

REPORT 2023

Non-formal learning is part of the solution

**A comparative study on NQFs,
validation and non-formal
learning in the Nordic countries,
the Netherlands and Austria**

NOVA nordic

Enhancing the link between National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) and arrangements for the validation of prior learning (VPL) with a specific focus on non-formal qualifications will create both better training and labour market opportunities for people as well as contribute to vocational education and training in line with labour market needs. It will also strengthen the inclusion of the third sector in both the work with NQFs and VPL. To enhance that link, to support further policy development, and strengthen the capacity of involved stakeholders the NOVA-Nordic project has been exploring the following questions:

- Non-formal qualifications – how and by who are they developed? Are they included in the NQFs and if so, how?
- How are learning outcomes designed and used for qualification development as well as in VPL arrangements?
- Are NQFs and VPL arrangements linked and if so, how?

By comparing different country approaches to the above questions and identifying and analysing good practices, the project has formulated a number of core messages aimed at policy makers. In addition, the project has developed a quality tool to support capacity building for those involved in the development of non-formal qualifications, defining learning outcomes, and linking these with VPL arrangements.

Read more about the project at novanordic.eu



Completed: 2023-11-30

DNR: MYH 2020/3787

ISBN: 978-91-89815-24-7



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflects the view only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Summary

The NOVA-Nordic project was a collaborative effort aimed at enhancing and supporting non-formal learning, validation, and their integration into National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) in Nordic countries, Austria, and the Netherlands. Non-formal learning plays a significant role in developing skills that are essential for the labour market, yet there had been limited progress in Europe regarding the inclusion of non-formal qualifications within NQFs, and the development of validation procedures for non-formal learning.

Adaptation to changing economic conditions was of paramount importance in the planning phase of the project. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need for more flexible learning pathways. The project recognised that flexible labour markets are essential for economic revival, emphasising the importance of high-quality skills development and validation procedures to support mobility within and across economies.

The project aimed to investigate the procedures of levelling non-formal qualifications to NQFs in partner countries and assess the development of learning outcomes-based non-formal qualifications. Taking a more in depth look at these issues was driven by specific needs identified within the non-formal education sector in each partner country.

This report highlights the key findings from seven different country approaches to include non-formal qualifications in their NQFs, and what possible role validation of prior learning play in the process. The six themes that were developed for the comparative framework are:

1. NQFs and non-formal learning
2. NQFs and validation
3. Qualification design and development
4. Transparency
5. Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement
6. Quality assurance

The comparative analysis is structured according to these areas, depicting the different approaches to non-formal learning, validation, and their relation to NQFs between the countries. The project *Core Messages* were developed on the basis of the comparative study, and they also reflect the good practices gathered and analysed by the NOVA-Nordic project.

Content

Summary	3
Introduction and background	5
Why is non-formal learning important?	9
Human capital development issues	9
Non-formal learning and links to EU recommendations and policies	9
Concepts used by the NOVA-Nordic project.....	10
Data collection and comparative framework	13
Analysis of findings	15
Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	17
Links between NQFs and validation arrangements	19
Qualification design and development.....	21
Transparency.....	23
Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement.....	25
Quality assurance.....	27
The user's voice.....	29
Core messages in short.....	31
References	34
Annexes.....	35
Annex 1. Interview guide – NOVA Nordic.....	35
Annex 2. Terminology	36
Annex 3. EU policies and recommendations	37
Annex 4. Country summaries.....	40

