



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2022  
**SWITZERLAND**



# European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022 – Switzerland

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This report is part of the [European inventory of national qualifications frameworks \(NQFs\)](#). For additional information please visit Cedefop's [NQFs online tool](#).

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## 1. Introduction

This report is part of the European inventory of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Since 2009, Cedefop has carried out a systematic mapping and analysis of NQF developments in countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process. These reviews, done in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, have directly supported the development of operational and sustainable NQFs. The report offers a detailed description of the structure and scope of the Swiss NQF, and its objectives, functions and institutional arrangements, as well as data on the framework's implementation and impact on broader policy areas.

In 2009, the country adopted a national qualifications framework for higher education (*Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich*) (NQF-CH-HS) <sup>(1)</sup> in line with the Bologna process. The framework was updated in 2021 and approved by the Swiss Conference of Higher Education Institutions; it is aligned with the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) <sup>(2)</sup>. A framework for vocational and professional qualifications (*Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung*) (NQF-VPQ) <sup>(3)</sup> has been in force since 2014. The NQF-VPQ is explicitly oriented to the EQF and introduces an eight-level structure defined through knowledge, skills and competences; it was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (SERI, 2015).

## 2. National context

### 2.1. Policy context

The country considers the link to the EQF and the QF-EHEA an opportunity to strengthen the transparency and comparability of its national qualifications in a European and wider international context.

Swiss vocational and professional qualifications enjoy considerable prestige and labour market relevance. Around two thirds of all young people coming out of compulsory school opt for vocational education and training (SERI, 2020).

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(1) The web page of the [qualifications framework in Swiss higher education](#) is available in English, French, German and Italian.

(2) More information on the NQF: [Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich](#) (in German); [Cadre de qualifications pour le domaine des hautes écoles suisses](#) (in French).

(3) Also referred to in English as the national qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training.

However, many of its qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, potentially hindering Swiss citizens from seeking employment abroad.

## 2.2. NQF legal basis

The NQF-VPQ is legally embedded by the Regulation on the NQF for Vocational Education and Training (VET) Qualifications, in force since 1 October 2014 <sup>(4)</sup>. The responsibilities of bodies involved in referencing and implementing the framework are clearly defined in Annex 6.3 to that regulation and the explanatory note to the regulation (Chapter 5).

## 3. NQF objectives and functions

The NQF-VPQ aims to improve the transparency and comparability of vocational and professional qualifications. More specific objectives (SERI, 2015) are to:

- (a) promote equal recognition and valuing of vocational and professional education and training in society in comparison with academic qualifications;
- (b) aid employers' understanding of the competences of graduates of vocational and professional courses and of graduates from other countries, to meet the needs of the labour market;
- (c) strengthen, as part of an overall strategy, the recognition of higher vocational and professional education and training;
- (d) improve the opportunities for Swiss-educated professionals to get jobs abroad and so to increase overall mobility.

There have been no changes to the function and policy objectives of the NQF-VPQ since 2020 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The main purpose of the NQF-CH-HS is to promote the comparability of higher education qualifications in an international context. It functions as the foundation for the international recognition of qualifications. Higher education institutes are guided by the descriptors of the NQR-CH-HS when developing programmes <sup>(5)</sup>.

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<sup>(4)</sup> The [regulation](#) is available in French, German and Italian.

<sup>(5)</sup> More information about [the qualifications framework in Swiss higher education](#) is available in English, French, German and Italian.

## 4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

### 4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The level descriptors of the NQF-VPQ reflect the competence approach <sup>(6)</sup> already used in vocational and professional education and training. The main elements of the descriptors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. **Main elements of the NQF-VPQ descriptors**

<b>Knowledge</b>	Knowledge Understanding
<b>Skills</b>	Procedural skills Sensorimotor skills
<b>Competences</b>	Professional competences Personal competences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• autonomy</li> <li>• social competences</li> <li>• leadership competences</li> </ul>

Source: Government of Switzerland (2014); SERI (2015).

It is emphasised that the descriptors are defined specifically in relation to vocational and professional education and training (SERI, 2015). 'Knowledge' relates to factual knowledge in a field of work or study and is subdivided into the categories of 'knowledge' and 'understanding'. 'Skills' relate to the ability to apply knowledge to perform tasks and solve problems. A distinction is drawn here between procedural and sensorimotor skills. 'Competences' denotes the regular and routine application of knowledge and skills in the context of work; it is divided into 'professional' and 'personal' competences. The formulation of this descriptor gives due weight to the importance of practical experience and indicates that other competences beyond technical ones can be acquired, contributing to the development of the individual both within and outside work situations.

<sup>(6)</sup> The competence-oriented model and the competence and resources model are the two commonly used models that determine how professional competences are described and structured in training plans. For more information, consult Appendix 6.6 of the referencing report (SERI, 2015).

