

NQF state of play



Sweden 2018

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Introduction and context

Sweden invests substantially in education and training, exceeding EU targets for several key indicators. Relatively few students leave education and training early (7.7% in 2017), the rate of tertiary education attainment is one of the highest in the EU (51.3% in 2017, compared to the EU average of 39.1%) and the rate of employment of recent graduates is also high at all qualification levels. According to the 2015 Programme for International Skills Assessment (PISA), student performance in basic skills has been improving, and the proportion of underachievers in reading, mathematics and science is close to EU averages. However, student performance is increasingly linked to socioeconomic background and disparities also exist between native and foreign-born students. Early intervention to improve basic skills, the integration of the growing number of newly arrived students and support for the training of teachers are among the government's priorities. In higher education, a new quality assurance system was introduced in 2017 and the current focus of the government is on widening participation and on strengthening the links between the academia and society. In vocational education and training (VET) apprenticeships were introduced in 2011. However, participation in upper secondary VET is decreasing, despite a very high rate of employment of VET graduates (87.8% in 2017). One of the concerns of the government in recent years has been to examine ways to increase permeability between VET programmes and tertiary education. 30.4% of Swedish adults participate in lifelong learning, approximately three times the EU average, but this percentage is significantly lower among low-educated adults, a trend observed in many EU countries (European Commission, 2018).

Since 2017, adults have had the right to study courses within adult education at upper secondary level to meet the eligibility requirements for university studies and higher vocational education.

The legal basis supporting the Swedish national qualifications framework (SeQF) came into force on 1 October 2015 ([1]). Appendix 2 of Decree SFS 2015:545 provides the SeQF levels for all qualifications in the Swedish formal education system. The government further decided that it would be possible to include qualifications from outside the formal education system in the framework. The added value of the SeQF, it is argued, depends on its ability to address explicitly, and include certificates and qualifications awarded by, private companies and

branch/sector organisations and bodies. While the SeQF is mainly seen as a tool to increase transparency of qualifications, the framework is also seen as supporting better cooperation between the education and training system and the labour market. In this sense, the framework is not only about describing existing qualifications but also about improving education and training policies and practices. The SeQF was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in June 2016. Following legal adoption of the framework in autumn 2015, criteria and procedures for inclusion of non-formal qualifications have been put in place and made public. The SeQF has reached operational status.

Policy objectives

Unlike other European frameworks, the SeQF has, from its inception in 2009, been seen as a tool for opening up to qualifications awarded outside the formal education system, particularly in the adult/popular education sector and in the labour market. This focus on the inclusive character of the framework responds to specific features of Swedish education and training.

First, the role of adult and popular education is generally very strong, largely explaining why Sweden consistently scores highly in all international comparisons on adult and lifelong learning. Other providers supply courses alongside formal education. An inclusive framework is expected to increase the overall transparency of Swedish qualifications and clarify options for progress and transfer.

Second, an important part of vocational education and training (VET) is carried out by enterprises and sectors. While upper secondary education (*Gymnasieskolan*) offers a full range of (three-year) vocational courses, acquiring a full qualification (enabling someone to practise a vocation) will sometimes require additional training and certification at work. This extensive system of labour market-based education and training is diverse and, in some cases, difficult to summarise.

Linking this non-formal sector to the NQF is seen as crucial for increasing the overall transparency of qualifications in Sweden. The 2015 SeQF Decree with regulations authorises the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education to act as 'gatekeeper' (supported by an advisory council) and put in place the necessary procedures and criteria to allow this to happen in practice. These procedures and criteria have been publicly available since March 2016 ([\[2\]](#)).

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, as the national coordination point (NCP) for EQF, is in dialogue with the Swedish public employment service, which would like to use SeQF levels and descriptors to guarantee the quality of job applicants' skills. This is also the goal of the organisations that have successfully applied to have their qualifications placed in SeQF.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The SeQF is based on an eight-level structure where each level is described through knowledge (*kunskap*), skills (*färdigheter*) and competence (*kompetens*). It is a comprehensive framework including all qualifications in the formal education system and open to qualifications outside the formal education system by application from providers, such as sectors, labour market trainers, sports associations or liberal adult education. The explicit objective has been to develop a set of descriptors as closely aligned with the EQF as possible. While the influence of the original EQF descriptors is apparent, the level of detail has been increased. In the definition of competence, for example, the EQF emphasis on autonomy and responsibility is also extended to address decision-making ability and cooperation/teamwork.