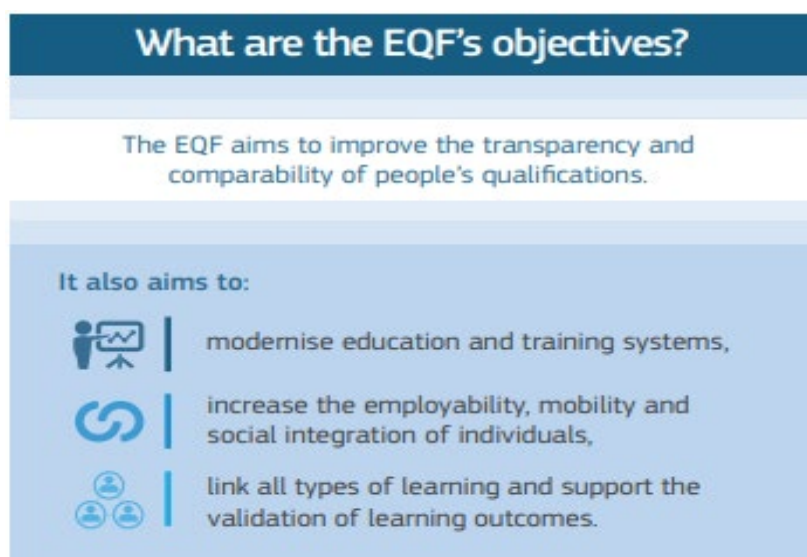
Introduction and background

Nova-Nordic was a three-year (2021-2023) project co-funded by Erasmus+, focusing on the links between National Qualifications Frameworks and validation arrangements in the Nordic countries. The project consortium consists of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, Sweden, the Education and Training Service Centre, Iceland and Globedu, Finland.

The aim of the NOVA Nordic project was to examine **if and how** non-formal learning and qualifications are linked with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) in the Nordic countries. In addition, to widen the comparison, Austria and the Netherlands was also included as they have frameworks open to “non-formal” qualifications. NOVA has also examined if these qualifications can be awarded through validation of prior learning (VPL) procedures. The working definition of non-formal qualifications used in the project is all qualifications that are not part of and awarded through formal education. This is a pragmatic definition that purposely was kept as wide as possible as it differs between countries what is defined as “formal education”, sometimes including VET, CVT and adult learning and sometimes not.

Non-formal learning produces a substantial amount of skills and competence crucial from the viewpoint of the labour market. A starting point for the project worth noting, emphasised and recommended by the EU is that the EQF should include all learning and facilitate VPL.

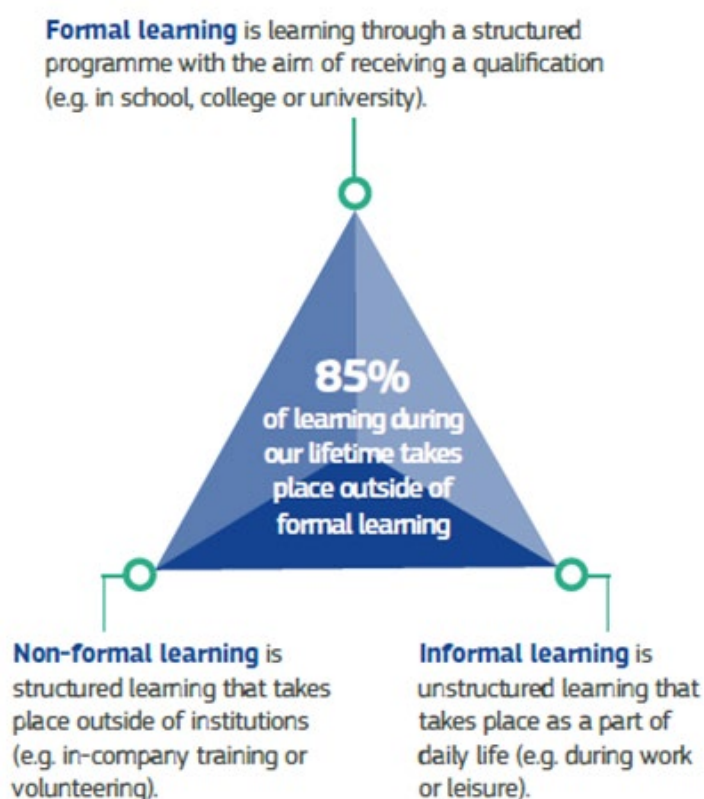
Figure 1. Objectives of the EQF.¹



From the viewpoint of the individual, it is crucial to have all types of learning made visible – not only formal qualifications. In general, non-formal and informal learning form the widest learning arenas in an adult person’s life and it would be detrimental for the individual as well as society not to make the individuals’ skills visible.

