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The non-formal education sector (C2) and the NQF

Model project in the construction sector

The Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is currently being developed, aims to portray all qualifications (i.e. certified degrees and similar) independent of where they have been acquired. The presentation of the NQF in the eight-level grid includes qualifications from the formal, i.e. the school and higher education (HE) sector, which build on legal bases (e.g. exam regulations, laws), as well as qualifications from the continuing education and training (CET) sector (i.e. non-formal area), which are not regulated by law. To facilitate the process of NQF development, relevant stakeholders have agreed that in the first stage work will be conducted separately on qualifications regulated by law and those not regulated by law. The former make up 'Corridor 1' (C1), the latter 'Corridor 2' (C2). Nevertheless, ultimately all qualifications will be classified in the NQF based on the same criteria and procedural steps.

This project, which had been commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture (*BMUKK*), was the first to deal with **qualifications not regulated by law** (C2 qualifications) in the context of NQF development. The specific focus was on qualifications in **construction** which are awarded by *Bauakademien* (construction academies, www.bauakademie.at).

Project objectives

This study pursued the main objective of testing if these qualifications are compatible with the requirements foreseen by the (future) NQF for referencing to particular levels; in addition, it analysed the basic willingness of qualification providers to reference their qualifications to the NQF. Another goal was to discuss the referencing of these qualifications in relation to existing legally regulated qualifications (such as the apprenticeship diploma or the final certificate from VET school or engineering college). Furthermore, the study analysed whether the creation of **additional qualifications** mainly for **Levels 1 to 3** but also for **Levels 6 to 8** is possible on the basis of the NQF descriptors/the Austrian criteria and desirable for the construction sector. Another objective of this project was to inform *Bauakademien* – in their capacity as the major training providers of the construction industry – about the establishment of **bodies responsible for qualifications** (QVSs) in order to explain the admission procedure in the non-formal sector to them and find out any 'areas of friction' from their viewpoint.