The learning outcomes perspective (*Resultat av lärandet*) is an important, and largely incorporated, feature of Swedish education and training. While the term 'learning outcomes' is only gradually coming into general use, the underpinning principles are well known and broadly accepted. The core curricula for compulsory education have recently been revised, further strengthening and refining the learning-outcomes-based approach.

Universities follow national regulations on examinations, requiring the use of learning outcomes, though how these learning outcomes are interpreted by individual institutions varies. The Bologna process has been influential in this respect, as have local initiatives.

The setting up of the SeQF has contributed to the overall shift to learning outcomes and clarified the importance of the concept to stakeholders outside traditional, formal education and training. In the longer term, this may prove of particular importance, potentially supporting dialogue between education and the labour market.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Ministry of Education and Research has overall responsibility for work on the SeQF and referencing to the EQF. Supported by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan* - MYH) the SeQF has full operational status.

A broad group of stakeholders, from education and training as well as the labour market, has been involved in developing the SeQF.

Several stakeholders have signalled their interest in using it as a reference for their work. The Property Promotion Branch Association formulates standards for qualifications within its sphere of influence to develop validation procedures that will assist in recruitment and improve competence training programmes for staff. The NQF is an instrument that will ensure a high level of quality in the content of existing education and training programmes. Another example is provided by the 26 institutions responsible for the qualifications of teachers and trainers in VET, which have used the NQF as an instrument to identify available pathways into teacher training and to indicate minimum requirements in prior learning and qualifications. A third example is the construction sector, where the framework is being used to indicate alternative progression routes for those wanting to qualify as construction site managers. This approach shows that the traditional higher education pathway (civil engineer) is not the only possible alternative; several combinations of work experience and formal education (both upper secondary and post-secondary VET) are possible. A fourth example is the financial sector, where the framework is seen as an opportunity to highlight the training activities taking place within the sector, in most cases, independent of public education and training.

A set of procedures and criteria have been developed for the inclusion/levelling of non-formal qualifications to the SeQF. An advisory council (*Rådet för den nationella referensramen för kvalifikationer*) supports the National Agency; this council consists of 14 stakeholder representatives from education and the labour market.

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

[3]

Sweden has made significant progress between 2016 and 2018 towards fulfilling the objectives of the 2012 recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning ([4]), particularly related to assessing and recognising immigrants' prior learning.

The National Delegation for Validation was set up by the government in 2015 ([5]) to develop and promote a national policy for validation, ensuring transparency, coordination, quality, efficiency and delegation of responsibility at national and regional level. The delegation published a report in May 2018 cataloguing progress and identifying where provision was still lacking ([6]). The main conclusions of the report are:

- a. while examples of validation have generally increased, some areas (e.g. in municipal adult education) are still not providing adequate coverage;
- b. the validation system in Sweden is highly decentralised, with many actors, and even though some progress has been made in coordinating the work and assigning responsibilities, this aspect needs to be further developed;
- c. the feasibility of transferring learning outcomes between different qualifications is limited, as the learning outcomes approach has not yet been applied to all qualifications;
- d. the SeQF was introduced in 2016, and is perceived as an important tool in the context of validation, though it is still underused;
- e. validation standards and guidelines have been developed for many areas, but have not yet been implemented everywhere;
- f. the financing of validation is still patchy, and is often characterised by short-term, ad hoc measures;
- g. validation is now increasingly used as a strategic tool for tackling skills shortages in the labour market, with the active involvement of social partners;
- h. more immigrants and refugees are now having prior learning validated as a way of supporting their integration into the labour market, but there is still a need to reinforce efforts here;
- i. validation statistics in Sweden are incomplete and, for some areas,

non-existent.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (MYH) previously had the task of coordinating and supporting the national structure for validating prior learning. The Agency is now required to support the economic sectors with developing, and quality assuring, models for validation. Given that this national agency is also responsible for implementing the SeQF, a close link between the national qualifications framework and validation is seen as critical. Cooperation with education and training providers, sector organisations, social partners, universities and regional representatives has been an essential part of this work. The criteria and guidelines on validation, presented by the agency in 2012, are regularly updated ([7]).