¹ European commission (2018). *10 years of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*.

Figure 2. Formal, non-formal and informal learning²



Validation practices are constantly developed in the non-formal sector, but to make the learning outcomes more usable, transferable, and comparable, it is important to have a common reference point. National Qualifications Frameworks provide such a reference tool, but in different countries the practices of including non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications into the NQFs vary. Some countries have relatively open NQFs, and they welcome non-formal qualifications to be included, often through a formal application process, whereas others provide access only to formal qualifications.

However, according to both the European Inventory on NQFs from 2019³ and the Inventory on validation from 2018⁴, it appears that there is little development in Europe of opening up frameworks for the inclusion of non-formal qualifications, validation procedures designed for non-formal learning and development of learning outcome-based non-formal qualifications.

The main questions addressed by the NOVA-project:

- Non-formal qualifications – how and by who are they developed? Are they included in the NQFs and if so, how?
- How are learning outcomes designed and used for qualification development as well as in VPL arrangements?
- Are NQFs and VPL arrangements linked and if so, how? Is it possible to award a non-formal qualification through validation?

² European commission (2018). *Unlocking talent – Validation of non-formal and informal learning*.

³ Cedefop (2021). *National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019: qualifications frameworks: transparency and added value for end users*.

⁴ Cedefop (2020). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning: 2018 update: final synthesis report: executive summary*.

Based on the state-of-play especially in the Nordic countries, the NOVA-Nordic project has in more depth compared and analysed these different approaches with the aim of learning more. Some of the aspects that have been compared:

- What processes and procedures are countries adopting to include non-formal learning and qualifications in NQFs?
- What are the criteria for inclusion and how validation practices are linked with such qualifications?

The aim of this deliverable (Intellectual Output 2 – IO2) was to compare the approaches in the Nordic countries as well as Austria and the Netherlands and the work within IO2 has been conducted in conjunction with the identifying and gathering of good practice examples (Intellectual output 3 – IO3). The findings were then used to develop both the project core messages, and the support tool (the NOVA Quality Tool) for the process of developing learning outcome-based non-formal qualifications for the labour market (Intellectual output 4 – IO4).

The gathered data and comparative analysis are meant to serve as inspiration and encourage policy makers, non-formal learning providers and other stakeholders to develop and make better use of non-formal qualifications. Thus, help make the learning gained in the non-formal sector visible and comparable as it is linked, mapped, or levelled to the NQF levels. Furthermore, the aim was that the findings, tools, and core messages from the project should contribute to the capacity building of providers, industry sectors, as well as other relevant stakeholders to enhance their capability in terms of non-formal qualifications in a more uniform way.

The NOVA-Nordic project was based on specific needs derived from the non-formal sector in the partner countries (such as sector industry organisations in Sweden; Lifelong Learning Centers and working life in Iceland; Community College network in Finland). The project group recognises that there has been a positive development regarding the role of non-formal learning, validation, and their link to NQFs. However, support and capacity building are still needed for further developments. The project aimed at enhancing and supporting national developments as well as overall European aspirations to strengthen the role of non-formal learning, validation, and their link to NQFs.

During the current COVID-19 crisis, it has become evident that all economies need to develop their learning systems in an ever more flexible direction. Millions of jobs were lost, and economies suffered. For proper revival of European economies, flexible labour markets are required, which in turn means development and implementation of high-quality skills provision and validation procedures that aid in mobility both within economies as well as across borders.

Against this background, the project developed a methodology, including indicators, on how to canvass the EQF/NQF policy approaches in different countries as well as good practices in terms of how non-formal qualifications are placed on NQF levels. Based on the canvassing, the project has produced policy recommendations – core messages – as well as common elements for successfully putting all skills to use by gathering and analysing 17 good practice examples.

