



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2020  
**SWITZERLAND**

Please cite as:  
Cedefop (2021). *European inventory of NQFs 2020 – Switzerland*.  
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/switzerland-european-inventory-of-nqfs-2020>

© European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), 2021.  
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

# Contents

SWITZERLAND .....	2
European inventory of NQFs 2020.....	2
Introduction and context.....	2
Policy objectives.....	3
Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications.....	3
Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement .....	5
Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways .....	6
NQF implementation and impact.....	7
Referencing to the EQF .....	9
Acronyms .....	10
References.....	11

# SWITZERLAND

## European inventory of NQFs 2020

### Introduction and context

Switzerland is well above EU averages with regard to several key indicators in education and training and has exceeded EU 2020 targets in a number of areas. Tertiary education attainment is the second highest (56.1% in 2019, compared to the EU average of 40.3); employment of recent graduates at 87.9% in 2019 exceeds the EU average of 80.9%; adult participation in learning was 32.3% in 2019, also one of the highest in Europe; and early leaving from education is among the lowest (4.4% in 2019), well below the EU average of 10.2% (European Commission, 2020).

In the global PISA education ranking in reading, mathematics and science, the Swiss 15-year-olds' underachievement in mathematics and science is well below the EU average and close to EU average in reading (OECD, 2018).

Swiss vocational and professional qualifications, also referred to as vocational and professional education and training (VPET), enjoys 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). However, many of its qualifications are relatively unknown in other countries, potentially hindering Swiss citizens seeking employment abroad.

Switzerland sees the link to European qualifications frameworks – both the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) – 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 for higher education – Qualifikationsrahmen für den schweizerischen Hochschulbereich (NQR-CH-HS/NQF CH-HS) <sup>(1)</sup> in line with the Bologna framework. A national qualification framework (NQF) for vocational and professional qualifications – Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung (NQR-CH-BB/NQF-VPQ) <sup>(2)</sup> – was adopted on 27 August 2014 <sup>(3)</sup>

---

(1) [NQF CH-HS](#)

(2) Also referred to in English as NQF-VPET.

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

<https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/index.html>

and put in force from 1 October 2014. This latter framework is explicitly oriented to the EQF and introduces an eight-level structure defined through knowledge, skills and competences.

The framework was referenced to the EQF in May 2015 (SERI, 2015).

## Policy objectives

The NQF-VPQ aims to improve transparency and comparability of Swiss vocational and professional qualifications. More specific objectives (SERI, 2015, p. 33) are to:

- (a) map the Swiss VPQ system adequately and thus improve the transparency, clarity and comparability of Swiss vocational and professional qualifications in relation to European ones;
- (b) promote equal recognition and valuing of vocational and professional education and training in society in comparison with academic qualifications;
- (c) aid employer understanding of the competences of graduates of Swiss vocational and professional courses and of graduates from other countries, to meet the needs of the labour market;
- (d) strengthen, as part of an overall strategy, the recognition of Swiss higher vocational and professional education and training;
- (e) improve the opportunities for Swiss-educated professionals to get jobs abroad and so increase overall mobility.

There have been no changes to the function and policy objectives since 2018 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

## Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The level descriptors of the NQF-VPQ reflect the competence approach <sup>(4)</sup> already in use in Swiss vocational and professional education and training. The main elements of the descriptors are presented in Table 1.

---

<sup>(4)</sup> Two models are commonly used in Switzerland to structure competence-oriented documents: competence-oriented model and the competence-and-resources model. They determine how professional competences are described and structured in training plans. For more information consult Appendix 6.6 of the referencing report (SERI, 2015).

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

Knowledge	Knowledge
	Understanding
Skills	Procedural skills
	Sensorimotor skills
Competences	Professional competences
	Personal competences:
	• autonomy
	• social competences
	• leadership competences

Source: SERI, 2015; Swiss Government, 2014.

It is emphasised that the descriptors are defined specifically in relation to Swiss 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.

While it is not envisaged that any VET qualifications will be aligned to level 1, levels 2 to 5 are open to the various VET qualifications. With respect to levels 5 to 8, the NQF-VPQ is compatible with the level descriptors for the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). However, only professional qualifications are aligned to the NQF-VPQ; university qualifications are assigned to the NQF CH-HS <sup>(5)</sup>.