Transferability between qualifications has been highlighted by the National Delegation for Validation as one of five priority areas. SeQF is seen as the common starting point for ensuring that skills profiles and criteria and learning objectives are formulated uniformly and to the highest standards([8]).

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education has been assigned the task of developing a national standard and guidelines for sectoral validation of vocational competence ([9]). The assignment is being carried out in collaboration with industries that have knowledge of, and experience in, constructing validation models, and has NQF as its starting point. The purpose of this validation is to increase recruitment to industry and to support individuals' employability. A national standard will further support industry in developing quality assurance and stable validation models. The standard has been anchored in the Agency's validation network for industry. The network includes representatives of both industry and national authorities. Currently, models have been developed in 21 sectors extending over approximately 150 occupations. Only a limited part of the labour market is covered at this stage, but new developments are under way.

NQF implementation and impact

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education plays a key role in implementing the SeQF. The agency was set up in 2009 with responsibility for administering what is a new and vocationally oriented strand of Swedish higher education and training. *Yrkeshögskolan* – higher vocational education – has attracted a lot of interest both among individuals and employers, offering an alternative to the traditional university sector, for example by combining theoretically and practically oriented learning. The main aim of higher vocational education is to meet the needs of the labour market for post-secondary vocational skills.

This means that coordination of framework developments is carried out by an institution with a clear position on the role of non-academic qualifications at levels 5 and 6.

Since January 2016, awarding bodies outside the formal education system have been able to have their qualifications assessed and given an SeQF level by submitting an application to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. An advisory body assists the agency in deciding the relevant level for a qualification based on particular criteria, mainly the legitimacy/acceptance of the qualification in the relevant occupational area, learning outcomes and quality assurance. An application fee of EUR 1 000 is required in advance to cover administration costs. Decisions can be appealed to the Higher Education Appeals Board. A decision on a level is valid for 10 years, after which a renewed application is required. The Agency will carry out at least one follow-up check during the 10-year period to reaffirm that the qualification corresponds to the level allocated and that it is meeting learning outcomes, and that the provider is fulfilling the requirement to guarantee systematic quality work.

Six qualifications had been included in the SeQF by November 2018 ([10]): cleaners (level 4), key account managers (level 5), authorised payroll consultants (level 5), performing artists (level 6), business administrators (level 6) and Montessori educators (level 6).

Realising that it is a key challenge to communicate the SeQF's purpose and possibilities, and to get past the first threshold of applying for non-formal qualifications to be included in the framework, the Agency is developing a common language for the national qualifications framework, and, especially, for the description of learning outcomes. This is required

for transparency between different stakeholders and to provide good examples of the value of including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training. The Agency has published a manual for the design of qualifications and there are also instructions on how to write learning outcomes. However, there is a need for more detailed instructions and it is the Agency's intention to develop new guidelines on writing learning outcomes.

Sweden has developed a separate qualifications framework for higher education and separate self-certification to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) has been carried out. SeQF levels 6 to 8 also include the three levels from the qualifications framework for higher education. While the relationship between the national qualifications framework for higher education and the SeQF was extensively discussed during initial development stages, levels 6 to 8 of the SeQF are now open both to academic and non-academic qualifications.

A communication plan has been developed, an important part of which is the inclusion of an ambassador network consisting of a range of SeQF stakeholders. However, it has been found that several of the ambassadors themselves have too little knowledge about the national qualifications framework and how it works to be able to assist. The communication plan will, therefore, be revised. The SeQF is well known to authorities and bodies, and to labour market stakeholders but awareness is more variable among education and training institutions and providers and guidance and counselling practitioners. The general public has more limited knowledge of the SeQF.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education has received ESF funding for a project, which aims to raise legitimacy and transferability of validated learning outcomes, and thereby increase the use and usefulness of sectoral validation. The project is being conducted with around 20 economic sectors. The starting point for the project is the SeQF and the standards and guidelines for sectoral validation of professional competencies.

