SWITZERLAND
European inventory on NQF 2014

Introduction

While Swiss education and training is generally considered to be of high quality, many of its qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, potentially hindering Swiss citizens seeking employment abroad. Switzerland sees the link to European cooperation on qualifications frameworks, both the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the qualifications framework in the European higher education area, as an opportunity to strengthen the transparency and comparability of its national qualifications in a European and wider international context. In 2009, Switzerland adopted a national qualifications framework (NQF) for higher education (qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area (*Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich*) (NQF CH-HS)) ([1]) in line with the Bologna-process, including qualifications awarded by universities, universities of applied science (*Fachhochschulen*) and university colleges for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). A Swiss NQF (*Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen Schweiz*) (NQR-CH) for vocational and professional qualifications ([2]) was adopted on 27 August 2014 (Government of Switzerland, 2014) and put in force from 1 October 2014 ([3]). This latter framework is explicitly oriented to the EQF and introduces an eight-level structure defined through knowledge, skills and competence. Switzerland sees future referencing to the EQF as important and as a way to increase (in particular) the transparency of its vocational and professional qualifications abroad. Following recent reorganisation at federal level, it is possible that some form of linkage between the two framework initiatives will be created.

([1]) Information on the NQF for higher education can be found at:
www.crus.ch/information-programme/qualifikationsrahmen-nqfch-hs.html [accessed 23.10.2014].

([2]) Following feedback in the consultation, the name of the NQR-CH has been changed to national qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training (*Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung*) (NQR-CH-BB), indicating that it is not an overarching framework, but rather one for vocational education and training (VET) and professional education and training (PET) (BB = *Berufsbildung*). The new name will be used in this chapter.

([3]) Information regarding the adoption of the framework is published on:
http://www.sbfi.admin.ch/hbb/ [accessed 23.10.2014].

Main policy objectives

The proposal for the NQR-CH-BB (VET/PET) was presented in February 2012. The framework consists of eight learning outcomes-based levels described through knowledge, skills and competence, as in the EQF. While limited to vocationally and professionally-oriented qualifications, it could be argued that the current proposal is modelled as a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning. Moving in this direction will require a political decision and whether such development is possible is not clear. The recent reorganisations at ministerial level, bringing the responsible departments closer together, could provide a closer link between the two initiatives. Even in a case where the two frameworks are taken forward separately there will be a need to clarify the relationship between professional qualifications at levels 5 to 8 of the NQR-CH-BB and the three levels (cycles) of higher education covered by the NQF CH-HS.

Stakeholder involvement

The development of the NQR-CH-BB has been rapid and was initiated in 2009-10. During 2011 the responsible ministry (federal department of economic affairs) (*Eidgenössisches Volkswirtschaftdepartement*) organised a series of round tables with representatives of cantons, trade associations and the social partners. Based on oral and written comments received on the proposal during these gatherings, the documents forming the basis for the spring 2012 consultation ([4]) were amended.

The proposal has received support from stakeholders (cantons, trade associations and social partners), linked to two particular issues. First, the NQF is seen as a precondition for increasing the visibility and value of Swiss qualifications abroad and supporting employment opportunities for Swiss citizens. Second, the NQF builds directly on the shift to learning outcomes initiated by the 2004 reform of the federal act on vocational and PET. This reform introduces a more outcome-oriented approach to defining VET programmes and qualifications. More than 600 different qualifications have been redefined in dialogue between trade associations and public authorities, preparing the ground for the overarching learning outcomes approach now taken forward by the NQR-CH-BB. The NQF for higher education, in contrast, has weaker links to

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([4])   Reactions to the consultation are available at:
       http://www.bbt.admin.ch/themen/01051/01071/01076/01312/index.html?lang=de
       [accessed 23.10.2014].

stakeholders outside education itself. However, in their responses to the consultation, most participating stakeholders point to the problem caused by the limited scope (VET and PET) of the NQR-CH-BB as well as to the lack of clarity caused by the existence of two framework initiatives in Switzerland. A message from the stakeholders is to develop one comprehensive framework covering all qualifications.

Framework implementation

The NQR-CH-BB became formally operational on 1 October 2014. While the legal basis now is in place, the actual implementation of the framework is just starting. The responsible State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation) (SERI) within the federal department of economic affairs, education and research (EAER) is currently (October 2014) preparing a set of guidelines to be used by education and training stakeholders and others when placing qualifications at levels and when using the NQF levels as reference points for curriculum and programme development.

Implementation of the NQF is closely related to a national strategy, initiated in 2013, aiming at the further strengthening vocationally oriented education and training at higher (NQR-CH-BB 5 to 8) levels. There is overall agreement among Swiss stakeholders that tertiary VET is a particular strength of Swiss education and training and that its future development is essential to meeting the needs of the national labour market: in 2014 it was estimated that more than 25 000 certificates and diploma were awarded at these levels. For this further development to take place, however, a number of challenges have to be addressed:

(a) further development of tertiary VET requires that the position of the most important VET providers (for example *Fachhochschulen*) is clarified (relative to the position of other institutions operating at tertiary level, notably universities);

(b) titles awarded for tertiary VET must attract the same societal recognition as titles awarded by academic institutions;

(c) differences in financing of different types of tertiary education and training must be clarified.

The NQF is seen as an important instrument for addressing the first two points, providing a reference point for positioning and comparison. By supporting

that national strategy in this area, the NQR-CH-BB takes on a reforming role, going beyond a restricted transparency function.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The shift to learning outcomes has been fundamental to reforming Swiss vocational and professional qualifications in recent years, with work leading to gradual development of methods for writing learning outcomes ([5]). The use of learning outcomes for general and higher education is more limited, but can be observed in these areas as well.

