

NQF state of play



Austria 2020

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Overview

Stage of development: [Operational stage](#)

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

Designed as a comprehensive NQF; currently includes qualifications awarded in formal education and training (higher education and VET qualifications); qualifications under the responsibility of other ministries such as defence and health. First non-formal/non-regulated qualifications included.

Number of levels:

Eight

Legal basis/stage of development:

Federal Law 14/2016 on the NQF (in German)

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Qualifications register/database:

[Qualifications register](#)

Introduction and context

Austria has a low youth unemployment rate, with early school leaving below the EU average (7.8% compared to 10.2% in 2019) ([1]). The main factor explaining this success is high participation in vocational education and training (VET) (68.4% of upper secondary students in 2018) ([2]). This is one of the main education pathways in the country, with VET courses of high quality and labour market relevance leading to high employability (88% of recent VET graduates were in employment in 2019) ([3]). VET is also seen as crucial for the integration of refugees and migrants to the labour market and in society. Recent initiatives include adapting the VET sector for the digital transition and development of guidelines for competence-oriented apprenticeships. Adult participation in lifelong learning is also above the EU average, at 14.7% in 2019 ([4]); there is, however, a need for upskilling. Foreign-born students are much more likely to leave school early and educational performance continues to be strongly dependent on parents' socioeconomic status. Almost half of Austria's teaching personnel, especially at secondary level, are expected to have to be replaced over the next decade; there is also a need to support teachers better in tackling increasingly complex classroom environments, in terms of diversity, intercultural issues, multilingualism, inclusive education and ICT. Continuous professional development of teachers has become mandatory as of the 2019/20 school year. A comprehensive education and training reform is being implemented, focusing on increasing school autonomy, improving digital skills of students at all levels and more structured pedagogical approaches. Demand for a highly skilled workforce is reflected in an employment rate of recent tertiary graduates higher than the EU average (91.4% compared to 85% in 2019) ([5]) and significantly higher wages compared to holders of upper secondary qualifications (European Commission, 2019).

In response to the European qualifications framework (EQF) initiative, Austria designed a national qualifications framework (NQF) with an eight-level structure. It is a comprehensive framework, open to all types and levels of qualifications from the formal and non-formal sector, and also envisages integrating the results of informal learning in the long term. As the education system is already highly regulated in terms of what kind of qualifications give entrance to certain education pathways and access to occupations/professions in the labour market, the NQF has been designed to promote transparency and guidance and has no regulatory functions.

While qualifications play an important role in Austria, the term as defined in an EQF context is not used consistently and is sometimes used to refer to *curricula* or training programmes.

The Federal Act on the national qualifications framework ([6]) was approved by the Austrian Parliament in March 2016, establishing the governance structure for the framework and the procedures for allocating qualifications to levels. The NQF was referenced to the EQF in 2012 and is now operational. 44 vocational and professional qualifications were assigned to levels 4, 5, 6 and 8 by September 2020. Academic higher education qualifications are automatically referenced to the NQF according to the 2016 NQF Act. Levelling of non-government regulated qualifications acquired through non-formal learning started in 2020. The NQF has had an influence on the education and training system since its development phase (Cedefop and Refernet Austria, 2018). More recently, it has been part of discussions on the establishment of a separate subsystem, under the 'higher VET' umbrella label, to increase transparency and trust in the diversity of higher-qualifying training offers available in the country (Cedefop and Refernet Austria, 2020b).

Policy objectives

The main roles of the Austrian NQF are transparency and comparability of qualifications, nationally and internationally, support for the development of a permeable education and training system and a highly effective VET system and promoting lifelong learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. The framework helps map national qualifications from all education and training subsystems and learning settings, present them in relation to one another and make explicit the implicit levels of the qualification system. It aims to strengthen transparency of the different subsystems by highlighting existing pathways and developing new ones to open up new progression possibilities. It is also expected to aid validation of non-formal and informal learning and to be an important tool in promoting lifelong learning. While having no regulatory functions and no legal effect on vocational and other authorisations, the NQF supports reform and further development of VET qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Specific objectives of the NQF are to ([7]):