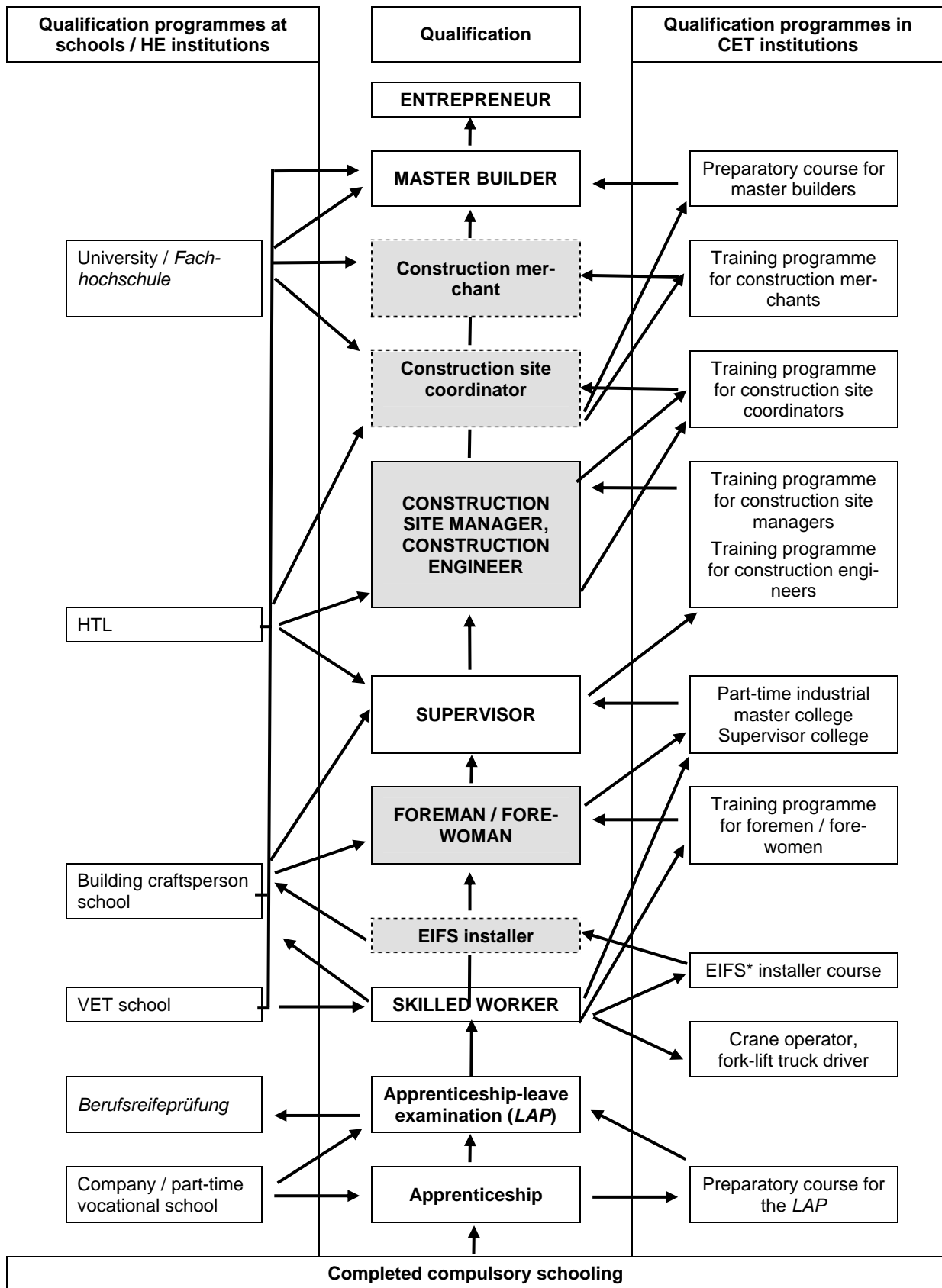
Project design

To achieve the specified project objectives, a combination of methods comprising quantitative and qualitative approaches was selected. In quantitative respects, a **company survey** and a **survey among *Bauakademien*** were conducted. In qualitative respects, the results of these surveys were again discussed and specified in **in-depth interviews** with company representatives and in a **discussion workshop** with the heads of *Bauakademien*.

Qualifications in the construction sector

The construction sector boasts a wide range of **specialist qualifications**. Specialist formal qualifications (i.e. on a legal basis) can be acquired at all levels of the school and HE system as well as at CET institutions (e.g. apprenticeship, engineering college, supervisor, master builder qualifications, etc.). Major non-formal or C2 qualifications are mainly imparted at sector-specific *Bauakademien* (e.g. construction site manager, construction engineer, construction merchant qualifications). In general the qualification programmes are well adapted to each other: formal qualifications are complemented or 'refined' by CET programmes. There is a permeable career ladder which ranges from apprenticeship graduates to self-employed entrepreneurs. The following illustration provides an overview of the major and quantitatively largest qualifications in the construction sector:

Fig. 1: Selected education and training pathways and qualifications in the construction sector



Notes: The grey shaded qualifications are non-formal (C2) qualifications. Qualifications in block capitals are part of the 'career ladder in construction', a continuous career pathway ('from apprentice to master builder'). Qualifications in boxes with dashed lines do not form part of the 'career ladder' but are nevertheless important non-formal qualifications.

* EIFS = exterior insulation and finishing system

Sources: <http://www.maurerlehre.at/bilder/dateien/Bildungsbaum.pdf>
<http://www.baukulturreport.at/index.php?idcat=56>
www.bauakademien.at

Results of the study

The qualifications presented in fig. 1 formed the basis of this project. At the core of the study there were the following specific questions:

- Can the large non-formal qualifications in construction which are provided by *Bauakademien* (such as foreperson, construction engineer, construction site manager, construction site coordinator and construction merchant qualification) be referenced to the NQF in principle?
- Is there any interest on the part of *Bauakademien* to allocate these qualifications to the future NQF?
- What reasons could be put forward for referencing these non-formal qualifications to a level? In what relation are these qualifications to formal qualifications (apprenticeship training, engineering college, etc.)?
- Is there any need for (further) qualifications of relevance for the sector at the lower and upper levels (that is below the apprenticeship diploma at Levels 1 to 3 and above the foreperson qualification at Levels 6 to 8) and would the establishment of such qualifications be desirable?
- What importance will certificates have in the future for the acquisition of non-formal qualifications?
- What is the position of *Bauakademien* towards the establishment of bodies responsible for qualifications?
- What do they see as challenges in the planned referencing procedure in the non-formal (C2) sector?
- What is the opinion of construction sector representatives about the establishment of a National Qualifications Framework?
- What implications could the NQF have for the construction sector?

The **main findings** about the specified questions obtained on the basis of the collected data and information can be summarised as follows:

- The construction sector boasts a large number of **non-formal qualifications** which play an important role (cf. fig. 1). The analysis of these qualifications reveals that they essentially **fulfil the requirements** that are considered as prerequisites in the NQF. However, there is the need for optimisation in the description of the learning outcomes associated with the qualifications and of the standards which must be proven by candidates as part of the assessment procedure (that is, the examination) to be awarded these qualifications. Furthermore not all information about the exam procedure and the assessment mode and criteria is available. If existing **deficits** can be **cancelled out**, *Bauakademien* as qualification providers would in principle be able to file an applica-

tion for referencing these qualifications to the NQF via bodies responsible for qualifications.