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 documents are already described in competences or are planned for

---

<sup>(5)</sup> It includes diplomas from cantonal universities, federal institutes of technology, universities of applied sciences, universities of teacher education and other specialised institutions.

revision. If a VET qualification is not described in 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 minimum standards for training.

The federal government approves the examination regulations for federal diplomas of higher education and advanced federal diplomas of higher education; these include regulating admission to examinations, legally protected title, the professional competences and the occupational profile. 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.

## Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Swiss NQF-VPQ is legally embedded in the Ordinance on the NQF-VPET qualifications, in force from 1 October 2014 <sup>(6)</sup>. The responsibilities of bodies involved in referencing and implementing the framework are clearly defined in Annex 6.3 of that ordinance and the explanatory note to the ordinance <sup>(7)</sup>.

The Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), is in charge of 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 in line with the Article 2 of the ordinance. SERI also takes on the role of national contact point for the EQF in its capacity as the expert body for the NQF-VPQ. It provides all necessary information to awarding bodies and other stakeholders and assists in the assignment of qualifications. Guidelines <sup>(8)</sup> on the NQF-VPQ (SERI, 2015, Annex 4) have been developed, that describe in detail individual steps and responsibilities in relation to the assignment of qualifications to the NQF-VPQ.

The Swiss federal institute for initial and continuing training (SFIVET) supports implementation with consistency checks and review of the coherence of proposed levels of qualifications in line with the methodology and guidelines.

Before the final decision on levelling is made, twice a year SERI consults the Federal Commission for Vocational and Professional Education and Training

---

<sup>(6)</sup> <https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/201410010000/412.105.1.pdf>

<sup>(7)</sup> *Erläuterungsbericht*

<sup>(8)</sup> Guidelines in German, Italian and French available at <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet/das-vorgehen-zur-einstufung.html>

(FCVPET), in existence since 1970. This is a tripartite body involving cantons, professional organisations and colleges of higher education in the implementation of the NQF-VPQ.

There are no plans to change the scope of the NQF or the relevant procedures, at the moment.

Quality assurance of VPET qualifications is legally embedded in the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training and corresponding ordinances at all levels.

## Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways <sup>(9)</sup>

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 is the Swiss federal government's specialised agency for national and international matters in education and training. SERI coordinates validation projects throughout Switzerland, supporting or checking pilot projects cooperating with specific services and stakeholders.

If someone already has certain occupation-specific competences before starting a VET programme, they can prove them; they must be appropriately credited as already acquired educational achievements. This recognition process must be completed before the start of the VET programme as it has influence on the possible pathways to a VET qualification. Once the educational achievement has been awarded, the candidate must complete a 'qualification procedure' 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 having taken a final examination. The validation procedure includes five phases: information and advising, self-evaluation, assessment, accreditation (or partial certification) and certification. The validation of educational achievements is available in VET programmes that show a corresponding need, for which the body responsible has formulated a regulation and implementing provisions recognised by the SERI. A total of 22 IVET qualifications (out of 230 different occupations in IVET) are

---

<sup>(9)</sup> This section draws on input from SERI (2020) and Salini et al. (2019).



accessible through validation, in various Swiss cantons, although the possibility of validation varies from canton to canton, as each decides on which IVET diplomas can be offered by 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 the possibility to validate, partially or completely, a higher education degree.

## NQF implementation and impact

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

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.

At the start of NQF-VPQ implementation, single qualifications were assigned NQF-VPQ levels. However, experience has shown that most qualifications of a given type are assigned to the same level. Since summer 2016, professional organisations have two options: applying for simplified referencing of qualifications or seeking individualised referencing of qualifications <sup>(10)</sup>. For simplified assignment of levels, qualifications are assigned according to a standard level for a type of qualification, proposed by SERI <sup>(11)</sup>. This reduces workload for the professional organisation submitting the application. A professional organisation

---

<sup>(10)</sup> [NQF-VPQ referencing process](#)

<sup>(11)</sup> SERI proposes a standard reference level for each type of a qualification:

- Federal certificate of vocational education and training (two-year VET programmes): level 3;
- Federal diploma of vocational education and training (three- and four-year VET programmes): level 4;
- Federal diploma of higher education (federal professional examination): level 5;
- Advanced Federal diploma of higher education (federal professional examination): level 6;
- Advanced Federal diploma of higher education (formal study programme): level 6.

can request an individual levelling of a qualification if it feels that a specific one might be assigned higher levels within the NQF-VPQ. In this case levelling is based on 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.