- a. strengthen transparency, understanding and comparability of Austrian qualifications internationally;
- b. promote cross-border mobility;
- c. make formal and non-formal qualifications easier to understand and more visible for Austrian citizens;
- d. improve permeability between formal and non-formal sectors of the qualification system, develop new pathways, open new progression possibilities and support lifelong learning;
- e. progress the learning outcomes orientation;
- f. promote the European dimension in higher education.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The Austrian NQF has eight levels. The decision on the number of levels followed broad consultation, a study providing information on the implicit hierarchy in the national qualification system and NQF pilot projects (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2011). Opening levels 6 to 8 to both academic higher education qualifications and VET qualifications was one important topic of discussion. A 'Y-structure' was agreed, to capture differences between the two strands at these levels. Dublin descriptors are used at levels 6 to 8 for qualifications related to the Bologna cycles (bachelor degree, master degree and doctorate) as outlined in the Qualification Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). EQF level descriptors are used for all other qualifications, with additional explanations serving as a guide to make the EQF descriptors understood in the Austrian context ([8]). The explanations were formulated to build on existing qualification descriptions, curricula, training regulations and legal documents. In addition to the EQF descriptors and the national explanations, reference qualifications were also used in the referencing process, aiming to illustrate the requirements of learning outcomes connected to each level and to guide the allocation process for additional qualifications.

As learning outcomes are central in the levelling of qualifications to the NQF, its development is seen as having had a positive effect on strengthening the learning outcomes orientation across education and training. This is not just in terms of use of learning outcomes in developing qualifications but in increasing knowledge and understanding about the learning outcomes approach (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). Many qualifications are already learning outcomes oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions, so work is continuing (Cedefop, 2016a; Cedefop, 2016b).

In school-based VET, learning outcomes are defined in VET educational standards ([9]); this has been implemented in a step-by-step approach in recent years. Educational standards for VET schools and colleges define 'content' (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), 'action' (cognitive achievements required in particular subjects) and personal and social competences related to a specific field. Competence-

oriented and standardised upper secondary school leaving examinations (*AHS-Reifeprüfung* and *BHS-Reifeprüfung* and *Diplomprüfung*) were used for the first time in the school year 2015/16, aiming to increase the transparency and comparability of upper secondary qualifications and fairness; they grant direct access to higher education ([10]). Higher VET curricula are being revised and qualifications awarded by VET colleges are being updated based on NQF principles. An initiative (*fit4NQR*) was piloted to increase transparency and quality assurance in the master craftsperson qualification (*Meister*) and in examinations, with a more detailed definition of learning outcomes and implementation of a competence-oriented structure of the preparatory courses ([11]). The master craftsperson qualification ([12]) was allocated to NQF level 6 in 2018, reflecting the high esteem of this qualification in Austria.

In apprenticeship (dual system), a training regulation is issued for each profile by the Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs. The regulations are largely written in learning outcomes and are currently under reform to strengthen the outcome orientation of apprenticeship training. Each consists of an occupational competence profile (*Berufsprofil*), with related activities and work descriptions, and a job profile (*Berufsbild*), with the knowledge and skills to be acquired by apprentices.

Implementation of the learning outcomes approach in higher education is linked to the Bologna process and Dublin descriptors. Higher education institutions have already described their programmes and qualification profiles in learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) established under university autonomy (Cedefop, 2016a) but implementation differs across institutions.

Guidelines for developing learning outcomes approaches in adult education became available in 2011, part of NQF development, and learning outcomes were introduced in quality guidelines for the accreditation of institutions offering free basic skills courses (Cedefop, 2016a).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The General Directorate for VET at the Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs (as it was then called) initiated the NQF development process, in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, which was responsible for higher education. The Austrian context has been characterised from the beginning by active stakeholder involvement and occasional conflicting views on the NQF's role ([13]). Cooperation has been strong, especially with the social partners, who were part of the development of the legal framework of the NQF as well as part of the qualification mapping process (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). As of 2018, following administrative restructuring, the main authority in charge of NQF development and implementation is the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, now responsible for all education and training subsystems.