The level descriptors of the NQR-CH-BB build on the main categories of the EQF, but also reflect extensive national experience in using learning outcomes for describing and defining qualifications. Staying close to the knowledge and skills categories, the main elements of the descriptors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1   **The main elements of the descriptors in the Swiss NQF**

Knowledge	Declarative knowledge	
	Understanding	
Skills	Procedural skills	
	Senso-motoric skills	
Competences	Vocational or professional competence	
	Personal competence	Self-competence
		Social competence
		Leadership competence

Source: Adapted from Government of Switzerland, 2014.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning ([6])

A number of key national factors should be taken into account when considering the Swiss perspective on validation: the federalism, the quadrilinguism and the complex articulation of the Swiss education area. Since January 2013, all matters relating to education, research and innovation at federal level have been brought

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([5]) For information on the method for writing learning outcomes and examples of profiles, consult:
http://www.bbt.admin.ch/themen/hoehere/00160/index.html?lang=de
[accessed 23.10.2014].

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

together in the EAER. The State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) has been combined with the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) to form the SERI: both are now part of the EAER. SERI has overall governance of validation projects throughout Switzerland, supporting or checking the pilot projects implemented in cooperation with the specific services, and coordinating the processes in the different education and training degrees and sectors. It is also the organisation in charge of development of the NQF, in a first stage only for VET qualifications, and it will maintain existing validation practices.

Switzerland has defined validation procedures mainly for VET and further professional training. In other sectors there are no binding rules; instead various official documents include indications for development and diffusion of validation procedures. Access to validation is considered an individual right, and validation practices are optional.

Validation is formally referred to as one of the four possible ways of obtaining a qualification in upper secondary VET [7]. Full qualifications, as well as exemptions and provision of access, can be also obtained for higher VET and PET. The OPET (now integrated in SERI) developed national validation guidelines in 2010 [8]. These specify five different phases for validation: information and advising, self-evaluation, assessment, accreditation (or partial certification) and certification. These phases, although referring specifically to the upper-secondary level of VET, also act as a general indicator of other Swiss validation practices.

In higher education, regulation is normally decentralised to the institutional level; depending on the type of university (Cantonal universities, universities of applied science, university colleges for teacher education) procedures and regulations might differ. There are options for admission into a programme without a baccalaureate and the possibility to validate, partially or completely, a higher education degree.

Validation procedures, both in VET and higher education, use the standards of formal qualification/programmes as reference.

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[7] The other ways are:
  (a) structured curriculum of study (classical formal way);
  (b) admission of adults to professional exams without having participated in a formal curriculum of study;
  (c) shortened initial vocational training if the adult is able to demonstrate his or her knowledge within the desired professional domain.

[8] See validation instruments (*Validierungsinstrumente*) [accessed 23.10.2014].

The Labour Market and Unemployment Insurance, part of the State Secretariat of Economic Affairs, has set up skills assessment centres that carry out'personal *bilans* (skills audits) to identify skills and know-how acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, and aid development of a personal or professional portfolio. There are other initiatives of this nature in Switzerland, normally integrated into career guidance practices though it is not clear how these are connected to formal qualification standards.

Referencing to the EQF

There is currently no indication on when referencing to the EQF can take place. This is due to the 'exclusion' of Switzerland for the moment, following the 2014 referendum on immigration, from EU education (Erasmus+) and research (Horizon 2020) committees and working groups. Given that Switzerland's participation in the EQF advisory group was linked to the Erasmus+ programme, referencing is on hold for the moment.

Main sources of information
SERI: http://www.sbfi.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en [accessed 23.10.2014].

Table 1   **Indication of qualifications types to be included in the NQR-CH-BB and approximate level**

Level	Qualification types [*Abschlussarten*]
8	
7	HFP
6	HF
5	BP
4	EFZ
3	
2	EBA
1	

EBA: Eidgenössische Berufsattest (federal VET certificate); two-year basic vocational education.

EFZ: Eidgenössische Fähigkeitszeugnis (federal VET diploma); three- or four-year basic vocational education.

BP: Berufsprüfung (vocational examination).

HF: Höhere Fachschulen (higher technical schools) ([9]).

HFP: Höhere Fachprüfung (higher technical examination).

Source: Department for Economy, Education and Science, in presentation to kick-off meeting to NQR-CH-BB, 22 October 2014, Bern.

([9]) HF offers courses with high practical and labour market relevance. Focus is on specific problems in service, operation, workshop and production. Higher technical schools courses are mostly based on completed basic vocational training and last at least two or three years (full-time or part-time).

List of abbreviations

EAER	federal department of economic affairs, education and research
EQF	European qualifications framework
NQF	national qualifications framework
NQR-CH	Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen Schweiz [Swiss national qualifications framework]
NQR-CH-BB	Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung [national qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training]
NQF CH-HS	Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich [qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area]
OPET	Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology
PET	professional education and training
SER	Staatssekretariat für Bildung und Forschung [State Secretariat for Education and Research]
SERI	Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation]
VET	vocational education and training

References

[URLs accessed 22.10.2014]

European Commission et al. (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014. Country report: Switzerland.* http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory

Government of Switzerland (2014). *Verordnung über den nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung (V-NQR-BB)* [Regulation on the NQF for VET qualifications]. http://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/index.html