Sweden does not have a database for all qualifications, but an embryo structure can be found in the database associated with the EQF NCP ([11]). Non-formal qualifications included in the SeQF will be published here.

Most universities provide information about their education offer: authorities and businesses can download and present them in their own

web services. The portal [*Utbildningsinfo* \(information about education\)](#) includes search tools for education paths and providers throughout the formal education system ([12]). (European Commission; Cedefop, 2018).

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing to the EQF took place in June 2016 and a finalised referencing report will be published in January 2019.

Ensuring that level placements are included in new certificates, diplomas and/or Europass supplements is continuing. They are included in: certificates for diploma/advanced diploma in higher vocational education at level 5 and 6; certificates from the general course at compulsory school level/at upper secondary level from folk high school at level 2 and 4; and in all certificates for qualifications by application, provided by the Agency for Higher Vocational Education.

Important lessons and future plans

The SeQF has influenced the use of learning outcomes, especially for qualifications outside the formal education system. It has proved useful for validating non-formal and informal learning and for recognising foreign qualifications.

Compared to other countries, Sweden has, from the start, emphasised the need to open up to non-formal education and training and make it possible to establish links to the diverse and extensive field of continuing and popular education and training run by the private sector and non-governmental organisations. The overall success of the framework will partly depend on the extent to which the framework is seen as relevant to stakeholders outside formal, initial education and training. For this reason it is particularly important to make practical progress and move from intention to concrete results. In this respect, the National Agency will: support different stakeholders in describing and applying to place qualifications in the SeQF; develop a system to ensure the quality of non-formal qualifications; and look at the possibility of modularisation of qualifications to promote individuals' lifelong learning.

Work is still required to develop a common language for learning outcomes that makes the system transparent. What further development remains is mainly related to higher education and to how employers and different sectors in the labour market describe the skills they need. Another clear requirement is to continue to inform and communicate the purpose and benefit of the national qualifications framework and the EQF to different stakeholders. To support the placement of qualifications awarded outside formal education and training, the Agency will support stakeholders: in describing their qualifications and applying for placement in SeQF; in developing ways of ensuring the quality of non-formal qualifications; and in looking at the possibility of modularisation of qualifications to promote individuals' lifelong learning.

For the SeQF to be able to operate as a comprehensive national qualifications framework, the relationship between higher education and other education sectors requires further clarification and continuous dialogue. Transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes across education sectors is not available as a general opportunity in Sweden. Discussions are continuing between the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education and higher education institutions about the transfer of credits from higher vocational education to academic higher

education. However, credits from the two education sectors are different and not automatically transferrable.

Main sources of information

- The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is the designated EQF NCP: <https://www.myh.se/In-English/Swedish-National-Agency-for-Higher-Vocational-Education/> [assessed 14.1.2019].
 - Information about the SeQF is available (in English) at: <https://www.myh.se/In-English/EQF/> [assessed 14.1.2019].
 - The SeQF portal is available (in Swedish) at: <https://www.seqf.se/> [assessed 14.1.2019].
 - The *Register of qualifications* is accessible via the SeQF web-portal (under development): <https://www.seqf.se/sv/Sa-funkar-det/Kvalifikationer> [assessed 14.1.2019].
 - Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (2016). *Referencing report of the Swedish qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework* [unpublished].
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National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Degrees, third cycle, Annex 2 to Higher Education Ordinance 1993:100 (Examina på forskarnivå enligt bilaga 2 till högskoleförordningen 1993:100) Category Qualification types (formal education) Degrees, third cycle, Annex to Regulation 1993:221 (Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet Examina på forskarnivå enligt bilagan till förordningen (1993:221) för Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet Förordning (2017:276)) Category Qualification types (formal education)	8

7

Degrees, second cycle, Annex 2 to Higher Education Ordinance 1993:100 (Examina på avancerad nivå enligt bilaga 2 till högskoleförordningen 1993:100)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

7

Degrees, second cycle, Annex to Regulation 1993: 221 (Examina på avancerad nivå enligt bilagan till förordningen (1993:221) för Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Degrees, second cycle, in the Annex to Regulation 2007: 1164 (Examina på avancerad nivå enligt bilagan till förordningen (2007:1164) för Försvarshögskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