The 2016 NQF Act ([14]) established the governance structure for the framework and defined the responsibilities of institutions and bodies and implementation processes. The NQF/EQF national coordination point (NCP), the main administrative, coordinating and information office on NQF/EQF, was set up as an independent body within the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (*Österreichischer Austauschdienst* (OeAD)). It is governed by a contract between OeAD and the Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) in agreement with the Ministry of Digital and Economic Affairs (BMDW) and is funded by both ministries and European Commission grants. The NCP is staffed with five employees. Its tasks include (European Commission; Cedefop, 2020):

- a. mapping of qualifications to the NQF according to the NQF Act;
- b. further development of the NQF Register;
- c. support of all relevant bodies involved in the process (NQF Steering Committee, NQF Advisory Board, NQF Service Points, and experts);
- d. public relations and consultation;
- e. networking at national and European level.

An NQF steering committee of 32 members representing all key stakeholders (all relevant federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education and training, public employment service, federal youth representation and the *Länder*) has been set up as

the central governance body and meets regularly. Its key task is to provide advice to public authorities responsible for education, training and qualifications at all levels. Further tasks include approval of operational procedures (such as inclusion of qualifications in the NQF register and appeals) and content-related issues (such as adoption of the NQF manual). This broad representation reflects stakeholder interests and acknowledges the importance of social aspects in the allocation of qualifications to levels.

An NQF advisory board, consisting of seven experts from different qualification contexts (initial, further and continuing education and training, professional practice, higher education), was established to advise the NQF NCP by providing a written opinion on allocation requests. In addition, the NQF NCP maintains a list of experts (currently over 200 (NQF NCP, 2020)) that may be consulted in the process of examining allocation requests.

The NQF Act regulates the process of mapping qualifications based on learning outcomes to the eight levels of the NQF and publication of the results of the mapping process in the register. Higher education qualifications of the Bologna system (BA/MA/PhD) are mapped to the NQF automatically through the NQF Act; all other qualifications are levelled following an allocation request. Procedures and structures for levelling non-government regulated qualifications acquired through adult learning, further learning and youth work have been recently put in place. The allocation process ([15]) is principally the same for all qualifications, the only difference being the body submitting the allocation request.

Applications for government-regulated qualifications are submitted by the responsible ministry, while for non-government regulated qualifications six NQF service points were established in November 2019 ([16]) for this purpose, as intermediaries between qualification providers and the NQF coordination point. The NQF service points serve as gatekeepers of the NQF ([17]), performing a quality assurance function and supporting qualification providers in the preparation of allocation requests (Cedefop and Refernet Austria, 2020a). Their activity will be evaluated after two years of operation (European Commission; Cedefop, 2020).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[18]

Following the 2012 recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2012) and linked to the Lifelong learning strategy ([19]) and the development of the NQF, the Austrian national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning ([20]) was adopted in November 2017 ([21]). It was based on analysis of existing validation arrangements in three areas (the low-qualified, VET and higher education) and was subject to a national consultation process. Its strategic objectives include:

- a. increasing the value of competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts;
- b. making validation arrangements more accessible by providing low-threshold, central information and advisory services;
- c. improving opportunities for education and work (e.g. by making it easier for adults to obtain qualifications as 'second-chance education');
- d. improving permeability at the central interfaces of the Austrian education and training system (improving flexibility and efficiency);
- e. strengthening validation as an integral part of the Austrian education and training system;
- f. promoting the learning outcomes orientation and quality assurance.

The national validation strategy promotes summative approaches (pillar 2) to validation, based on the requirements and standards of the qualifications system, aimed at the acquisition of a qualification or part of one; and also formative validation approaches (pillar 1) aimed at identifying and documenting competences to empower individuals and increase motivation for learning. The latter do not lead to certification, but may lead to steps towards certification. For the first stage of implementation (2017-19), four thematic working groups were established, related to quality, communication, system synergies and professionalisation. Results so far include a catalogue of quality criteria for validation initiatives in VET and adult education, piloted throughout 2018, and the outline of an online portal with information about validation

initiatives.