SERI maintains a list of qualifications that have been referenced to the NQF-VPQ. It updates this list twice each year, in January and July. The assigned NQF-VPQ reference level of a given qualification becomes official as soon as it has been added to this list.

A total of 498 of roughly 740 formal vocational and professional qualifications have been attributed levels; 206 initial VET qualifications distributed to levels 3 and 4; 10 initial VET qualifications at level 5; 274 tertiary professional qualifications, at levels 5 to 7; and three at level 8 <sup>(12)</sup> (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

The process is expected to continue. Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) is not integrated into the NQF-VPQ (Salini et al., 2019).

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

A database of all State-recognised occupations and professions and programmes is available in German, French and Italian, but does not include NQF and EQF levels <sup>(13)</sup>. NQF and EQF levels are indicated on Europass supplements for VET and tertiary professional qualifications <sup>(14)</sup>. Learning outcomes are described in the supplements available for download in the register for all qualifications included in the NQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Tools have been developed for professional organisations wishing to include their qualifications <sup>(15)</sup>. Accordingly, the NQF-VPQ has been promoted mostly through professional organisations and sectors.

---

<sup>(12)</sup> List of referenced VPQ qualifications updated July 2020 can be found [here](#).

<sup>(13)</sup> <https://www.becc.admin.ch/becc/public/bvz>

<sup>(14)</sup> <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet.html>

<sup>(15)</sup> <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet/das-vorgehen-zur-einstufung.html>

## Referencing to the EQF

The NQF-VPQ was referenced to the EQF in May 2015. Table 2 shows the approximate alignment of EQF and NQF-VPQ levels and how different types of qualifications fit into the framework.

### Main sources of information:

- State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) acts as EQF NCP: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home.html>
- NQF VPQ website: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/education/mobility/nqf-vpet.html>
- List of assigned vocational and professional qualifications: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/en/home/bildung/mobilitaet/nqf-vpet/das-verzeichnis-der-eingestufen-abschluesse.html>
- A database of all State-recognised occupations and professions (available in German, French and Italian): <https://www.becc.admin.ch/becc/public/bvz>
- Swiss EQF referencing report (SERI (2015): <https://europa.eu/europass/en/reports-referencing-national-qualifications-frameworks-eqf>

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

NQF VPQ level	Qualification types	EQF levels
8	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)	8
7	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)	7
6	Advanced federal diploma of higher education (*) (tertiary federal examination) Eidgenössisches Diplom (Höhere Fachprüfung)  Advanced federal diploma of higher education issued by a college of higher education (*) Diplom HF ausgestellt von einer Höheren Fachschule  Federal diploma of higher education (tertiary federal examination) Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung)	6

NQF VPQ level	Qualification types	EQF levels
5	Federal diploma of higher education (*) (tertiary federal examination) Eidgenössischer Fachausweis (Berufsprüfung)  Federal VET diploma (three- or four-year dual VET programmes) Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung)	5
4	Federal VET diploma (*) (three- or four-year dual VET programmes) Eidgenössisches Fähigkeitszeugnis (drei- und vierjährige duale Berufsbildung)	4
3	Federal VET certificate (two-year VET programmes) (*) Eidgenössisches Berufsattest (zweijährige duale Berufsausbildung)	3
2		2
1		1

(\*) Standard level for this type of a qualification.

## Acronyms

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

## References

[URLs accessed 21.2.2021]

- European Commission (2020). *Education and training monitor leaflet*.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2020-leaflet-on-eu-targets-for-2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2020-leaflet-on-eu-targets-for-2020_en)
- Salini, D.; Weber Guisan, S. and Tsandev, E. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Switzerland*.  
[https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/european\\_inventory\\_validation\\_2018\\_Switzerland.pdf](https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Switzerland.pdf)
- Government of Switzerland (2014). *Verordnung über den nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen für Abschlüsse der Berufsbildung V-NQR-BB* [Regulation on the NQF for VET qualifications].  
<https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20140910/index.html>
- SERI (2015). *Swiss EQF referencing report*. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/reports-referencing-national-qualifications-frameworks-eqf>
- SERI (2020). *Vocational and professional education and training in Switzerland: facts and figures 2020*.  
[https://www.berufsbildungplus.ch/berufsbildungplus/fachportal/service/shop\\_neu.html](https://www.berufsbildungplus.ch/berufsbildungplus/fachportal/service/shop_neu.html)
- European Commission; Cedefop (2020). Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF [unpublished].