

NQF state of play



Austria 2022

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Overview

Stage of development: [Operational stage](#)

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF is open to all types of qualifications from the formal and non-formal sectors. General education qualifications are not yet included in the framework.

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

1.1. Policy context

Austria's demography is marked by ongoing population increase through migration and an ageing population, making both the integration of migrants into the labour market and lifelong learning imperative (Cedefop and ibw Austria, 2022). There is a relatively low rate of early leavers from education and training (8.0 % in 2021). Equity is a challenge, with children from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds being more at risk of early leaving and more likely to attend secondary pathways that do not give access to higher education. Early tracking of students towards non-academic compulsory secondary schools (*Mittelschule*) and academic schools preparing for higher education (*Gymnasium*) is thought to have a further impact on inequalities (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). Around 70 % of learners follow a VET path at the end of compulsory education (Cedefop and ibw Austria, 2022). While the need for upskilling and reskilling persists, adult participation in education and training is above the EU average; a range of active labour market policy measures have a strong focus on qualifications. The rate of tertiary education attainment, at 42.4 % in 2021, is slightly above the EU average, and is increasing (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

The NQR Act (see Section) provides a foundation and framework for policy initiatives in various areas (e.g. education, economics, youth) undertaken by ministries and the social partners. The [2020–2024 Austrian government programme](#) includes measures to create a legal basis for, and to expand, tertiary VET, in parallel to higher education, so as to better credit apprenticeships at tertiary level, upgrade the master craftsperson (*Meister*) qualification and create a pathway to NQR level 7 (professional master) ([1]).

1.2. NQF legal basis

The [federal act on the NQR](#), which was approved in 2016 (and its [explanatory document](#)), established the governance structure and outlined its implementation procedures, including the levelling of formal and non-formal qualifications to the NQR and the publication of levelled qualifications in the NQR register. Further explanations of principles – along with detailed descriptions of NQR levels, criteria and levelling/allocation procedures – are contained in the [NQR manual](#), which

was also adopted in 2016. Updates to the allocation request form were adopted in 2019. The NQR is well embedded in the [legislation](#) governing education and training, especially the legal basis for VET qualifications, including the 2017 engineering act, curriculum ordinances, curriculum reform ordinances, qualification examination ordinances and training ordinances (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Policy objectives

According to the explanatory document attached to the federal act on the NQR, the framework aims to:

- a. increase the transparency, understanding and comparability of Austrian qualifications at the national and European levels;
- b. promote cross-border mobility;
- c. promote permeability within and between the formal and non-formal sectors of the qualification system in the context of lifelong learning;
- d. strengthen the recognition and value of qualifications and skills;
- e. promote the learning outcomes as a common denominator of levelled qualifications;
- f. promote the European dimension in higher education.

The NQR also aims to promote benchmarks and targets relating to quality, as defined in the 2020 strategic framework for education and training, and to competitiveness, employability and social cohesion in the context of the 2030 strategy on education and training (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The main function of the NQR is to promote the transparency and comparability of qualifications at the national and international levels, lifelong learning and cross-border mobility. It maps qualifications from all education and training sectors and learning settings, and the relationship between them, thus increasing clarity, highlighting progression routes and promoting permeability within formal education sectors and with non-formal sectors. It also serves as a labour market tool enabling employers to search for personnel throughout Europe and enabling graduates to make their skills and competences more transparent (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). As the education system is already highly regulated in terms of what kinds of qualification give access to certain education pathways and to occupations in the labour market, the NQF has no regulatory functions and no legal effect on vocational and other authorisations. However, the NQF does support the reform and further development of VET qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The NQR has eight levels ([2]), equivalent to those of the EQF. A 'Y structure' was agreed, to capture differences between higher education and VET qualifications at levels 6 to 8 of the NQR. Thus, EQF level descriptors are used for all qualifications at levels 1 to 5, while levels 6 to 8 follow two strands: qualifications related to the Bologna cycles (bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate), for which Dublin descriptors are used; and other qualifications, for which EQF level descriptors are used. Additional [explanations](#) ([3]) serve as a guide to make the EQF descriptors understood in the national context ([4]).