The strategy is intended to provide a platform and framework for development and coordination of the many existing, and future, initiatives that were devised 'bottom-up' in all sectors and areas, to raise awareness about the value of competences gained in non-formal and informal settings and to provide potential users with an overview of relevant measures. To date, different acts and regulations include mechanisms and arrangements that enable formal education and training institutions to recognise learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings, such as in the context of 'external exams'. Almost all qualifications (from general education and VET, but not university degrees) can be obtained without participating in programmes or courses. This requires passing the relevant exam (as 'externals'), using the same standards and methods as in the formal education system. Examples are the acquisition of the compulsory school leaving certificate (*Pflichtschulabschluss*) by young people and adults, and exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam for those without formal training ([22]). Validation is also used to obtain exemptions and shorten programmes in general education or VET and to shorten degree programmes at universities of applied science based on recognition of professional experience. There are also possibilities of gaining access to higher education programmes in an alternative way. The vocational matriculation exam (the *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP)) and the higher education entrance examination (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung* (SBP)) can both be taken by graduates of specific apprenticeships and VET schools and early leavers from VET colleges that traditionally are not granted university access through their initial education.

One weakness of the current system is the absence of a legal framework to regulate validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which could be an obstacle to implementation. In the long term, it should be possible for all qualifications mapped to the NQF to be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning. The necessary steps for this are learning outcome-based quality assurance and the further development of validation methods and procedures. The Austrian NQF and the validation strategy share common objectives and their implementation is closely linked.

NQF implementation and impact

The Austrian NQF has reached the operational stage. The NQF Act ([23]), establishing procedures for allocating qualifications to the eight levels of the NQF and the responsible bodies and the NQF manual ([24]) describing the process, principles and criteria for allocation, were adopted in 2016. The allocation request form was updated in 2019. Academic higher education qualifications (bachelor, master and PhD/doctoral degrees) are directly allocated to levels 6, 7 and 8 through the NQF law. Mapping of all other qualifications is based on a request for mapping a qualification made to the NQF NCP, with a detailed description of the qualification, related learning outcomes and the assessment procedure. The NQF distinguishes between formally and non-formally acquired qualifications, the former being those, which are government-regulated, and the latter, which are those not regulated by the government.

Mapping of qualifications awarded in the formal education and training system started in 2017. The initial focus has been on qualifications from the VET sector at levels 4, 5 and 6, starting with VET school-based and apprenticeship qualifications ([25]); these were followed by qualifications under the responsibility of other ministries, such as defence and healthcare, at levels 5 and 8 respectively. A decision on inclusion of general education qualifications in the NQF has not yet been made.

Inclusion of non-government regulated qualifications into the NQF started in 2019, with the first eight levelled in 2020. A quality assurance process has been put in place and six NQF service points were set up in 2019, serving as intermediaries between qualification providers and the NQF NCP. Three deadlines per year have been set for submission of allocation requests; the NCP plans to allocate around 20 non-government regulated qualifications a year (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Mapped qualifications are included in the national qualifications register ([26]), which currently contains 50 qualifications (November 2020), including qualifications exemplarily representing a whole qualification type. The qualifications register indicates NQF and EQF levels, as well as a description of learning outcomes, the qualification provider, rights/entitlement, sectors and fields of activity, access requirements and duration of training. Discussions are under way to include NQF levels in the database of the Austrian Employment Service. Both NQF and EQF levels are, in some cases, indicated on new qualifications from VET, higher education, and on some of the non-government regulated

qualifications that have been mapped to the NQF, and on Europass supplements ([27]).

The NQF is being used as a basis for reform and development in VET qualifications, with significant influence in VET at higher levels. There is a strong link between the NQF and the curricula of technical and vocational colleges, which are being constantly updated based on the NQF and labour market requirements. The new legal acts regulating VET qualifications such as *Meister* or *Ingenieur* make reference to the NQF and its adoption act. The new *Ingenieur* qualification ([28]) was developed in consequence of the NQF, as the methods for identifying the competences in the previous *Ingenieur* qualification did not match NQF requirements (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Initial communication efforts have been oriented towards qualification-awarding bodies, aiming to help them prepare their qualifications for the mapping process and inclusion in the NQF register and experts using the NQF in their work. Future efforts will be directed to bringing the NQF closer to workers, job-seekers and learners (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). Dissemination of information about the NQF is carried out via the NQF website ([29]), newsletters, seminars and one-to-one meetings.

Referencing to the EQF

Austria referenced its national qualifications framework to the EQF and self-certified its higher education qualifications to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in June 2012, preparing one comprehensive report.