As a result of this project, both policy makers as well as non-formal education and training providers and other stakeholders are provided with practical examples of different approaches. Policy makers can draw inspiration from the core messages and the good practice examples on how to further open the NQFs and how it can be better utilised in terms of lifelong learning. The learning providers have access to support that steer the process of describing qualifications in terms of learning

outcomes and how the validation procedures can be carried out within the non-formal learning context.

As the project partnership had wide national, Nordic, and European networks dealing with validation, qualifications development, EQF/NQF development as well as other Lifelong Learning issues, and as all the partners are engaged with the same issues in their daily work, the long-term impacts are easily detectable and further development of the tools designed in this project is foreseen. In all partner countries, there are national development projects emerging which aim at validation of non-formal learning, NQFs as well as a learning outcome-based approach within the sector.

Why is non-formal learning important?

Human capital development issues

The Nordic countries have a high employment rate compared to the EU average, but they also face challenges such as an aging population, skill mismatches, and ongoing digital transformation. Some of the reasons for workforce shortages in the Nordic countries are low fertility rates, high retirement rates, lack of qualified workers in certain sectors (such as health care, education, and engineering), low labour migration, and increased competition from other regions. The Nordic countries are trying to address these issues by investing in education and training, promoting lifelong learning, enhancing social dialogue, supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, and fostering diversity and inclusion in the labour market.⁵

The job vacancy rate in the EU was 2.8% (and 4,7% in the Netherlands and Austria) in the first quarter of 2023⁶, which means that about one in every 36 jobs was vacant.

According to a report by Eurofound⁷, labour shortages are a challenge for many EU Member States, especially in sectors such as health, ICT, construction, and manufacturing. The same report, lists some of the reasons for workforce shortages in the EU as:

- Demographic changes such as ageing population, low birth rates and migration flows
- Skills mismatches between the supply and demand of labour, especially in sectors such as healthcare, ICT, engineering, and education
- Working conditions that affect the attractiveness and retention of workers, such as low wages, high workload, health and safety risks and lack of career prospects

The report also suggests some possible policy responses to tackle these challenges, such as⁸:

- Improving **education and training** systems to align them with current and future labour market needs
- Promoting **labour mobility** within and across countries, regions, and sectors
- Enhancing **social dialogue and collective bargaining** to improve working conditions and wages
- Supporting **diversity and inclusion** in the labour market, especially for women, young people, older workers, and migrants

To ease the labour shortages, accelerating the opening of NQFs to non-formal qualifications (and micro-credentials) and improving systems for the validation of prior learning in Europe could provide more mobility and flexibility of workforce in the EU.

Non-formal learning and links to EU recommendations and policies

The EQF (European Qualifications Framework) recommendation, VNFIL (Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning) recommendation, and the Skills Agenda are all important elements of the

⁵ Alsos & Dølvik (eds). (2021). *The Future of Work in the Nordic Countries*.

⁶ [Job vacancy statistics - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&code=sdg_8_8_2&plugin=1)

⁷ Eurofound (2021). *Tackling labour shortages in EU Member States*.

⁸ Ibid.

European Union's efforts to promote lifelong learning, enhance the recognition of skills and qualifications, and address the changing needs of the labour market.

The EQF helps promote mobility, transparency, and lifelong learning by providing a clear and standardised way to describe qualifications, making it easier for individuals to move between countries and for employers and educational institutions to understand the value of a qualification. The EQF recommendation encourages member states to align their National Qualification Frameworks or systems with the EQF to enhance the recognition, comparability, and transferability of qualifications as well as validation of prior learning.⁹

The VNFIL recommendation is a European policy initiative aimed at recognising and giving value to skills and competences developed outside the formal education system, such as through work experience, volunteering, or self-directed learning. It is closely related to the EQF, as it seeks to ensure that skills developed through non-formal and informal learning are recognised and integrated into National Qualification Frameworks, in alignment with the EQF. The VNFIL recommendation promotes the validation and recognition of these skills to enhance employability, social inclusion, and lifelong learning opportunities for individuals who may not have formal qualifications but possess valuable skills and knowledge.¹⁰

The European Skills Agenda is a broader policy framework and initiative introduced by the European Commission to address the evolving skills needs of the European labour market and promote lifelong learning. The Skills Agenda encompasses various policies and initiatives, including initiatives for the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, improving digital and green skills, and enhancing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through VNFIL.¹¹

The Skills Agenda is closely linked to both the EQF and VNFIL recommendations, as it seeks to promote a more responsive and inclusive education and training system that aligns with the evolving needs of the labour market and supports the recognition of skills and qualifications, both formal and non-formal.