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The NQR is open to all types of qualifications from the formal and non-formal sectors. It includes qualifications from formal (higher education, VET and qualifications under the responsibility of other ministries such as defence and health) and non-formal sectors. General education qualifications have not yet been levelled. Higher education qualifications in the Bologna system (bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate) are mapped to the NQR automatically through the NQR act; all other qualifications are levelled following an allocation request. Considerable progress has been achieved in expanding the coverage of the NQR. So far in 2023, a total of 66 formal qualifications and 38 qualifications awarded outside formal education and training have been levelled to the NQR ([5]). Since 2020, professional qualifications have been included at NQR levels 6, 5 and 4, youth qualifications at NQR levels 4 and 3 and Chance B qualifications at levels 2 and 1.

The allocation process ([6]) is generally the same for all qualifications, with the only difference being the body submitting the allocation request. Applications for government-regulated qualifications are submitted by the ministry responsible. The mapping of qualifications awarded in the formal education and training system started in 2017. The initial focus was on qualifications from the VET sector at levels 4, 5 and 6, starting with VET school-based and apprenticeship qualifications. This was followed by qualifications under the responsibility of other ministries, such as defence and healthcare, at levels 5 and 8 respectively. Since 2019, procedures

and structures for levelling non-government-regulated qualifications acquired through adult learning, further learning and youth work have been put in place. A quality assurance process was put in place, and six NQF service points were set up in the same year (Chapter 5) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

As learning outcomes are central in the levelling of qualifications to the NQF, the development of the framework is seen as having a positive effect on strengthening the orientation of learning outcomes across education and training, for instance in developing qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). Many qualifications are already learning-outcome oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions, therefore work is ongoing ([7]) (Cedefop, 2016).

In school-based VET, learning outcomes are defined by [VET educational standards](#), implemented using a step-by-step approach. Educational standards for VET schools and colleges define ‘content’ (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), ‘action’ (cognitive achievements required in specific subjects) and personal and social competences related to a specific field. Competence-oriented and standardised upper secondary school leaving examinations have been in place since the 2015/2016 school year; they grant direct access to higher education.

Higher VET curricula are being revised and qualifications awarded by VET colleges are being updated based on NQR principles. Master craftsperson qualifications have been aligned to the requirements of the NQR and included at level 6 of the framework (2018), reflecting the high level of esteem in which this qualification is held in Austria. The necessary qualification standards have been developed for each craft / regulated trade (using the learning-outcomes approach), along with training documents, guidelines for the design of examinations and competence-oriented examination tasks. The use of learning outcomes plays an important role in promoting quality assurance (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

The inclusion of apprenticeship qualifications (dual system) in the NQR introduced new requirements for the development/revision of apprenticeship profiles. Expected learning outcomes should be aligned with the corresponding NQR level descriptors. Specific guidelines have been adopted, and apprenticeship profiles are being developed or revised

in accordance with them (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

The 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), and have developed guidance material on implementing the learning-outcomes approach (Cedefop, 2022), but implementation differs between institutions.

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

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The main authority in charge of NQR development and implementation is the education ministry ([8]), which is responsible for all education and training subsystems. The EQF national coordination point (NCP) – the main administrative, coordinating and information office on the NQR and the EQF – was set up by the federal act on the NQR 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 the OeAD and the education ministry and funded by the education and labour ministries, along with EU grants. The EQF NCP is staffed by five employees (2.5 full-time equivalents). It is responsible for the day-to-day running of the NQR, while its tasks include (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020):

- a. mapping qualifications to the NQR in accordance with the NQR act;
- b. further developing the NQR register;
- c. supporting all relevant bodies involved in the process (NQR steering committee, NQR advisory board, NQR service points and experts);
- d. public relations and consultation;
- e. networking at the national and European levels.

