

NQF state of play



Austria 2018

Table of contents

- Chapter 1 - Introduction and context
- Chapter 2 - Policy objectives
- Chapter 3 - Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications
- Chapter 4 - Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement
- Chapter 5 - Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways
- Chapter 6 - NQF implementation and impact
- Chapter 7 - Referencing to the EQF
- Chapter 8 - Important lessons and future plans
- Chapter 9 - Main sources of information
- Chapter 10 - National qualification framework (NQF)
- Chapter 11 - Acronyms
- Chapter 12 - References

Introduction and context

Austria has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the EU, with early school leaving below the EU average (6.9% compared to 10.7% in 2016). The main factor explaining this success is high participation in vocational education and training (VET); this is one of the main educational pathways in the country, well adapted to the labour market, with VET courses of high quality and relevance. VET is also seen as crucial in the integration of refugees and migrants. Adult participation in lifelong learning is also well above the EU average. However, foreign-born students are much more likely to leave school early and educational performance continues to be strongly dependent on parents' socioeconomic status. According to the 2015 Programme for international student assessment (PISA) results, the proportion of Austrian students with underachievement in science and mathematics is similar to the EU average, and slightly higher than the EU average in reading. Around half of Austria's teaching personnel, especially at secondary level, are expected to have to be replaced over the next decade; this is both a challenge, having to attract sufficient new teachers into the system, and an opportunity for innovation in pedagogy. Current education and training reforms are focused on increasing school autonomy, improving digital skills of students at all levels, and strengthening the social dimension of higher education (European Commission, 2017).

As a response to the European qualifications framework (EQF) initiative, Austria carried out a national consultation process on the EQF in 2005-06 and designed a national qualifications framework (NQF) with an eight-level structure. It was 'designed as a comprehensive framework, encompassing all types and levels of qualifications from the formal and non-formal sector, and appreciating the results of informal learning' (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture; Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2012). 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, with no regulatory functions. While qualifications in general 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.

After several years of preparation, with intensive involvement of

stakeholders and experts, the Austrian Parliament approved the Federal Act on the national qualifications framework ([1]) in March 2016, establishing the governance structure for the framework and the procedures involved in allocating qualifications to levels. Referenced to the EQF in June 2012, the Austrian NQF is now operational. Its influence has been observed since the development phase of the framework, with NQF principles being applied in the design of new qualifications and in the modernisation of existing ones to ensure mapping to NQF levels (Cedefop and Refernet Austria, 2018).

Policy objectives

The main roles of the Austrian NQF are communication and transparency of qualifications, nationally and internationally. 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 coordination between the different subsystems by highlighting existing pathways and developing new ones to open up new progression possibilities ([2]). 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 is used as a basis for reform and further development in VET qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Specific objectives are the following ([3]):

- 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 and a study providing information on implicit hierarchy in the national qualification system, using statistical educational research and statistical frameworks (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2011). One important topic of discussion was the inclusion of non-traditional higher education qualifications at NQF levels 6 to 8. A 'Y-structure' was agreed, to capture differences between academic higher education and VET qualifications at these levels. EQF level descriptors are used for all qualifications except those awarded by higher education institutions, with additional explanations serving as a guide to make the EQF descriptors understood in the Austrian context ([4]). Parallel Dublin descriptors were introduced at levels 6 to 8 for qualifications related to Bologna cycles (bachelor degree, master degree and doctorate) and awarded by higher education institutions (universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) and university colleges for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*)). Reference qualifications have been used in the referencing process to illustrate levels of learning outcomes ([5]).

As learning outcomes are central to positioning qualifications in 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 continues. Initiatives designed to strengthen this orientation include the introduction of educational standards in the school-based sector and the introduction of competence-based and learning-outcome-oriented curricula in VET (Cedefop, 2016a; Cedefop, 2016b). In general education, core subject areas (German, mathematics and English) are described in terms of learning outcomes.

In school-based VET, learning outcomes are defined in VET educational standards ([6]); 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 transparency and comparability of upper secondary qualifications, and fairness and access to higher education ([7]). Higher VET curricula are being revised and qualifications awarded by VET colleges are being updated based on NQF principles. A recent initiative was piloted to increase transparency and quality assurance in the master craftsperson qualification (*Meister*) and examinations, with a more detailed definition of learning outcomes and implementation of a competence-oriented structure of the preparatory courses. The master craftsperson qualification ([8]) has now been allocated to NQF level 6 (September 2018), increasing the comparability of training pathways and reflecting the high esteem of this qualification in Austria ([9]).

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 job profile (*Berufsbild*), with knowledge and skills to be acquired by apprentices ([10]).

Implementation of the learning outcomes approach in higher education is clearly 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.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Austrian approach has been characterised from the beginning by active stakeholder involvement and occasional conflicting views on the NQF's role ([11]). 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. 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, 2018). 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 ([12]) establishes the governance structure for the framework, and defines the responsibilities of institutions and bodies, as well as processes involved in implementation. The Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (*Österreichischer Austauschdienst* (OeAD)) has been appointed as NQF/EQF national coordination point (NCP) and the main implementation coordinating body. According to Article 5 of the Act, its tasks include:

- a. formal and content-related verification of the request for qualification mapping;
- b. keeping a public NQF register with mapped qualifications, including description of a qualification and its learning outcomes, NQF level and the name of the provider;
- c. setting up a list of those with expertise for any content-related verification of request for mapping a qualification.