These three elements are interconnected and work together to create a more flexible and responsive education and training system as well as labour market in Europe. These three policies steered the NOVA-Nordic project's work in all its phases.

Concepts used by the NOVA-Nordic project

There are a few key concepts used in the NOVA project, below you find the most important ones and how the project has understood them.

NQFs - National Qualifications Frameworks¹², serve as essential tools to establish a structured and standardised framework for organising and recognising qualifications and skills developed by individuals within a country or region. The primary purposes of NQFs include:

- **Quality assurance:** NQFs help ensure the quality and consistency of qualifications and certifications by setting specific standards and criteria for each level of

⁹ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03)

¹⁰ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. (2012/C 398/01)

¹¹ [European Skills Agenda - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/skills/european-skills-agenda/)

12 [National qualifications frameworks \(NQFs\) | CEDEFOP \(europa.eu\)](#)

education/training/learning. This ensures that qualifications are comparable and meet the required standards of competence.

- **Facilitating lifelong learning:** NQFs encourage and support lifelong learning by providing clear pathways for individuals to progress and advance in their education and career. The framework allows learners to easily understand how their current qualifications fit into the larger educational/qualification system and what options they have for further development.
- **Enhancing recognition and mobility:** NQFs facilitate the recognition of qualifications and skills developed in one institution or country in another. This recognition is vital for individuals who wish to work or study in different regions or countries, as it helps employers and educational institutions understand the value of foreign qualifications.
- **Promoting transparency and comparability:** NQFs promote transparency by making information about qualifications, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria readily available to learners, employers, and institutions. This transparency enables stakeholders to compare different qualifications and make informed decisions.
- **Supporting workforce development:** NQFs are valuable for governments, businesses, and industry sectors as they assist in identifying skills gaps and aligning educational offerings with the needs of the labour market. This ensures that the workforce is equipped with the necessary skills and competence required by employers.
- **Encouraging lifelong skills development:** NQFs emphasise the importance of skills development beyond formal education. This can include validation of prior learning (VPL), work-based learning, and other non-formal or informal learning experiences, ensuring that all valuable learning experiences are considered.
- **Promoting social inclusion:** By providing clear pathways for progression and recognition of diverse learning experiences, NQFs can help promote social inclusion and reduce barriers to education and employment opportunities for marginalised groups.

Overall, NQFs are vital tools for promoting a coherent and efficient education and training system, fostering lifelong learning, and supporting individuals in their educational and career journeys.

The EQF - European Qualifications Framework¹³, is a framework developed by the European Union to facilitate the comparison and portability of qualifications across different countries and education systems in Europe. It was established to promote lifelong learning, mobility of learners and workers, and to enhance the transparency and recognition of qualifications within the European labour market. It's important to note that while the EQF is primarily used in Europe, similar frameworks exist in other regions around the world to achieve comparable objectives of improving the recognition and comparability of qualifications on an international scale.¹⁴

The levelling process in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) is a systematic way of categorising and organising qualifications based on their complexity, difficulty, and academic or vocational progression. NQFs are established by many countries to create a clear framework for recognising and comparing different qualifications, making it easier for employers, educational institutions, and individuals to understand the relative value and equivalence of different qualifications – both formal and non-formal. Different countries have different procedures for how to include or decide what level qualifications best fit at. Concepts such as including, allocating mapping, levelling, and referencing are in use. So what's behind these different words – actual

¹³ [The European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\) | Europass](#)

¹⁴ UNESCO, ETF and CEDEFOP. (2023). *Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks 2022. Volume II – National and Regional case studies.*

differences in procedures? The differences in how countries describe the process might indicate a difference in how formal the procedure is, if it is a legally binding decision giving a qualification a more formal status, or if the level should be perceived simply as an indication of the complexity of its content. Regardless, when more and more NQFs are moving towards becoming comprehensive frameworks, it is important to understand the different ways of “including” qualifications, both formal and non-formal, for the sake of trust between frameworks.