The Austrian context has been characterised from the beginning by active stakeholder involvement and occasional conflicting views on the NQR's role ([9]). Cooperation has been strong, especially with the social partners, who were both part of the development of the legal framework of the NQR and part of the qualification mapping process (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

The NQR steering committee, chaired by the education ministry, has 32 members representing all key stakeholders (all relevant federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the various fields of education and training, the public employment service, federal youth representation and the *Länder*). The committee was set up to advise the education and labour ministries and meets regularly, but is not involved in the day-to-day running of the NQR (European Commission and

Cedefop, 2020). Further tasks include approving operational procedures (such as the inclusion of qualifications in the NQR register and appeals) and content-related issues (such as the adoption of the NQR manual). This broad representation reflects stakeholder interests and acknowledges the importance of social aspects in the allocation of qualifications to levels.

An NQR advisory board, consisting of seven experts from different education sectors (initial, further and continuing education and training, professional practice, higher education), was established to advise the EQF NCP by providing a written opinion on allocation requests. In addition, the EQF NCP maintains a list of experts who may be consulted in the process of examining allocation requests.

The NQR service points were introduced by the federal act on the NQR and authorised by the education ministry. There are six service points, which are intermediaries between qualification providers and the EQF coordination point, and which serve as gatekeepers of the NQR ([10]). They perform a quality assurance function and support qualification providers in preparing allocation requests (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022; Cedefop and ReferNet Austria, 2020a).

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

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

The [national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning](#), adopted in November 2017, is linked to the [2020 lifelong learning strategy](#) and the development of the NQR. The strategy has not yet been fully implemented. It aims to improve the steering, coordination, coherence and quality assurance of validation activities in various sectors (Luomi-Messerer, forthcoming). Another aim is to promote the learning-outcome orientation of education and training. Validation initiatives can lead to NQR formal qualifications. NQR qualifications awarded through non-formal and informal learning can also be obtained through validation, due to the use of learning outcomes and standardised assessment procedures. Such qualifications include those of a certified adult educator at NQR levels 5 and 6 and of an engineer at level 6 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Validation exists in the various education and training sectors but lacks coherence, as there is no uniform legal framework regulating the strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning (Luomi-Messerer, forthcoming). To date, various acts and regulations have included 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. Thus, there are distinct validation initiatives in different formal and non-formal sectors.

Almost all qualifications (from general education and VET) can be obtained without participating in programmes or courses. This requires passing the relevant exam (as an external applicant), 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 ([11]). 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 the recognition of professional experience.

In 2021, the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences in higher education was legally strengthened. Since then, it has been a requirement for all higher education institutions to carry out procedures to identify, document and assess achieved learning outcomes in order to be recognised (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The NQR has reached the operational stage (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). The number of levelled qualifications and of those that indicate the NQR/EQF level on certificates is constantly growing, while a qualifications register is in place. The framework provides a platform for cooperation by stakeholders across the fields of education, training and employment, and a reference point for the development and review of standards and curricula. It also supports the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

Since 2020, there has been considerable progress in indicating NQR levels on qualifications. NQR levels are indicated on all qualifications up to level 6, apart from those in the health sector (which is planned) and bachelor's degrees; they are also not mentioned on master's and doctoral degrees, while it is planned that they will be mentioned on level-8 professional qualifications in the health sector. EQF levels are mentioned on all qualifications up to level 3, on many qualifications at level 4 and on the engineer's qualification at level 6. NQR levels are often indicated on Europass certificate supplements (at level 5 and below), while only some of them also indicate EQF levels. All NQR qualifications are included in the qualifications register, where their NQR and EQF levels are indicated (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.3. NQF dissemination

The NQR communication strategy is part of the [annual report to the parliament on the NQR](#). The main tasks of the EQF NCP include raising awareness of the NQR among the public and bringing the framework closer to them (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Initial communication efforts were 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.

