

SWEDEN

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

The legal basis supporting the Swedish national qualifications framework (SeQF) came into force on 1 October 2015 (¹). While the overall technical design of the framework was finalised by 2012, legal adoption has proved time-consuming, not least due to the need to include all stakeholders in the process. SeQF developments have, from the start, focused on the need to include all types of qualifications in the framework. The added value of the national qualifications framework (NQF), it is argued, depends on its ability to address explicitly, and include certificates and qualifications awarded by, private companies and branch/sector organisations and bodies. While the SeQF is mainly seen as a tool to increase transparency of qualifications, the framework is also seen as supporting better cooperation between the education and training system and the labour market. In this sense, the framework is not only about describing existing qualifications but also about improving policies and practices. The SeEQF was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in June 2016 (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2016). Following legal adoption of the framework in autumn 2015, criteria and procedures for inclusion of non-formal qualifications have been put in place and made public. The SeQF can be considered to have reached (an early) operational status.

Policy objectives

Different from other European frameworks, the SeQF has from the start (in 2009) been seen as a tool for opening up to qualifications awarded outside the public system, particularly in the adult/popular education sector and in the labour market. This focus on the inclusive character of the framework responds to specific features of Swedish education and training.

(¹) Law 2015:478): Regulating fees linked to the approval of qualifications for lifelong learning.

Regulation 2015:545): On a qualifications framework for lifelong learning.

First, the role of adult and popular education is generally very strong, largely explaining why Sweden consistently scores highly 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 is expected to increase overall transparency of Swedish qualifications and clarify options for progress and transfer.

Second, an 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 summarise.

Linking this ‘non-formal’ sector to the NQF is seen as crucial for increasing overall transparency of qualifications in Sweden. The 2015 SeQF Law and Regulation authorises the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan (MYH)) to act as ‘gatekeeper’ (supported by an advisory council) and put in place the necessary procedures and criteria to allow this to happen in practice. These procedures and criteria have been publicly available since March 2016 ⁽²⁾.

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. In the definition of competence, for example, the EQF emphasis on autonomy and responsibility is extended to also address decision-making ability and cooperation/teamwork.

The learning outcomes perspective (*Resultat av lärandet*) is an important and mostly implemented feature of Swedish education and training. While the

⁽²⁾ Guidelines for applying for levelling of non-formal qualifications:
<https://www.seqf.se/sv/Sa-funkar-det/Ansokan/> [accessed 31.10.2016].

term learning outcomes is only gradually coming into general use, the underpinning principles are well known and broadly 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 interpreted by individual institutions varies. The Bologna process has been influential in this area, as have local initiatives.

Implementation of the SeQF since 2009 has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes and clarified the importance of the concept to stakeholders outside traditional, formal education and training. In the longer term this may prove of particular importance, potentially supporting dialogue between education and the labour market.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Education and Research has overall responsibility for work on the NQF and referencing to the EQF. Supported by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, first step towards full operational status of the framework has now been taken.

A broad group of stakeholders, from education and training as well as the labour market, has been involved in developing the SeQF (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2016). This reflects the objective of the ministry to open up the framework to qualifications offered outside the public sector. The discussion on the opening up of levels 6 to 8 to non-academic qualifications has also contributed to raising interest in the proposal.

Several 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 requirements in prior learning and qualifications. A third example is 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 possible alternative; several combinations of work experience and formal education (both upper secondary and post-secondary VET) are possible. A fourth example is 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.

A set of procedures and criteria have been developed for the inclusion/levelling of non-formal qualifications to the SeQF. An advisory council (*Rådet for den nationella referansramen för kvalifikationer*) will support the national agency; this council will consist of 14 representatives from all stakeholders in education and the labour market. The following steps have to be described by those submitting a request to this council:

- (a) before initiating the process, a fee has to be paid;
- (b) in addition to title, occupational and/or educational context of the qualification has to be clarified;
- (c) the type of qualification (certificate, diploma, proof of education, proof of vocation);
- (d) assumed level of qualification;
- (e) motivation for assumed level;
- (f) learning outcomes of qualifications;
- (g) learning outcomes for parts of qualification;
- (h) legitimacy/acceptance of qualification in relevant occupational area;
- (i) form of assessment;
- (j) quality assurance;
- (k) awarding institution.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽³⁾

In the past two years, Sweden has made progress in the area of validation, particularly related to assessing and recognising immigrants' prior learning. This is exemplified by the 2015 Budget Bill where a total of SEK 141 million was allocated to strengthen validation measures, mostly related to migrants' qualifications and experiences.