The levelling process typically involves the following steps:

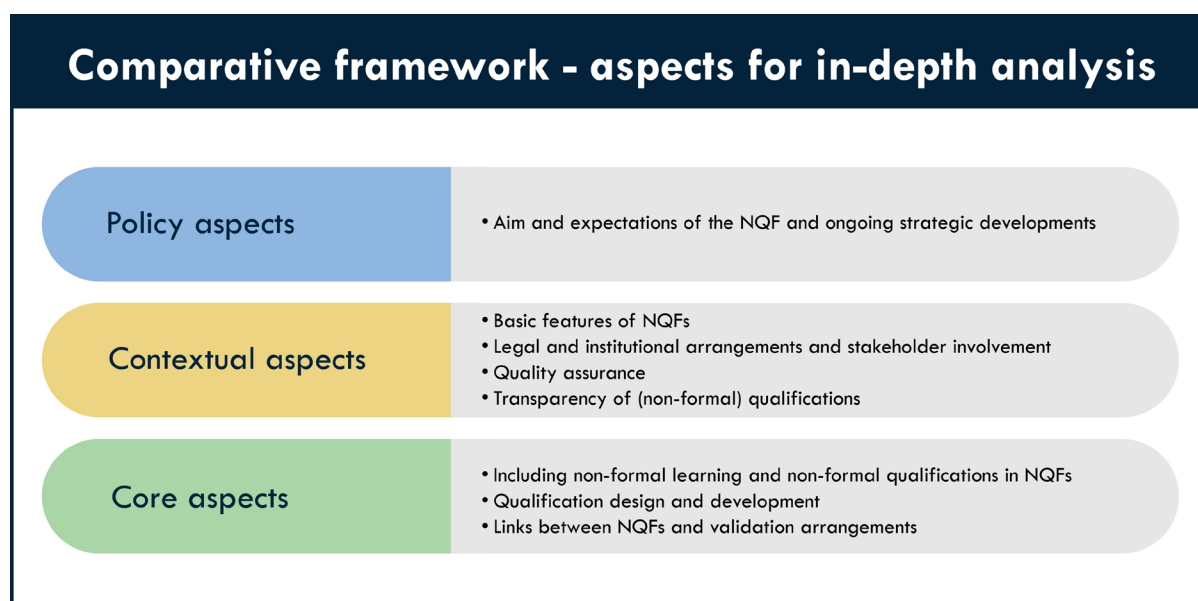
- **Descriptors and Criteria:** To ensure consistency and transparency, clear descriptors and criteria are developed for each NQF level. These descriptors outline the general characteristics and learning outcomes expected at each level and provide guidance on how to assess the level of a qualification.
- **Mapping Qualifications:** In this step, existing qualifications are mapped to their appropriate levels based on the defined descriptors and criteria. This mapping process may involve consultation with subject experts, educators, employers, and other stakeholders to ensure accuracy and relevance.
- **Review and Validation:** Once the initial mapping is done, there is often a review and validation process to check for consistency and appropriateness. Stakeholders may provide feedback, and adjustments may be made as necessary.
- **Recognition and Comparability:** After the qualifications are levelled and validated, they become part of the official NQF. This formal recognition allows individuals to understand the relative positions of qualifications within the framework, and it also facilitates comparisons between qualifications from different educational providers and across different sectors.

National Coordination Point (NCP): Each country in Europe that has implemented an NQF may have its own body or organisation responsible for coordinating and overseeing the framework's development and implementation. This coordinating body usually serves as the reference point for information related to the NQF and may provide guidance to stakeholders on its usage and interpretation.