The dissemination of information on the NQR takes place through events (e.g. career and study information fairs), seminars (e.g. training sessions for guidance counsellors), consultations and close cooperation with the

Euroguidance and Europass networks. Brochures and promotional materials are published regularly, while a [handbook](#) on the mapping of formal and non-formal qualifications to the NQR has also been developed ([12]). On the website of the qualifications register, end users can find all of the information they may need about levelled qualifications, the NQR and EQF, and learning outcomes. The NQR's visibility is constantly growing: in 2021, the website of the NQR register had a total of 40 000 hits, which was a 94 % increase compared to the previous year. In the same period, one of the main objectives of the EQF NCP, in coordination with the NQF service units and the OeAD, was to communicate about developments relating to the NQR, focusing on the considerable increase in the number of levelled qualifications, especially those awarded outside formal education and training. Austria considers levelling new qualifications to the NQR to be an important way to raise NQR awareness, as new target groups will be reached. Indicating NQR levels on certificates is also perceived to be an effective method of reaching end users (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.4. Qualifications databases and registers

NQR levelled qualifications are included in the [national qualifications register](#), which contains 104 qualifications (as of May 2023) ([13]). Publishing the qualification in the register is a legal requirement in order for the levelling to become effective. The register targets experts, stakeholders, qualification providers and learners. It provides information in German and English on the field of study; the EQF level; what the learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do (as open text); the awarding body; and entry requirements. Elements such as further information on the qualification and links to qualification supplements are partially covered. Only the main learning outcomes (10 to 15) are published in the register, aiming to taxonomically depict (depending on the chosen verbs) the level of the qualification in a concise way (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

Awareness of the NQR has increased (Section 7.3). Awareness among learners and recent graduates (who may also be jobseekers) is raised by indicating NQR levels on qualifications. Qualification providers are mainly reached through information events; they are aware of the benefits of levelling their qualifications but are often discouraged by the demanding and time-consuming levelling process (although no fees are charged) ([14]). Guidance and counselling practitioners were informed about the function and main elements of the NQR and the EQF through an EU-

funded training programme.

There is empirical evidence that the NQR is used by learners and jobseekers in their effort to find employment, including outside Europe. The framework is advantageous for internationally active companies and organisations, helping them find personnel throughout Europe. NQR levels are also mentioned in job descriptions and advertisements (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The NQR is being used as a basis for the reform and development of VET qualifications, with significant influence on VET at higher levels. There is a strong link between the NQR and the curricula of technical and vocational colleges, which are constantly being updated based on the NQR and labour market requirements. The new engineer's qualification ([15]) was developed in line with the NQR requirements, as previously it did not match them (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). Education and training providers, guidance and counselling practitioners, and recognition authorities and bodies have started to use the NQR. Providers also use the NQR to promote their qualifications. The use of the NQR in legislation has increased considerably. For instance, the legal acts regulating VET qualifications such as *Meister* or *Ingenieur* refer to the NQR and its adoption act (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

6.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

No formal evaluation has taken place. However, the institutional structure and the implementation of the NQR have been monitored through working groups. The focus was on the cooperation among the NQR steering committee, NQR service points, the EQF NCP and the ministries responsible, and on how to speed up the levelling process and better communicate the framework. This has led to a better understanding of specific elements of the levelling process, more transparency and the faster levelling of qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Regarding the monitoring of the NQR service points, several feedback meetings between the service points, the EQF NCP and the education ministry took place in 2022. The service units were also able to provide written feedback. The EQF NCP drew conclusions from the results (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023) and is now working with the service points on measures to increase the number of qualifications levelled to the NQR, enhance visibility and ensure high quality ([16]).

