

SWEDEN

European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

A formal decision of the Swedish government adopting a comprehensive Swedish national qualifications framework (SEQF) is expected in spring 2015 in the form of a decree (*Förordning*). A report on referencing the SEQF to the European qualifications framework (EQF) will be presented to the EQF advisory group in autumn 2015. While the overall technical design of the framework was finalised by 2012, preparation of the national qualifications framework (NQF)-decree has proved time-consuming, involving formal consultation with all stakeholders. The final stage of this consultation – in the form of a referral memorandum (*remisspromemorian*) – is expected to be finalised by October 2014. The delays are related to the decision to open up the NQF to qualifications awarded outside the public sector, for example by private organisations and companies. Successful adoption of the NQF-decree in spring 2015 would allow the SEQF to move into early operation, building on the extensive technical work carried out since 2009. Separate self-certification of Swedish higher education to the European higher education area has been carried out.

Main policy objectives

The December 2009 decision to initiate work on a comprehensive NQF was primarily presented as a way to aid referencing to the EQF; the framework should make it easier for individuals and employers to compare Swedish qualifications with those in other EU Member States. While this European objective still stands, the NQF is now increasingly playing a national role.

The aim is to develop an inclusive framework open to qualifications awarded outside the public system, in particular in adult/popular education and in the labour market. This focus on how the inclusive character of the framework responds to particular features of Swedish education and training. First, adult and popular education is generally very strong, largely explaining why Sweden consistently scores high in all international comparisons on adult and lifelong learning. Courses are offered by a wide range of stakeholders and institutions, both public and private; their link to the ordinary public system is not always fully transparent and clear. An inclusive framework could increase overall transparency of Swedish qualifications and clarify options for progress and

transfer. Second, a very important part of vocational education and training (VET) is carried out by enterprises and sectors. While upper secondary education (*Gymnasieskolan*) offers a full range of (three-year) vocational courses, acquiring a full qualification (enabling someone to practise a vocation), will sometimes require additional training and certification at work. This extensive system of labour market-based education and training is diverse and, in some cases, difficult to overview. Linking this 'non-formal' sector to the NQF is seen as crucial to increasing overall transparency. A first outline of how to manage this 'opening up' of the framework was developed by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education during 2011. This proposal suggests establishing a National Council for Qualifications to act as the 'gatekeeper' of the NQF. The council – and stakeholders – would make sure that qualifications aspiring to be included in the framework meet nationally established quality criteria and requirements. Separate work aimed at developing quality criteria for inclusion was launched in 2012 and a final proposal was presented on 16 November. These criteria specify how to apply the learning outcomes approach when describing and levelling qualifications, and indicate requirements on quality assurance and transparency to the awarding institution.

The NQF proposal presented to the government in October 2010 states that all eight levels of the NQF – including levels 6 to 8 – should be open to all types of qualification, academic and non-academic. Not only is this seen as being in line with the spirit of EQF, it also reflects the existence of high level qualifications awarded outside universities and academic institutions. A consultation carried out in spring 2011 revealed different opinions on this question. While most universities and academic institutions were in favour of restricting levels 6 to 8 to qualifications covered by the Bologna process, public authorities, social partners and regional bodies were in favour of opening these levels to all types of qualification. Everybody agreed, however, that an opening of levels 6 to 8 requires robust and visible quality assurance mechanisms, making sure that the overall level of Swedish higher education is not negatively affected. The quality criteria proposed in 2012 for the inclusion of qualifications into the framework (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2012) will provide a basis for developing practical solutions.

Stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education and Research has overall responsibility for work on the NQF and referencing to the EQF. The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan*) has been given the mandate to

coordinate framework technical development and is also (as of 1st July 2009) the Swedish national coordination point for the EQF. A number of expert and working groups were formally established following the December 2009 decision ⁽¹⁾.

Development of the SEQF since 2009 has involved a broad group of stakeholders, from education and training and the labour market. This reflects the objective of the Ministry to open up the framework to qualifications offered outside the public sector. Discussion on the opening up of levels 6 to 8 to non-academic qualifications has also contributed to raising interest in the proposal.