## 4.2. NQF scope and coverage

NQF-VPQ levels 3–5 are open to the various VET qualifications; there are no plans to assign any VET qualifications to levels 1 and 2 <sup>(7)</sup>. With respect to levels 5–8, the NQF-VPQ is compatible with the level descriptors of the QF-EHEA. However, only professional qualifications are levelled to the NQF-VPQ; university qualifications are assigned to the NQF-CH-HS <sup>(8)</sup>.

At the start of the implementation of the framework, single qualifications were assigned NQF-VPQ levels. Experience has shown that most qualifications of a given type are assigned to the same level. Since 2016, professional organisations have two options for having a qualification levelled: applying for simplified referencing of qualifications or seeking individualised referencing of qualifications <sup>(9)</sup>. For simplified assignment of levels, qualifications are assigned according to a standard level for a type of qualification, proposed by SERI (Table 2). This reduces the workload for the professional organisation submitting the application. A professional organisation can request the individual levelling of a qualification if it feels that a specific one might be assigned to higher levels within the NQF-VPQ. In this case levelling is based on the learning outcomes of each qualification description and takes into account the specifics of each profession. Close cooperation with all stakeholders is required to reach a consensus on a level for a specific qualification.

A total of 520 formal vocational and professional qualifications have been levelled to the framework; 220 initial VET qualifications and 300 tertiary professional qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The total number has slightly increased since 2020; the process is expected to continue. Continuing VET (CVET) is not integrated into the NQF-VPQ (Salini et al., 2019).

Table 2. **NQF for vocational and professional qualifications (NQF VPQ)**

NQF-VPQ level	Qualification types	EQF level
8	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) <i>Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)</i>	8

<sup>(7)</sup> Levels 1 and 2 were included to enable future integration into an overall NQF (Source: internal communication with SERI).

<sup>(8)</sup> It includes diplomas from cantonal universities, federal institutes of technology, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education and other specialised institutions.

<sup>(9)</sup> More information on the [NQF-VPQ referencing process](#) is available in English, French, German and Italian.



NQF-VPQ level	Qualification types	EQF level
7	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) <i>Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)</i>	7
6	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (*) (tertiary federal examination) <i>Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)</i>  Advanced federal diploma of higher education issued by a college of higher education (*) <i>Diplom HF ausgestellt von einer Höheren Fachschule</i>  Federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) <i>Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung)</i>	6
5	Federal diploma of higher education (*) (tertiary federal examination) <i>Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung)</i>  Federal VET diploma (3- and 4-year dual VET programmes) <i>Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung)</i>	5
4	Federal VET diploma (*) (3- and 4-year dual VET programmes) <i>Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung)</i>	4
3	Federal VET certificate (2-year VET programmes) (*) <i>Eidgenössischer Berufsattest (zweijährige duale Berufsausbildung)</i>	3
2		2
1		1

(\*) SERI proposes a standard NQF-VPQ level for this type of qualification.

#### 4.3. Use of learning outcomes

Professional competences are described in reference documents: ordinances, training plans for VET, the examination ordinances and guidelines for federal examinations, and framework curricula for colleges of higher education. Almost all the documents are already described in terms of competences or are planned for revision. If a VET qualification is not described in terms of competences, it must have undergone revision before it can be assigned an NQF-VPQ level (SERI, 2015).

In VET, each ordinance is based on a qualification profile, which is a basis for a training plan, defining competences as the minimum standard for training. A

qualification profile is the basis for examination ordinances and guidelines, drawn up by professional organisations in cooperation with practitioners in the profession. It includes professional competences, occupational profile and performance criteria.

#### **4.4. Quality assurance arrangements**

Quality assurance of vocational and professional qualifications has been incorporated into law by the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training <sup>(10)</sup> and corresponding ordinances at all levels.

## **5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement**

The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) <sup>(11)</sup> oversees the implementation of the NQF-VPQ. SERI plays a key role in coordinating and quality assuring the entire levelling/assignment process from proposal until publication of the level of a qualification. SERI is also the EQF national contact point. It provides all necessary information to awarding bodies and other stakeholders, and assists in the levelling of qualifications. Guidelines are available <sup>(12)</sup> (SERI, 2015, Annex 4) that describe in detail individual steps and responsibilities in relation to the assignment of qualifications to the NQF-VPQ.

The Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training supports the implementation of the NQF-VPQ, with consistency checks and reviews of the proposed levels of qualifications in line with the methodology and guidelines.

Before the final decision on a level is made, SERI consults the Federal Commission for Vocational and Professional Education and Training twice a year. This is a tripartite body involving cantons, professional organisations and colleges of higher education in the implementation of the NQF-VPQ. In the daily running of the NQF-VPQ, there is close cooperation with professional organisations, which play an active role in levelling their diplomas (Section 4.2) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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<sup>(10)</sup> [Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training](#) of 13 December 2002 (status as of 1 April 2022) (in English).

<sup>(11)</sup> [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation \(SERI\)](#) (in English).

