

NQF/SQF development

status update

Country/Sector: **Austria**

State as at: June 2010

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Overall update on NQF/SQF implementation/development process

Current state of development/implementation:

(Please refer to the recent discussion, milestones reached, etc. regarding NQF development/implementation in your country/sector!)

- 01/2007: NQF development process started
- 02-10/2007: fact finding phase (to gather and analyse information, research work, to prepare a consultation paper; → basis for a national consultation process
- 01-06/2008: national consultation process: 270 responses (online: http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/eubildung/nqr/nqr_sn.xml#toc3-id3 [2010-06-08]);
- 11/2008: conclusions and recommendations to the National steering group (by the expert team);
- 10/2009: policy paper (strategy for the implementation of the NQF) of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research;
- Development process is organised into three strands ('Korridore'): formal qualifications, qualifications acquired in non-formal learning (e.g. in adult education institutions outside the formal education and training system) and informal learning.
- main objectives:
 - o Facilitating transparent referencing of Austrian qualifications to EQF;
 - o Enhancing transparency and comparability of qualifications;
 - o Strengthening the understanding of Austrian qualifications abroad (internationally);
 - o Improving permeability between VET and HE;
 - o Reinforcing the use of learning outcomes in standard settings, curricula and assessments;
 - o Supporting lifelong learning and enabling stronger links between the adult learning sector and the formal education and training system;
 - o Recognising broader range of learning forms (including non-formal and informal learning).
- main principle: to use 'reference qualifications' as an orientation for placing qualifications to the NQF levels.

Next steps foreseen:

(Please state here the next steps foreseen in terms of NQF development/implementation for the next six months!)

- Further development of a quality assured allocation procedure for the NQF
- Carrying out pilot projects on how to describe qualifications of the three strands (mentioned above) in the terms of learning outcomes
- Discussion with all relevant stakeholders on linking validation and allocation of non-formal qualifications to the NQF and on establishing validation and quality assurance procedures.
- Self-certification to the QF-EHEA: expected by the end of 2010.

Challenges/ obstacles discovered in the overall process:

- Communication between the individual education areas
- Question whether and to which extent the NQF should be used to support national reform;
- Questions regarding the equivalence of academically and vocationally oriented higher level qualifications;
- Allocation of national qualifications to the NQF level (open questions, e.g. the issues of partial qualifications, how to apply the principle of best fit, procedures and operational structures);
- Questions relating to the learning outcomes approach in terms of concepts and sound assessment methodologies and tools. Central questions: how to balance outcome orientation and input factors? And: Are learning outcomes to be implemented in a coherent way across different education and training subsystems (general, VET and HE)?;
- Integration of non-formal qualifications and validation of non-formal in informal learning in the NQF developments and equivalences of qualifications;
- Further involvement of stakeholders to strengthen ownership and commitment (the need to engage and include education and training providers and universities); the challenge is to find agreements within a justifiable time period in view of the different interests and objectives.
- Good cooperation in further development of the NQF for lifelong learning and the QF for HE will be needed to establish conditions for better progression possibilities between different subsystems.
- Clear classification of existing qualifications is currently not possible in many cases because the generic descriptors of the EQF are underdetermined and do not allow a perfect fit

Aspects that have positive influence on the overall process:

- stakeholder involvement in all phases of the NQF development: important strength of the Austrian NQF development process lies in its involvement and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders (representing all subsystems of education and training as well as the social partners); recognising different and sometimes conflicting views of the stakeholders on the role of an/the NQF.
- Intense discussions, increasing importance of orientation towards learning outcomes and the already begun implementation of corresponding instruments (such as the educational standards) lead to a rethinking process at all levels and in all areas of the education system.

Recommendations for further reading/reference:

- Information on the consultation paper, the process and the research work is available on the website of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture: <http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/nqr/index.xml> and on the website of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research: <http://www.bmwf.gv.at/wissenschaft/national/nqr/>
- Luomi-Messerer, Karin (2009): EQF-Ref. Wp3: EQF Referencing Process – Exchange of Experience. Austria. Online: http://www.eqf-ref.eu/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=33&Itemid= (2010-06-09).
- Luomi-Messerer, Karin & Tritscher-Archan, Sabine (2008): The development of a National Qualifications Framework. Cedefop Info 3/2008. Online: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/520/Inden.html#across. (2010-06-09)
- Tritscher-Archan, Sabine & Mayr, Thomas (eds.) (2008): VET Policy Report Austria. Online: <http://www.refernet.at/index.php/publikationen/policy-dokumente> (2010-06-09).

Information on the (envisaged) NQF/SQF and its development/implementation process

Development/implementation process:

(Please describe briefly the process envisaged in order to develop/implement an/the NQF in your country/sector.)