While still not formally adopted, a number of stakeholders have signalled interest in using it as a reference for their work, as in the sports-sector (*Svenska Riksidrottsförbundet*) where the NQF is seen as an instrument for better structuring existing education and training offers. Another example is provided by the 26 institutions responsible for the qualifications of teachers and trainers in VET, which have used the NQF as an instrument to identify available pathways into teacher-training and to indicate minimum prior learning and qualifications requirements. A third example is provided by the construction sector, where the framework is being used to indicate alternative progression routes for those wanting to qualify as construction site managers. This approach shows that the traditional higher education pathway (civil engineer) is not the only option; several combinations of work experience and formal education (both upper secondary and post-secondary VET) are possible. A fourth example is provided by the financial sector where the framework is seen as an opportunity to make visible the training activities taking place within the sector, in most cases independent of public education and training.

Framework implementation

Given delays in formal adoption, the SEQF will at best move into an early operational stage mid-2015. The following factors may influence implementation of the framework.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education has coordinated development of the NQF and will also play a key role in its implementation. The agency was set up as late as 2009 with the responsibility of administering what is a new strand of Swedish higher education and training. Providing high level VET directly relevant to the labour market, higher vocational education

⁽¹⁾ See <https://www.seqf.se/sv/Sa-funkar-det/Ramverken/NQF-LLL/> (in Swedish) [accessed 31.10.2014].

(*Yrkeshögskolan*) has attracted a lot of interest both among individuals and employers. Offering an alternative to the traditional university sector, for example by combining theoretically and practically oriented learning, the new institutions can be seen as complementing existing education and training provisions and qualifications.

This means that coordination of framework developments is carried out by an institution with a clear position on the role of non-academic qualifications at levels 5 to 6. This can prove both positive and negative for the forthcoming framework implementation.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is well placed to administer opening up the framework to the non-formal and private sector. Extensive dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders has already taken place and the gradual inclusion of private qualifications could start from 2015. However, it is questionable whether the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is well placed to ensure the commitment of higher education institutions to the SEQF. Sweden has decided to develop a separate qualifications framework for higher education and a separate self-certification to EHEA has been carried out. While the character of levels 6 to 8 in the NQF is extensively discussed in the proposal for the SEQF, future interaction with the SEQF for higher education is not addressed explicitly, apart from the general decision, in line with EQF, that academic qualifications will be placed automatically at levels 6 to 8. The consultation carried out in spring 2011 on opening up levels 6 to 8 shows that there are differences in opinion between the (academic) higher education sector and others involved in developing the NQF. Some universities fear that the creation of a comprehensive NQF may come to threaten the overall quality and status of Swedish higher education. For the SEQF to be able to operate as a comprehensive NQF the relationship to the higher education framework will require further clarification and continuous dialogue.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The SEQF is based on an eight-level structure where each level is described through knowledge (*kunskap*), skills (*färdigheter*) and competence (*kompetens*). The explicit objective has been to develop a set of descriptors as closely aligned with the EQF as possible. While the influence of the original EQF descriptors is apparent, the level of detail has been increased. The difference from the EQF can be seen with 'competence' which is defined as the ability to take responsibility, to decide and act independently and to cooperate; the EQF speaks about taking responsibility and acting independently.

The learning outcomes perspective is an important and mostly implemented feature of Swedish education and training. It is closely linked at political level to the 'objective-based governance' in use since the early 1990s. While the term learning outcomes is not commonly used (the term 'knowledge objectives' is used for compulsory education), the principles behind it are well known and accepted. The core curricula for compulsory education have recently been revised, further strengthening and refining the learning outcomes-based approach.

Universities follow national regulations on examinations, requiring the use of learning outcomes, though how these learning outcomes are translated by individual institutions varies. These are autonomous institutions where national authorities have less direct influence. The Bologna process has been influential, as have a number of local initiatives.

A particular challenge faced is the extent to which the learning outcomes perspective influences assessment practices. Professionals may have problems seeing that assessment methods and criteria have to relate directly to objectives expressed in the curricula. This is a continuing process illustrating the long-term challenge involved in the shift to learning outcomes.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NQF ⁽²⁾

Development of the SEQF is seen as an opportunity to promote the work on validating non-formal and informal learning.

The government gave the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education the task of coordinating and supporting the national approach to validation of prior learning. Cooperating with relevant parties, including the National Agency for Education (responsible for validation in adult education), from 2010 to 2012 the agency developed criteria for validation and guidelines for quality assurance and documentation of validation processes. The criteria and guidelines also define future areas of development on validation, among which linking to the SEQF is mentioned. While the formal status of these criteria and their subsequent implementation at national level is uncertain, progress is being made and qualifications and standards that will be included in the SEQF will also be open to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

⁽²⁾ This section draws mainly on input from European Commission et al., 2014.