An NQF steering committee of 32 members representing all the main stakeholders (all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education, 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). The broad representation reflects stakeholder interests and acknowledgement of 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, and professional practice), was established to advise and inform the coordinating body on allocation decisions.

In addition to specifying the responsible bodies, the NQF Act also regulates the process of mapping qualifications ([13]) based on learning outcomes to the eight levels of the NQF and publication of the mapping process results in the register. Qualifications or levels are not specifically included in the Act, and only qualifications based on the Bologna system are mapped by law in Austria. The Act makes a distinction between the allocation of formal versus non-formal qualifications: mapping of non-formal or informal learning requires further process specification as it is not fully defined in the NQF Act (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

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

[14]

Development of a validation strategy started in 2013, with the establishment of a working group ([15]) comprising relevant federal ministries (currently: [Education, Science and Research](#); [Digital and Economic Affairs](#); [Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection](#); Defence; Federal Chancellery: [Families and Youth](#)), social partner organisations (chamber of labour, chamber of commerce), youth organisations (Austrian Youth Association), adult education (Austrian Conference of Adult Education), Universities Austria and Austrian Association of Universities of Applied Sciences. Their work has been strongly linked to development of the Lifelong learning strategy ([16]), and of the NQF. The 2012 recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012) and (partly) the implementation of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) also play a role in the process.

Analysis of existing validation arrangements in three areas (the low-qualified, VET and higher education) fed into a consultation document for the national validation strategy (including key objectives and measures), published in 2015. Following a national consultation process, the national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning was finalised and adopted in November 2017 ([17]). 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 to validation, based on the requirements and standards of the qualifications system and aimed at the acquisition of a qualification or part of one; there are also formative validation approaches aiming to identify and document competences to empower individuals. Three thematic working groups have been established, related to quality, communication and system synergies. Their first results include a catalogue of quality criteria for validation initiatives in VET and adult education in a pilot phase throughout 2018. In higher education, several steps have been taken to support and improve validation quality.

The strategy is intended to provide a platform and framework for development and coordination of the many existing initiatives that were devised 'bottom-up', as well as future ones, 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 available 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') as required in the regular system, such as acquisition of the compulsory school leaving certificate (*Pflichtschulabschluss*) by young people and adults, and exceptional admission to the final apprenticeship exam. Validation is also used to obtain exemptions and shorten programmes, such as skipping grades for pupils in general education or VET who demonstrate appropriate achievements, and shortening degree programmes at universities of applied science based on recognition of professional experience. There are also possibilities to gain access to higher education programmes in an alternative way. *Berufsreifeprüfung* (BRP) and the higher education entrance examination (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung*) (SBP) can both be taken by graduates of specific apprenticeships, VET schools and early leavers from VET colleges that traditionally are not granted university access through their initial education. Preparatory courses for BRP are offered outside formal education. It is also possible to acquire certificates/qualifications without any equivalence in the formal education system: the professional title *ingenieur*; certificates issued by the Academy of Continuing Education in adult education; access conditions to regulated professions; or several other initiatives in the private and voluntary sectors. However, these non-traditional pathways are in limited use.

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 has not been changed with the publication of the current strategy, and which could be an obstacle to implementation.

With the approved NQF Act in March 2016, the allocation of formal qualifications started in 2017; the inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NQF is part of a second implementation phase, with mapping procedures currently being developed ([18]). NQF service centres, expected to be selected and authorised by the Ministry of Education in 2018, are to be established to support and advise providers of non-formal qualifications in submitting requests for allocation. Long term planning will make it possible to acquire all qualifications mapped to the NQF through validation of non-formal and informal learning. The basic prerequisite for this is learning-outcome-based quality assurance and the further development of validation methods and procedures. Thus, the NQF and the Austrian validation strategy are closely linked and based on common objectives.

NQF implementation and impact

After the adoption of the NQF Act ([19]) in 2016, which establishes procedures for allocating qualifications to the eight levels of the NQF and the responsible bodies, the NQF entered an operational stage. The NQF manual ([20]) describing the process and criteria of allocation was adopted in September 2016 by the NQF steering committee and mapping of qualifications started in 2017. Academic higher education qualifications (bachelor, master and PhD/doctoral degrees) are directly allocated to levels 6, 7 and 8 of the NQF by law. Mapping of all other formal and non-formal 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.

In the formal sector, the allocation request is made by the responsible federal ministry or *Länder* government. For non-formal qualifications, NQF service centres are envisaged as the applicants, serving as intermediaries between qualification providers and the NQF bodies. Mapping recommendations by the NCP, supported by the advisory body, are approved by the NQF steering group, which also has the right to appeal against the NCP's mapping recommendations ([21]).

The following indicators have been defined for implementation ([22]):

- a. including major VET qualifications (such as initial school-based vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and master craftsperson qualifications) by 2018;
- b. alignment of curricula in formal education and training, particularly for VET to learning outcomes orientation by 2020;
- c. increase in cross-border mobility in VET for 20 %.