6

Degrees, first cycle, Annex 2 to Higher Education Ordinance 1993:100 (Examina på grundnivå enligt bilaga 2 till högskoleförordningen 1993:100)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

6

Degrees, first cycle, Annex to Regulation 2007:1164 (Examina på grundnivå enligt bilagan till förordningen (2007:1164) för Försvarshögskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Degrees, first cycle, Annex to Regulation 1993: 221 (Examina på grundnivå enligt bilagan till förordningen (1993:221) för Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Advanced diploma in higher vocational education (Kvalificerad yrkeshögskoleexamen från yrkeshögskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Performing artist

Category

Awarded outside formal education

These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.

Business administration (Marknadsekonom)

Category

Awarded outside formal education

These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.

Montessori educator (Montessoripedagog)

Category

Awarded outside formal education

These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.

Qualified graduate from upper secondary engineering course (Gymnasieingenjörsexamen från gymnasieskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Diploma in higher vocational education (Yrkeshögskoleexamen från yrkeshögskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Key account manager (Säljare)

Category

Awarded outside formal education

These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.

Authorised payroll consultants (Auktoriserad lönekonsult)

Category

Awarded outside formal education

These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.

4	Degree from a national programme in upper secondary education - qualification title for students starting 2011 onwards (Gymnasieexamen från gymnasieskolan) Category Qualification types (formal education)	4
	Final grades from a complete national or specially designed programme (Slutbetyg från ett fullständigt nationellt eller specialutformat program i gymnasieskolan) Category Qualification types (formal education)	
	Degree from municipal adult education and training at upper secondary level - qualification title for students starting 2011 onwards (Gymnasieexamen från kommunal vuxenutbildning) Category Qualification types (formal education)	
	Final grades from municipal adult education and training at upper secondary level (Slutbetyg från gymnasial vuxenutbildning) Category Qualification types (formal education)	
	Certificate from the general course at upper secondary level from folk high school (Intyg om godkänt resultat från allmän kurs på gymnasial nivå från folkhögskola) Category Qualification types (formal education)	
	Cleaners (Städare) Category Awarded outside formal education These qualifications are added to the chart for comparability. These qualifications will be published on the EQF national coordination point website.	
3	(not available)	3
2		2

Final grades from compulsory school (Slutbetyg från grundskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Final grades from special school at compulsory level (Slutbetyg från specialskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Final grades from municipal adult education and training at compulsory level (Slutbetyg från kommunal vuxenutbildning på grundläggande nivå)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Certificate from upper secondary education for individuals with learning disabilities (Gymnasiesärskolebevis från gymnasiesärskolan)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Certificate from special education for adults at upper secondary level (Gymnasiesärskolebevis från särskild utbildning för vuxna på gymnasial nivå)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

Grade from Swedish for immigrants course D, or equivalent awarded by a folk high school (Betyg från utbildning i svenska för invandrare kurs D, eller motsvarande utbildning som bedrivs vid folkhögskola)

Category

Qualification types (formal education)

	Grade from municipal adult education in Swedish for Immigrants course D, or equivalent awarded by a folk high school (Betyg från kommunal vuxenutbildning i svenska för invandrare kurs D, eller motsvarande utbildning som bedrivs vid folkhögskola)	
1	Final grades from compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities (Slutbetyg från grundsärskolan) Category Qualification types (formal education)	1
	Final grades from special education for adults at compulsory level (Slutbetyg från särskild utbildning för vuxna på grundläggande nivå) Category Qualification types (formal education)	

Acronyms

EQF European qualifications framework

MYH *Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan* (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education)

NCP national coordination point

NQF national qualifications framework

SeQF Swedish qualifications framework

VET vocational education and training

VPL validation of prior learning

References

[URLs accesses 15.1.2019]

European Commission (2018). *Education and training monitor 2018: country analysis*. Luxembourg: Publications Office.

<https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/volume-2-2018-education-and-training-monitor-country-analysis.pdf>

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: country report: Sweden*.

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Related content

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Sweden - European inventory on NQF 2018

European inventory of NQF



Sweden