The procedures described in the criteria and guidelines are applicable to adult education, higher vocational education, higher education, folk high schools (civic education) and different sectors of the labour market. Formal education providers at all levels, along with sector organisations, have the opportunity to adapt the national criteria and guidelines to their needs and contexts.

Different sectors in the labour market are developing their own models for validation. Standards developed by different business sector organisations are used as trade-specific frameworks for validating vocational knowledge, skills and competences. These are mainly occupational standards focusing on an outcome-based evaluation of the extent to which an individual knows a certain occupation or trade. The sector models have been developed in cooperation with business sector organisations, such as the Swedish Trade Federation (Svensk Handel), the Swedish Construction Industry Training Board (Byggnadsindustrins Yrkesnämnd) and the Vocational Training and Working Environment Council-Transport Trades, with part funding and support from national public agencies. These are also planned to be included in the SEQF.

Referencing to the EQF

Assuming adoption of the SEQF by spring 2015, referencing to the EQF will take place in autumn 2015. The eight SEQF levels mirror the eight levels of the EQF. The Ministry has made the following proposal for placing qualifications within the SEQF (March 2014).

Table 1 **Proposed level correspondence between EQF and SEQF**

SEQF	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

Source: <https://www.seqf.se/sv/Sa-funkar-det/Ramverken/NQF-LLL/>
[accessed 31.10.2014].

The proposal for placing public education and training qualifications within the SEQF (March 2014) can be seen in Table 2. Opening up the framework to private and non-formal qualifications will take place in a second stage and progress according to the level of stakeholder interest.

The decision to place compulsory education at level 2 has been subject to much discussion, partly triggered by the Finnish proposal from 2010 (still to be adopted) to place compulsory education at level 3. The decision to put it at level 2 seems to correspond to the initial technical advice given by the experts developing the SEQF.

Important lessons and the way forward

Adoption of a decree in spring 2015 will provide the SEQF with the necessary political mandate to move into operation. There is a danger, if there are further delays, that momentum and interest – for example in the private sector – will be lost.

Compared to other countries, Sweden has, from the start, emphasised the need to open up to non-formal education and training and make it possible to establish links to the diverse and extensive field of continuing and popular education and training run by the private sector and non-governmental organisations. The overall success of the framework will partly depend on the extent to which it is seen as relevant to stakeholders outside formal, initial education and training. For this reason, it is particularly important to make practical progress and move from intention to concrete action.

While involvement of stakeholders has been systematic and extensive, the continued separate qualifications framework for higher education – and the separate self-certification of this to the qualifications framework in the European higher education area – points to the need for closer dialogue between the university sector and the remaining parts of education and training.

Main sources of information

[Urls accessed 31.10.2014]

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is designated as national coordination point: <http://www.yhmyndigheten.se/hem/higher-vocational-education--hve/>

The Swedish NQF for lifelong learning: <https://www.seqf.se/sv/Sa-funkar-det/Ramverken/NQF-LLL/>

Table 2 Swedish national qualifications framework

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctoral diploma	8
7	Master diploma	7
6	Bachelor diploma	6
	Advanced diploma in higher vocational education	
5	Qualified graduate from upper secondary engineering courses	5
	Diploma in higher vocational education	
4	Upper secondary level (new and former)	4
3		3
2	Compulsory education for young and corresponding education for adults, special needs schools and Swedish tuition for immigrants	2
1	Special needs education	1

Source: The Ministry of Education and Research has made the following proposal for the placing qualifications within the SEQF (March 2014): <https://www.seqf.se/sv/Aktuellt/Nyheter/Regeringens-forslag-angaende-nationell-referensram-for-kvalifikationer-for-livslangt-larande1/> [accessed 31.10.2014].

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
SEQF	Swedish national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 22.10.2014]

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning: country report: Sweden*.
https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87075_SE.pdf

Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (2012). *Återrapportering av regeringsuppdrag 2012 avseende utveckling av nationella kvalitetskriterier, som måste uppfyllas om en kvalifikation ska få anslutas till den nationella referensramen för kvalifikationer, NQF* [Feedback on the government commission in 2012 for the development of national quality criteria that must be met if a qualification must be approved by the national qualifications framework , NQF].
<https://www.myh.se/Documents/Publikationer/Aterrapporteringar/Redovisning-nationella-kvalkrit.pdf>