journeyman's exam directly, through validation of their practical work experience, instead of having to go through the regular training path. However, they must still pass the final exam to obtain the qualification. In 2014, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

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

published national guidelines for validation in lower and upper secondary education (general and VET).

In post-secondary vocational education and higher education, prior learning is validated against learning outcomes or programme goals in local curricula developed in each institution (the shift to learning outcomes is ongoing in this sector). Validation is performed locally in each institution. Access can be obtained through validation, as can exemption from obligatory work, courses and modules. In higher education it is not possible to reach a full qualification through validation. In post-secondary VET, validation for exemption as well as a national credit system was introduced in regulations of 1 August 2013, so further implementation is needed. Results from surveys (published in 2012) and regional meetings with the institutions (2012-13) underlined the need for support in validation processes; accordingly, guidelines for validation towards enrolment/access in post-secondary vocational education and towards exemption in higher education were developed and published by Vox in 2013, in cooperation with stakeholders from the sector.

The NKR maintains the right to apply for recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning at all levels and in all types of formal education and training. In addition, one objective of the NKR is to offer an opportunity to develop new instruments for validating learning from outside the formal system. The Ministry of Education and Research set up a working group with broad stakeholder representation, to explore and propose models for inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the NKR. Work should be finished by end of 2014.

Referencing to the EQF

Norway referenced to the EQF in June 2014 (combined with self-certification to qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA)). The correspondence between NKR and EQF levels was established as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 **Levels correspondence established between the NKR and the EQF**

NKR	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 not included in NKR	Level 1

Source: NOKUT, 2012.

Main sources of information

NOKUT acts as EQF NCP (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011a).

Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research:

<http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kd/tema/livslang-laring/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk.html?id=601327> [accessed 29.9.2014].

Table 3 The national qualifications framework in Norway

NKR			
NKR 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 (<i>Fagskole</i>) 1	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.

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

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