A new national committee (the National Delegation for Validation) was set up in 2015 to develop and promote a strategy on validation, addressing the regional

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

as well as the national level. In parallel to this, also in 2015, the Swedish government launched a formal consultation on validation, preparing a bill to be presented to parliament during spring 2017.

The strategy seeks to remedy existing and acknowledged weaknesses in the Swedish validation system. Such weaknesses are primarily connected to the decentralised, complex and pluralistic nature of arrangements. Since 2010, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan (MYH)) has had the task of coordinating and supporting the national structure for validation of prior learning. Given that this national agency is also responsible for the implementation of the SeQF, a close link between the NQF and validation is seen as critical. Cooperation with education and training providers, sector organisations, social partners, universities and regional representatives has been an essential part of this work. In 2012, the agency presented criteria and guidelines on validation of prior learning.

NQF implementation

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education plays a key role in implementing the SeQF. The agency was set up in 2009 with responsibility for administering what is a new and vocationally oriented strand of Swedish higher education and training. *Yrkeshögskolan*/higher vocational education 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. For the forthcoming implementation of the framework this can prove both positive and negative.

The national agency is well placed to administer the opening up of the framework to the non-formal and private sectors. Extensive dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders has already taken place and the gradual inclusion of private qualifications has now started. It can be questioned, however, whether the national agency 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 separate self-certification to EHEA has been carried out. While the character of levels 6 to 8 in the NQF was extensively discussed during initial development stages, long-term interaction between the SeQF and the

national framework for higher education is not addressed explicitly. The consultation carried out in spring 2011 on the opening up of levels 6 to 8 showed differences in opinion between the (academic) higher education sector and others involved in developing the NQF. For the SeQF to be able to operate as a comprehensive NQF, its relationship to the higher education framework will require further clarification and continuous dialogue.

The Swedish qualifications framework has now reached operational stage, a judgement based on the following factors:

- (a) a formal legal basis have been established, clarifying governance issues and stakeholder involvement;
- (b) the institution responsible for day-to day coordination and development of the work has been appointed and is actively pursuing agreed tasks;
- (c) a register of qualifications has been put in place and is accessible via the SeQF web-portal (⁴);
- (d) all relevant formal qualifications have been included in, and levelled to, the framework;
- (e) criteria and guidelines for inclusion and levelling of non-formal qualifications has been developed and published;
- (f) all qualifications included in the framework are based on learning outcomes.

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF took place in June 2016 (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2016). The eight SeQF levels mirror the eight levels of the EQF.

This placing of qualifications reflects what is seen as the first stage of NQF implementation, addressing public education and training qualifications. Opening up the framework to private and non-formal qualifications will take place in a second stage and progress according to the level of interest among stakeholders.

Important lessons and the way forward

The formal adoption of the SeQF in 2015 has made it possible for the framework to move into an early operational stage.

(⁴) SeQF web portal: <https://www.myh.se/ln-English/EQF/>

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 the framework 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 areas of education and training.

Source of further information:

Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (national coordination point):

<https://www.myh.se/In-English/Swedish-National-Agency-for-Higher-Vocational-Education-/>

[accessed 9.3.2015].

Swedish national qualifications framework:

<https://www.seqf.se/> [accessed 22.12.2016].

Swedish national qualifications framework (SeQF)

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
8	Doctorate diploma	8
7	Master diploma	7
6	Bachelor diploma	6
5	Advanced diploma in higher vocational education Qualified graduate from upper secondary engineering courses	5
	Diploma in higher vocational education	

NQF levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
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: Adapted from <https://www.seqf.se/>

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
MYH	Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education)
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
SeQF	Swedish qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

References

- European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Sweden.*
- Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (2016). *Referencing report of the Swedish qualifications framework to the EQF* [unpublished].