6.7. Impact of the NQF

The NQR has had an influence on the education and training system since

its development phase (Cedefop and ReferNet Austria, 2018). It has also contributed to improving the understanding and use of the learning-outcomes approach. 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 (Cedefop and ReferNet Austria, 2020b). The framework has increased the transparency of qualifications, as the number of levelled qualifications is constantly growing, and promoted the comparability of qualifications awarded through formal and non-formal education and training. The NQR has also contributed to promoting permeability by making the NQR levels of qualifications in different education fields and sectors visible, and by depicting the options for vertical progression, for example in the healthcare and justice sectors. The framework has provided a platform that has strengthened the dialogue among various stakeholders, including labour market representatives (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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 in June 2012, by means of a single comprehensive report.

Important lessons and future plans

Although the national qualification system has traditionally witnessed a distinct separation between education and training sectors, the NQR has contributed to reducing barriers between them, to promoting permeability and to increasing the transparency of qualifications. One major success in the NQR implementation process has been the considerable increase in the number of levelled qualifications, including qualifications awarded through non-formal learning and validation. NQR qualifications cover a great variety of education fields and sectors, constantly expanding the framework's coverage; nevertheless, general education qualifications are still not levelled (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Major enabling factors in the implementation of the NQR include:

- a. the adoption of the NQR act, which serves as an institutional foundation for the development of the framework and the expansion of its coverage;
- b. the commitment of EQF NCP staff in supporting the process of levelling qualifications;
- c. the support of the education and labour ministries and their efficient collaboration.

The engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, representing all education and training sectors and social partners through the NQR steering committee and the NQR service points, is another enabling factor. However, maintaining efficient dialogue among all sectors could be a challenge (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

NQR implementation was initially challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic as the number of in-person meetings was reduced, but online meetings ensured its continuation. Another challenge, and future priority, is to adequately communicate the NQR and carry out outreach activities with limited human resources. Nevertheless, it is expected that NQR awareness will continue to increase, including among end users. Plans include further increasing the number of levelled qualifications awarded outside formal education and training and through a validation process.

Main sources of information

URLs accessed 9 June 2023

- [Austrian Agency for Education and Internationalisation OeAD](#)
- [NQR](#) web page
- [NQR register](#).
- Austria. Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and Federal Ministry of Science and Research (2011). [*Austrian EQF referencing report*](#).

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
8	Doctorate (Doktorgrade) Level-8 professional qualifications in the health sector awarded by the Federal Ministry of Health e.g. clinical psychology (Klinische Psychologie); healthcare psychology (Gesundheitspsychologie)	8
7	Master's degree (Master- bzw. Diplomgrade)	7
6	Bachelor's degree (Bachelorgrade) Master craftsperson (Meister) Master of agriculture (landwirtschaftliche/r Meister/in) Engineer (Ingenieur) Health qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Health - nurse responsible for general care (RL 2005/36/EG) (Gehobener Dienst für Gesundheits- und Krankenpflege (Diplomierte Gesundheits- und Krankenpflegerin, Diplomierter Gesundheits- und Krankenpfleger)) Level-6 professional qualification e.g. certified master chef (WIFI Diplom-Küchenmeister/in); managing director Raiffeisen cooperative bank (Geschäftsleiter/in genossenschaftliche Raiffeisenbank)	6

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 - senior prison officer (Exekutivdienst in der Verwendungsgruppe E2a im Justizressort (Dienstführenden Grundausbildung - mittleres Management))

Level-5 professional qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy (Duale Akademie)

e.g. application development coding professional (f/m) (Applikationsentwicklung und Coding); wholesaler (f/m) (Großhandel)

Level-5 professional qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Health (Pflegefachassistent/in)

Level-5 professional qualification

e.g. certified adult educator (zertifizierte/r Erwachsenenbildner/in wba); customs declarant (Zolldeklarantin/Zolldeklarant)