Data collection and comparative framework

At the initial phases of the NOVA-Nordic project, a comparative framework was developed. Based on the framework, an online survey to collect data from the seven countries was constructed. Prior to creating the actual survey, the project divided the framework into three main categories: policy aspects, contextual aspects, and core aspects. The core aspects, including the openness of the NQFs, qualification design and development as well as links between NQFs and validation arrangements, were in special focus of the NOVA-Nordic project. However, attention to the other categories was also paid to in the comparative research.

Figure 3. Aspects for in depth comparative analysis.



The NOVA-Nordic project used a methodology in two steps for extracting critical information on different countries' approaches to validation and inclusion of non-formal learning in the NQFs. The first step was to collect data through the above-mentioned online survey. The survey can be utilised as a self-assessment tool for evaluating links between non-formal qualifications, NQFs and validation arrangements and can be found on the project website.

The survey was sent to the seven countries' National Coordination Points (NCPs). All the countries replied, and you can find an overview for each country in Annex 4. The initial results of the survey were disseminated in Reykjavik, Iceland in a NOVA-Nordic conference that was held in connection with the 4th VPL Biennale. The survey results were presented in a graphical format to highlight the differences between the seven countries' approaches.

After the initial survey, the second step was to conduct in-depth interviews with the seven NCP representatives for a better understanding of their approach as well as future developments. These results were presented and discussed initially with the invited NCP experts and the experts of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning in a meeting that was held in connection with [Skills Meetup Sweden](#), a three-day conference in Malmö, Sweden. The results were also presented to a larger audience at Skills Meetup. The NCPs indicated that according to the results of the NOVA-Nordic study, it is of interest to further strengthen the cooperation and sharing good practices between the different NCPs.

The NOVA-Nordic project has also collected and analysed good practices from different countries to better illustrate the various practices and approaches. The report, *Common elements for successfully putting all skills to use – Good practice examples (promising, but not yet there)* and cases can be found on the project website.

Analysis of findings

Similar, but also different

In general, benefits of including non-formal learning/qualifications are seen differently in the different countries. For example, the Austrian, Danish, Dutch and Swedish NQF levelling approaches are very open to all non-formal learning without many restrictions, whereas Norway has not opened their NQF to any non-formal qualifications. There is increasing interest and number of non-formal qualifications being levelled to the Danish, Dutch, and Swedish frameworks. Finland and Iceland are in the process of deliberation nationally. Countries with an NQF open to non-formal qualifications consider it as beneficial in terms of quality, transparency and for lifelong learning.

Quality assurance mechanisms linked to the NQF levelling procedures are in place in all countries. The procedures differ between the countries; in some, the NCPs provide support and guidance in the levelling process, whereas in others the process is the sole responsibility of the qualification or training provider.

The NQF levelling is of interest to non-formal learning providers, but the reasons vary. Some providers see the levelling procedure as a quality mark, even if that wasn't the initial purpose of opening NQFs up for levelling of non-formal qualifications. Some see it as a marketing tool that gives them a competitive edge in the "private" market for training and qualifications.

Some National Coordination Points stated that including non-formal qualifications is very beneficial from the working life perspective in terms of recruitment purposes, enhanced transparency, and comparability of skills. Other NCPs viewed the NQF rather as just a mechanical tool that promotes transparency between qualifications structures in the international arena. Some stated that the NQFs can aid in guidance and validation within the educational system and thus benefit individuals in terms of better understanding skills requirements, improve individuals' abilities to verbalise their own skills and the level of skills.