Important lessons and future plans

The Austrian NQF aims at improved transparency of a national qualification system that has traditionally witnessed distinct separation between different segments of education and training, and at increased transparency of VET and non-government regulated qualifications. With the adoption of the NQF Act in 2016, the allocation of the first formally acquired qualifications in 2017, and the development of procedures and structures for the allocation of non-government regulated qualifications in 2019, the framework is gradually moving towards achieving its goal of being a comprehensive representation of all qualifications, regardless of learning context.

A strength of the Austrian NQF development is involvement and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, representing all subsystems of education and training, as well as the social partners. This broad group of stakeholders is engaged in implementation via the NQF steering group. Stakeholder cooperation has been further strengthened with the establishment of the six NQF service points, responsible for submitting allocation requests for non-government regulated qualifications; two of them are run by institutions from the social partners. Education and training providers, guidance and counselling practitioners and recognition authorities and bodies, all have basic knowledge of the NQF and have started to use it in their work. NQF service point conferences with the NQF NCP take place regularly to improve communication among stakeholders and enhance common understanding. In 2020, non-government regulated qualifications for people active in youth work were mapped to the NQF for the first time. The first job adverts and work profiles with NQF levels have appeared. The indication of NQF and EQF levels on qualifications has increased the visibility of the framework and facilitated its use (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

While it is too early to assess the framework's impact, its benefits have already been observed in improving understanding and use of the learning outcomes approach. Its influence on the qualifications system can be seen especially in higher VET, where NQF principles are used for revision of qualifications. The mapping of *Meister* and *Ingenieur* qualifications to NQF level 6 has generated increased interest in the NQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). The NQF has also been referred to in discussions on the creation of a separate 'higher VET'

education segment to help structure and make more visible the diverse higher VET offer, of which a substantial part is outside the formal education and training system. The use of the existing NQF allocation process is being considered as part of the solution to this discussion (Cedefop and Refernet, 2020b). The framework is also central in implementing the Austrian strategy for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Future plans related to the implementation of the NQF include continuing the mapping of qualifications and further improving the allocation process.

Main sources of information

- The Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (Österreichischer Austauschdienst – OeAD) is the EQF NCP: <https://oead.at/en/the-oead>
- Austrian NQF webpage: <https://www.qualifikationsregister.at/en/der-nqr/>
- Austrian NQF register: www.qualifikationsregister.at
- Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture; Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2011). *Austrian EQF referencing report*. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/reports-referencing-national-qualifications-frameworks-eqf>

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctorate (Doktorgrade) Level 8 professional qualifications in the health sector e.g. Clinical Psychology (Klinische Psychologie)	8
7	Master degree (Master- bzw. Diplomgrade)	7
6	Bachelor degree (Bachelorgrade) Master craftsman (Meister) Engineer (Ingenieur)	6
5	VET college/school leaving certificate - 5-year programmes (BHS) (Reife- und Diplomprüfung der berufsbildenden höheren Schulen) Level 5 professional qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Defence - Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (Stabsunteroffizier oder Stabsunteroffizierin (StbUO, Erstverwendung)) Level 5 professional qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Justice - Executive Judicial Officer (Exekutivdienst in der Verwendungsgruppe E2a im Justizressort ("Dienstführenden Grundausbildung" - mittleres Management))	5

**VET school qualification - 3 and 4 year
programmes (BMS) (Abschluss der
berufsbildenden mittleren Schule)**

Apprenticeship certificate (Lehrabschluss)

**Level 4 professional qualification awarded by the
Federal Ministry of Defence - Career Non-
Commissioned Officer (NCO)
(Militärberufsunteroffizier oder
Militärberufsunteroffizierin (MBUO,
Erstverwendung))**

**Level 4 professional qualification awarded by
regional governments - agricultural technical
schools - 3 years (Abschlussprüfung an der
landwirtschaftlichen Fachschule)**

Acronyms

BRP	examination providing access to higher education for skilled workers and graduates of three- and four-year full-time VET schools (<i>Berufsreifeprüfung</i>)
EQF	European qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
OeAD	Austrian agency for international cooperation in education and research (<i>Österreichischer Austauschdienst</i>)
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework of the European higher education area
SBP	higher education entrance examination (<i>Studienberechtigungsprüfung</i>)
VET	vocational education and training

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Related content

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2020

Austria - European inventory of NQFs 2020

European inventory of NQF



Austria