4	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 (Militärberufsunteroffizier oder Militärberufsunteroffizierin (MBUO, Erstverwendung)) Level-4 professional qualification awarded by regional governments - agricultural technical schools - 3 years (Abschlussprüfung an der landwirtschaftlichen Fachschule) Level-4 youth qualification e.g. alpine education course (Lehrgang Alpinpädagogik) Level-4 professional qualification e.g. EBCL Betriebswirtschaft; European customs professional acc. to EN 16992 and CustComp EU, Zollfachkraft) Level-4 health qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Health - assistant nurse (Pflegeassistent/in) Level-4 professional qualification awarded by the Federal Ministry of Justice (E2b Grundausbildung für den Exekutivdienst in der Verwendungsgruppe E2b im Justizressort)	4
3	Level-3 youth qualifications e.g. family group leader (Familiengruppenleiter/in des Österreichischen Alpenvereins)	3
2	Level-2 Chance B qualifications e.g. housekeeping level 2 (Grundqualifikation hotellerie)	2
1	Level-1 Chance B qualifications e.g. housekeeping level 1 (Grundqualifikation hotellerie)	1

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
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NCP	national coordination point
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NQF	national qualifications framework
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NQR	Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen (Austrian qualifications framework)
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OeAD	Österreichischer Austauschdienst (Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research)
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VET	vocational education and training
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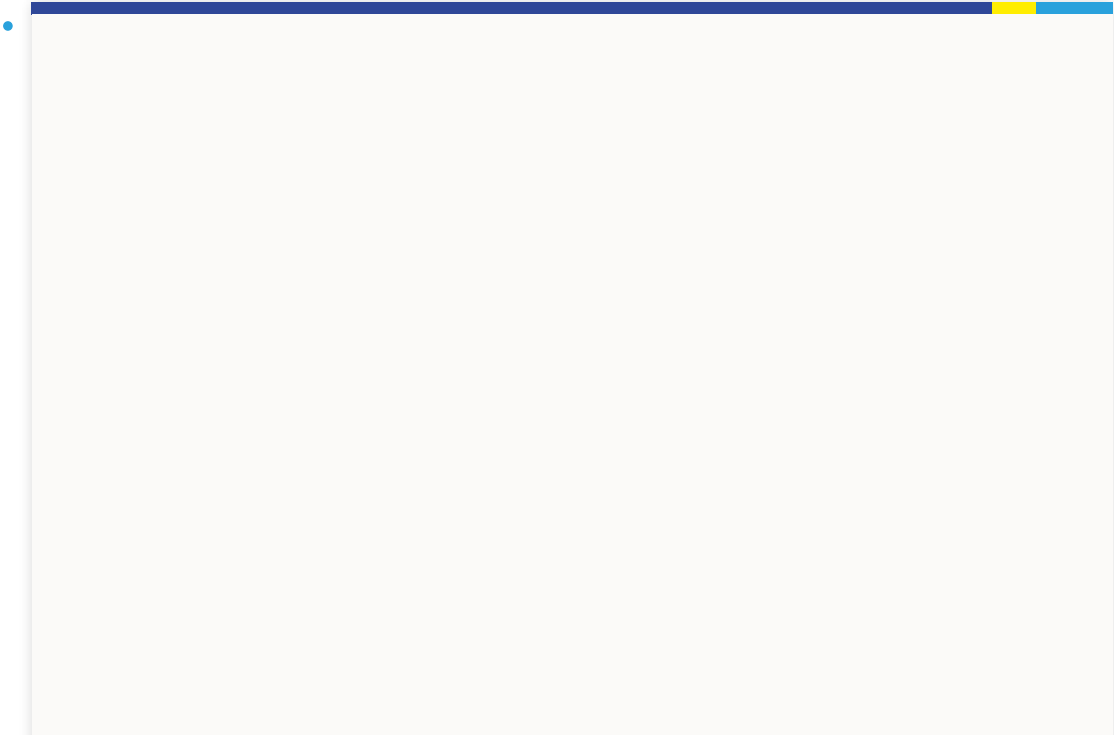
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Related content



2022

Austria - European inventory of NQFs 2022

European inventory of NQF



Austria