- further discussion on:
 - o Objective and functions of the NQF: should the NQF be (only) a transparency and orientation instrument or should it also be used to initiate national reforms? In this regard the medium and long-term implications of the development of an NQF need to be discussed in more detail.
 - o the relationship with the Bologna Process and the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area needs to be clarified.
 - o Future integration of stakeholders: who should be integrated in which way, how should responsibilities be allocated, how should ownership be developed?
 - o Orientation towards learning outcomes: which concepts and methods for describing learning outcomes and for checking and validating learning outcomes should be used?
 - o Classification of qualifications in the NQF: how should the principle of "equivalence (parity of esteem) rather than equality" or the "best fit" principle be realised? Which qualifications or qualification types should be included in the NQF? Which procedures and structures are necessary here?
- Exchange with other European countries (e.g. with participation in European projects such as EQF-Ref and ZOOM), cooperation with like-minded countries (Germany, Denmark, Luxembourg, Switzerland), and an NQF expert group with Poland and Croatia;
- Ongoing NQF pilot projects in the electrical, construction, health and tourism sectors;

- Set up of QVS's (qualification awarding bodies) and an accrediting authority;
- Development of an 'explanatory table': clarification of central terms of the EQF descriptors (e.g. compilation of a 'national glossary' in which the terms are also explained using examples from the Austrian qualifications system), 'typical qualifications' to illustrate the requirements of a level (e.g. qualifications from the formal qualification system which have a high level of awareness) and other criteria and principles for classification and referencing to the individual levels (e.g. clarification of the "best fit" principle).

Scope (envisaged):

(Please refer to sectors of education, forms of learning, etc.!)

There is the intention to develop and implement a common, complete and comprehensive NQF in Austria that should do more than combine individual sub-frameworks. The NQF should encompass all forms of learning and all sectors of education (including general education, higher education, adult education, further education and vocational education and training). The NQF consultation document proposed developing a NQF with eight levels.

Levels & descriptors (envisaged):

levels

- using an eight-level structure (the number of levels is sufficiently distinctive and corresponds well to the main characteristics of the Austrian qualifications system);
- levels 1-5: qualifications from all sectors of education and training will be referenced according to the same set of level descriptors;
- levels 6-8: two sets of level descriptors will be used allowing academically and vocationally oriented qualifications to co-exist;

Descriptors

- Qualifications related to Bologna cycles (BA, MA, Doctorate) and awarded by HE institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences [Fachhochschulen] and university colleges for teacher education [Pädagogische Hochschulen]: using Dublin descriptors for allocating qualifications;
- 'explanatory' table(s) including criteria and procedures are currently being developed to ease referencing of national qualifications to the NQF levels;
- VET qualifications and qualifications from adult learning: using EQF descriptors (and additional criteria) for allocating qualifications;

Responsibilities & quality assurance (envisaged):

- the national bodies responsible for qualifications are also responsible for quality assurance;
- Manifold and partly systematic quality efforts exist in the different segments of the Austrian qualifications system. Some are directly in line with European principles for quality assurance: 'On the basis of wide public debate, a large number of projects and pilots since the mid-1990s, quality development and quality assurance have established themselves as key educational policy objectives in the school sector over the past five years. In line with the international trend, the focus in Austria has also shifted from central input control towards process and mainly output control. From this follow fundamental changes in the conception of control levels'. Such initiatives include, for example, the initiative Quality in Schools (Q.I.S.) or the VET Quality Initiative (QIBB);

Assessment of learning outcomes (envisaged):

- many qualifications are already learning outcome oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions;
- Austria is moving to strengthen the learning outcome approach in all parts of the education and training system (as it is seen as central to the positioning of qualifications onto the NQF);
- Since 2005: project (by the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture) to develop educational standards for core subject areas in general education and in VET; Educational standards define 'content' (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), 'action' (cognitive achievements required in the particular subjects) and additionally personal and social competences related to the respective field are included;
- Since March 2009: project 'Curriculum Design – Learning Outcomes orientation' which aims to integrate educational standards in VET curricula;
- In apprenticeship (dual system): the training regulation is issued for each profile (consists of 'occupational competence profile' [=Berufsprofil] and 'job profile' [=Berufsbild]);
- Final apprenticeship examination (=Lehrabschlussprüfung): to assess whether the candidate has acquired the necessary skills and competences for entry to qualified work;
- In higher education: a 'qualification profile' describing the expected learning outcomes (and definitions of learning outcomes) for each module was introduced by the University Act (Universitätsgesetz) in 2002 (implementation differs between HE institutions);

Procedures to assign qualifications/certificates to the NQF (envisaged):

The process for developing the Austrian NQF may have two steps:

- First step: For the eight levels of the EQF descriptors, develop additional explanations ('explanatory table') to be known as 'guidelines and procedural principles for the classification of qualifications'. The learning outcomes associated with each level should also be illustrated by using selected qualifications as a kind of reference (Referenzqualifikationen);
- Second step: The additional explanations and allocation guidelines will be tested in pilot projects;

Referencing the NQF to the EQF (envisaged):

- Third step (in continuation to the two steps mentioned above): Allocate qualifications from the formal system to the NQF levels based on the EQF descriptors and the further information developed in the first step. The referencing of the NQF levels to the EQF levels will then be a quite simple procedure: Since the EQF descriptors table should also be used for the Austrian NQF, the referencing of the NQF to the EQF will probably be based mainly on the information given in the 'explanatory table/allocation guidelines';
- Approach of this three steps is still being discussed;
- 10 criteria for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF developed by the EQF Advisory Group:
 - o The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and

published by the competent public authorities;

- There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework;
 - The national qualifications framework or system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems;
 - The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent;
 - The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer (s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation);
 - The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies;
 - The referencing process shall involve international experts;
 - The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria;
 - The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports;
 - Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level;
- autumn 2010: referencing process is expected to start (supported by the EQF test and pilot projects, notably the Leonardo da Vinci 'EQF- Ref: Referencing process – Examples and proposals');
 - End of 2011: draft referencing report is expected to be prepared;