- *Bauakademien* are by all means **interested** in having their qualifications assigned to the NQF. This would not only force them to present the qualifications they provide **in more detail and more precisely**, *Bauakademien* would also see the positive effect of giving them a **clearer profile** by entering them in the NQF register. In principle they are welcoming the enhancement of **transparency** due to the presentation of all qualifications (independent of learning context, learning location, learning duration, etc.) in a standardised grid although they are still viewing the actual effects of the NQF with some **scepticism**.
- Concerning possible **level allocations of non-formal construction qualifications**, the experts from the construction sector see the **foreperson** qualification as above the apprenticeship diploma, which for them corresponds to the descriptors of Level 4. If however the (formal) supervisor qualification is referenced to Level 5 – because this level's descriptors fit best according to the experts –, the foreperson qualification should also be assigned to Level 4. They consider it appropriate to assign the **construction engineer** qualification also to Level 5, the **construction site manager** qualification to Level 6. Regarding the master builder qualification, which is part of the formal sector, the majority of experts opt for Level 7.
- Basically the experts see **no definite need** to create additional (certified) qualifications at **Levels 1 to 3 or 6 to 8**. The reason is that, on the one hand, they see the currently existing qualification levels for the construction sector (apprenticeship – skilled worker – foreperson – supervisor – construction site manager – master builder – self-employed entrepreneur) as **sufficient**, on the other hand, certificates are not seen by them as having the practical importance they have from the educational or NQF perspective. This mainly applies to the **lower qualification levels** – according to the collective agreement, these are unskilled workers (auxiliaries) and semiskilled construction workers. The recruitment procedures for these employee groups in the construction sector are usually not too elaborate. The job interview (in most cases conducted directly at the building site) and the probation period are what matters. Certificates can make decision-making in the recruitment process easier but are not considered as absolutely necessary. From the viewpoint of learners, however, they would indeed be important as they would **enhance their motivation**. But it would also be feasible to introduce courses for specific tasks (such as screed, interior and exterior plaster, ground construction, iron bending, etc.), which could possibly lead to a certificate. No other qualifications are considered necessary for the **upper qualification levels**. It is con-

ceivable, however, to provide certificate courses for deepening / widening the competence spectrum (such as management training for supervisors, law for construction engineers, etc.).

- The suggestion of introducing a **qualification below the present apprenticeship diploma** ('reduced training') is **rejected**. The apprenticeship diploma is considered a core entry qualification for the construction sector which should not be 'dequalified' by a 'simple' apprenticeship. Although certificates below the apprenticeship diploma would be conceivable, they should not undermine the skilled workers' level, which should rather be strengthened – by improving the apprenticeship beginners' entry competences, by increasing the quality of training, by a modern job profile, etc.
- According to the experts, in the future **certificates** will become **more important** above all for the upper qualification levels. Although the business sphere still sees professional experience as the more important prerequisite for accessing a qualification, certificate courses are still welcomed as they underpin the theoretical foundations of competences. Nevertheless there will still be 'mixed access' to positions / qualifications in the future: by way of appointment by the management (based on the individual's professional experience as well as specialist and personal aptitude) and by acquiring certificates.
- *Bauakademien* are basically in favour of the idea of introducing **bodies responsible for qualifications (QVSs)** as intermediary institutions between providers of non-formal qualifications and the NQF steering group. But in their majority they speak out against any **regulatory function** of QVSs as this would hamper their innovative power. It is mainly in the variety of programmes in the non-formal sector that they see benefits for learners as they can select from a wider repertoire of differently designed courses. A possible '**doorkeeper**' function of QVSs meets with the approval of *Bauakademien* however. They consider it legitimate that only qualifications which meet the minimum NQF requirements can go through the referencing procedure.
- Support by QVSs for the **NQF-compatible adaptation** of qualifications (such as the formulation of learning outcomes and standards, the preparation of information about the assessment procedure, etc.) is seen as positive by *Bauakademien*. Additional

challenges brought about by the NQF referencing procedure can hardly be appraised by educational providers from today's perspective as there are still too many unknown components about the specific procedure.

- The representatives of the construction industry are also rather restrained about the future **significance and benefit of the NQF** – both in general and for the construction sector in particular. Although they see **advantages** in the creation of more transparency and stronger visibility of qualifications which are currently neither shown in official statistics nor are perceived by the public. They also welcome that the appropriate presentation of Austrian qualifications (such as of the engineering college or the *Ingenieur* qualifications) is becoming easier at the European level as the learning outcome approach allows a more objective description of levels. Nonetheless they harbour **doubts** about the actual effects of the NQF. According to the sector's representatives, a decisive **disadvantage** of the NQF from a business perspective is its strong focus on certificates. They say that professional experience (which is often not certified) is rated considerably higher on the labour market. With the NQF they say a 'flood of new certificates' could emerge which counteracts this instrument's intention of transparency. According to the construction sector experts it will be essential for the NQF's success that allocations are **understandable and credible**.
- Overall this project has shown that – despite the discussions about the NQF held since 2007 – there are still major **information deficits** among educational providers and companies. As there are hardly any specific results about the NQF available to date, the development process has also been blocked several times and has therefore taken (or is taking) longer than originally planned, the NQF has "not yet arrived" in many sectors of industry. Related information campaigns will be needed to compensate for knowledge deficits and take the NQF from the theoretical to the practical level.

The entire study is available in print (ibw Research Report no. 165, ISBN 978-3-902742-45-2) or [online](#).