<sup>(12)</sup> [NQF guidelines](#) are available in English, French, German and Italian.

## 6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

### 6.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

The organisation and decision-making responsibilities in the Swiss education system are complex, and translate into a variety of approaches and projects in the field of validation. Nevertheless, 'Essentially, validation procedures are integrated within each education and training sector' (Salini et al., 2019, p. 4). SERI coordinates validation projects throughout the country, supporting or checking pilot projects in cooperation with specific services and stakeholders (Salini et al., 2019; SERI, 2020).

Individuals holding occupation-specific competences can gain credit for them as already acquired educational achievements. This recognition process must be completed before the start of the VET programme, as it may influence the possible pathways to a VET qualification. Once the educational achievement has been awarded, the candidate must complete a qualification procedure by taking examinations. The recognition of educational achievements is regulated in VET legislation and is available for all VET programmes.

In VET it is also possible to take part in the validation procedure, in which candidates prove that they have all the required competences. At the end of this procedure, candidates are awarded a vocational qualification without taking a final examination. A total of 22 initial VET qualifications (out of 230 different occupations in IVET) are accessible through validation, in various cantons, although the possibility of validation varies from canton to canton, as each decides independently which IVET diplomas can be offered in this way.

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

## 7. NQF implementation and impact

### 7.1. Stage of implementation

The NQF-VPQ can be considered to have reached operational stage, given that a significant proportion of existing vocational and professional qualifications have been included.

## 7.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

NQF-VPQ and EQF levels are indicated on Europass supplements for VET qualifications at levels 3–5. They are also indicated on the diploma supplements for tertiary professional qualifications for levels 5–8 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

## 7.3. NQF dissemination

The NQF-VPQ has a website <sup>(13)</sup> to spread knowledge about the framework. Tools have also been developed for professional organisations wishing to include their qualifications <sup>(14)</sup>. The framework has been promoted mostly through professional organisations and sectors.

## 7.4. Qualifications databases and registers

The SERI professional directory contains all formal VET and professional education qualifications, regardless of whether they are levelled to the NQF-VPQ or not <sup>(15)</sup>. Since the end of 2022, it has indicated the NQF-VPQ levels of qualifications included in the framework. The directorate contains a total of 902 qualifications, providing information on the field of study, awarding body and intended learning outcomes, in the form of open text and a link to relevant supplements. Learning outcomes for all qualifications included in the NQF-VPQ are also described in the supplements available in the database for download (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

SERI maintains a list of qualifications that have been referenced to the NQF-VPQ (Section 4.2). It updates this list twice each year, in January and July. The NQF-VPQ level assigned to a given qualification becomes official as soon as it has been added to this list <sup>(16)</sup>.

## 7.5. Impact of the NQF

The NQF-VPQ plays an important role in transparency. The classification of qualifications did not imply any change in VET. In the same vein, validation of non-formal and informal learning and the links to the NQF-VPQ did not change.

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<sup>(13)</sup> [National qualifications framework for vocational and professional qualifications \(NQF VPQ\)](#).

<sup>(14)</sup> More information about the [NQF-VPQ referencing process](#).

<sup>(15)</sup> The [professional directory](#) can be accessed in French, German and Italian.

<sup>(16)</sup> The [list](#) can be accessed in French, German and Italian.

## 8. Referencing to the EQF

The NQF-VPQ was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (SERI, 2015).

## 9. Reflections and plans

The country has established two sectoral qualifications frameworks: one encompassing vocational and professional education (NQF-VPQ) and a separate one for higher education (NQF-CH-HS). The alignment of each framework to the respective overarching European qualifications framework indirectly makes their systemic complementarity transparent (SERI, 2015).

The main goal of the introduction of the NQF-VPQ has been for it to act as a transparency tool. With the framework established in the education system, the plan is to focus on levelling qualifications.

## Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
IVET	initial vocational education and training
NQF	national qualifications framework
NQR-CH-HS/ NQF-CH-HS	<i>Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich</i> [Qualifications framework for the Swiss higher education area]
NQR-CH-BB/ NQF-VPQ	<i>Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung</i> [National qualifications framework for vocational and professional education and training]
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework of the European higher education area
SERI	<i>Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation</i> [State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation]
VET	vocational education and training

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[URLs accessed 6.4.2023]

European Commission and Cedefop (2022). Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF [unpublished].

Government of Switzerland (2014). *Verordnung über den nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung V-NQR-BB* [Regulation on the NQF for VET qualifications].

Salini, D.; Weber Guisan, S. and Tsandev, E. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Switzerland*.

SERI (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*.

SERI (2020). *Vocational and professional education and training in Switzerland: facts and figures 2020*.

## Web pages and databases

[URLs accessed 6.4.2023]

[Database](#) of all state-recognised occupations and professions.

[List](#) of referenced vocational and professional qualifications.

NQF-VPQ [website](#).

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation ([SERI](#)).