The initial focus has been on formal qualifications from the VET sector at levels 4, 5 and 6, starting with VET school-based and apprenticeship qualifications under the Ministry of education ([23]); these will be followed by qualifications under the responsibility of other ministries, such as healthcare and police. Mapping VET qualifications at level 6 and above has been found more challenging, involving extensive discussions (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). The inclusion of non-formal qualifications into the NQF is part of a second implementation phase, expected to start in 2019. As procedures for these qualifications are not fully defined in the NQF Act, preparatory work is currently being carried out. The prospect of mapping non-formal qualifications has provoked

discussions and a drive to develop suitable quality assurance systems ([24]).

Mapped qualifications are included in the national qualifications register ([25]), which currently contains 31 qualifications from the VET sector (September 2018). Work is under way to describe and include in the register qualifications, linked to the Bologna cycles, that have been mapped by law to the NQF levels. The NQF levels are indicated in the register and discussions are also under way to include them in the database of the Austrian Employment Service. Both NQF and EQF levels are indicated on qualifications from the VET sector that have been mapped to the NQF and on their Europass supplements ([26]).

The NQF is being used as a basis for reform and development in VET qualifications, with significant influence in VET at higher levels, where curricula and qualifications are being updated based on NQF principles. 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 ([27]) 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, 2018).

So far, the NQF's communication efforts have been primarily oriented towards qualification-awarding bodies, aiming to help them prepare their qualifications for the mapping process and inclusion in the NQF register a secondary focus is experts using the NQF in their work. Dissemination of information about the NQF is carried out via the NQF website ([28]), newsletters, seminars and one-to-one meetings.

The key challenges for NQF implementation in the next period are related to financial resources. Having enough funding for both the mapping process and for dissemination of the NQF on a wider level and to larger target groups is seen as difficult due to budget cuts in the public sector.

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. Compatibility between the NQF and the QF-EHEA is also discussed in the referencing report, which is available on the EQF portal ([\[29\]](#)).

Important lessons and future plans

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. Now formalised through the 2016 NQF Act, this broad group of stakeholders is engaged in implementation via the NQF steering group, which includes all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education, and the *Länder*. More widely, education and training providers, labour market stakeholders, 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 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The NQF aims at improved coordination of a national qualification system that has traditionally witnessed distinct separation between different segments of education, particularly between VET and higher education. Increased transparency of VET and non-formal qualifications is expected. Austria also sees the NQF as a communication tool to make qualifications transparent and comparable internationally, and to increase learning and work mobility.

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 in higher VET, where NQF principles are used for revision of qualifications. The NQF is also central in implementing the Austrian strategy for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The prospect of integrating non-formal and informal learning into the framework has highlighted the need to develop suitable quality assurance mechanisms.

Future plans related to the implementation of the NQF include continuing the mapping of qualifications to the NQF, developing procedures for inclusion of non-formal and informal learning into the framework, and inclusion of academic higher education qualifications in the NQF register.

Main sources of information

- The Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (Österreichischer Austauschdienst – OeAD) is the EQF NCP: <http://www.oead.at/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://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctorate (Doktorgrade)	8
7	Master degree (Master- bzw. Diplomgrade)	7
6	Bachelor degree (Bachelorgrade) Master craftsman (Meister) Engineer (Ingenieur)	6
5	VET college school leaving certificate (Reife- und Diplomprüfung der berufsbildenden höheren Schulen)	5
4	VET school qualification (Abschluss der berufsbildenden mittleren Schule) Apprenticeship diploma (Lehrabschluss)	4

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

References

[URLs accessed 11.12.2018]

Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture; Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2011). *Austrian EQF referencing report*. <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>

Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture; Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2012). *Austrian EQF referencing report: supplementary information*. <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>

Cedefop (2016a). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3074>

Cedefop (2016b). *The application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative perspective. Country: Austria* ([unpublished]).

Cedefop (2018). *Analysis and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 66.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5566>

Cedefop; Refernet Austria (2016). *Austria - NQF law enters into force*. Cedefop national news on VET, 14.4.2016.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/austria-nqf-law-enters-force>

Cedefop; Refernet Austria (2018). *Austria - NQF as a catalyst for qualification and quality*. Cedefop national news on VET, 8.2.2018. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/da/news-and-press/news/austria-nqf-catalyst-qualification-and-quality>

Council of the European Union (2012). Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C398, 22.12.2012, pp.1-5.

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

European Commission (2017). *Education and training monitor 2017: Austria*.

European Commission; Cedefop (2018). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].

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

Löffler, R.; Lachmayr, N. (2014). Die Validierung nichtformaler und informeller Lernergebnisse in Österreich Stand der Diskussion und Beispiele guter Praxis [The validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes in Austria: status of the debate and examples of good practice]. *BWP magazine*, Vo. 5/2014, pp. 20-23.

<https://www.bibb.de/veroeffentlichungen/de/bwp/show/7417>

Related content

-

2018

Austria - European inventory on NQF 2018

European inventory of NQF



Austria