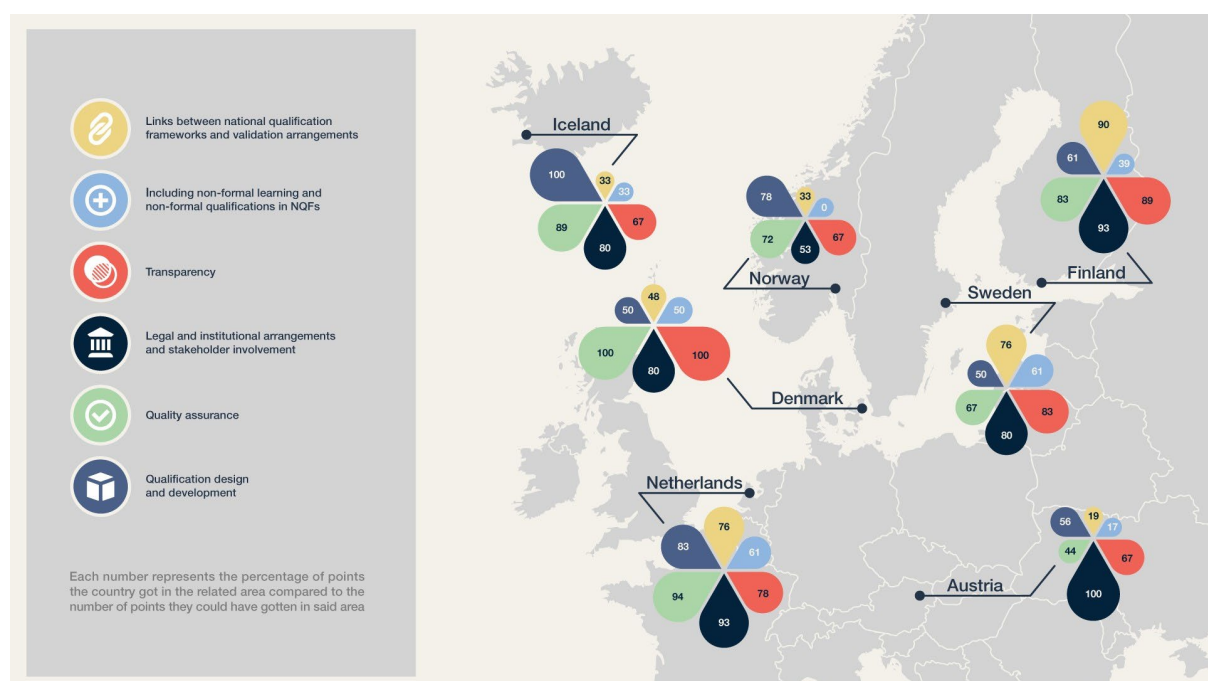
The cost of applying for levelling as well as the cost of developing non-formal qualifications varies between the countries. An example from the study is that the use of consultancies in the process of developing qualifications contributes to making the process expensive. In this respect, it would be important to level the playing field in the EU countries; if the levelling procedures are very bureaucratic and/or expensive – either due to direct fees to the NCPs or the organisation in charge of level assessment, or an expensive development process – it is unfair to smaller providers and becomes nearly impossible to include micro-credentials or other smaller non-formal qualifications. In contrast to the expensive levelling process of non-formal qualifications, the levelling process for formal qualifications is automatic and free, which creates a discrepancy between different learning and qualification providers.

In most countries validation within the non-formal sphere is not regulated, neither is it carried out systematically or even encouraged – regardless of the NQF status. Some countries have developed systems, in which skills gained in non-formal settings can better be made visible (cf. national databases, open badges), learning outcome-based course descriptions are encouraged to enhance transparency of learning results. However validation as such does not seem to play a big role in connection with non-formal learning in many countries. Nevertheless, there are some good examples from Sweden and Iceland, how important and beneficial validation can be – especially from the labour market perspective – when intertwined with non-formal learning.

Another key feature, which differs between the target countries, is the credit systems and different levelling procedures for the inclusion of non-formal learning/qualifications. Some countries do not apply any credit system for non-formal qualifications as an information about the qualifications' relative size and the levelling is solely based on the learning outcome descriptions. Learning outcomes have – of course – a central role, but when there are no credits applied, it will cause problems in terms of comparability, stackability, portability, and ultimately also transparency.

In the following, this report presents the results of the online survey. Figure 4 illustrates the overall situation in the Nordic countries, Austria, and the Netherlands regarding the six different areas that the survey concentrated on. In addition, each of the six survey areas are pictured in grid format, discussed, and analysed based on desk-research, the replies of the web-survey and the in-depth interviews with the NCPs.

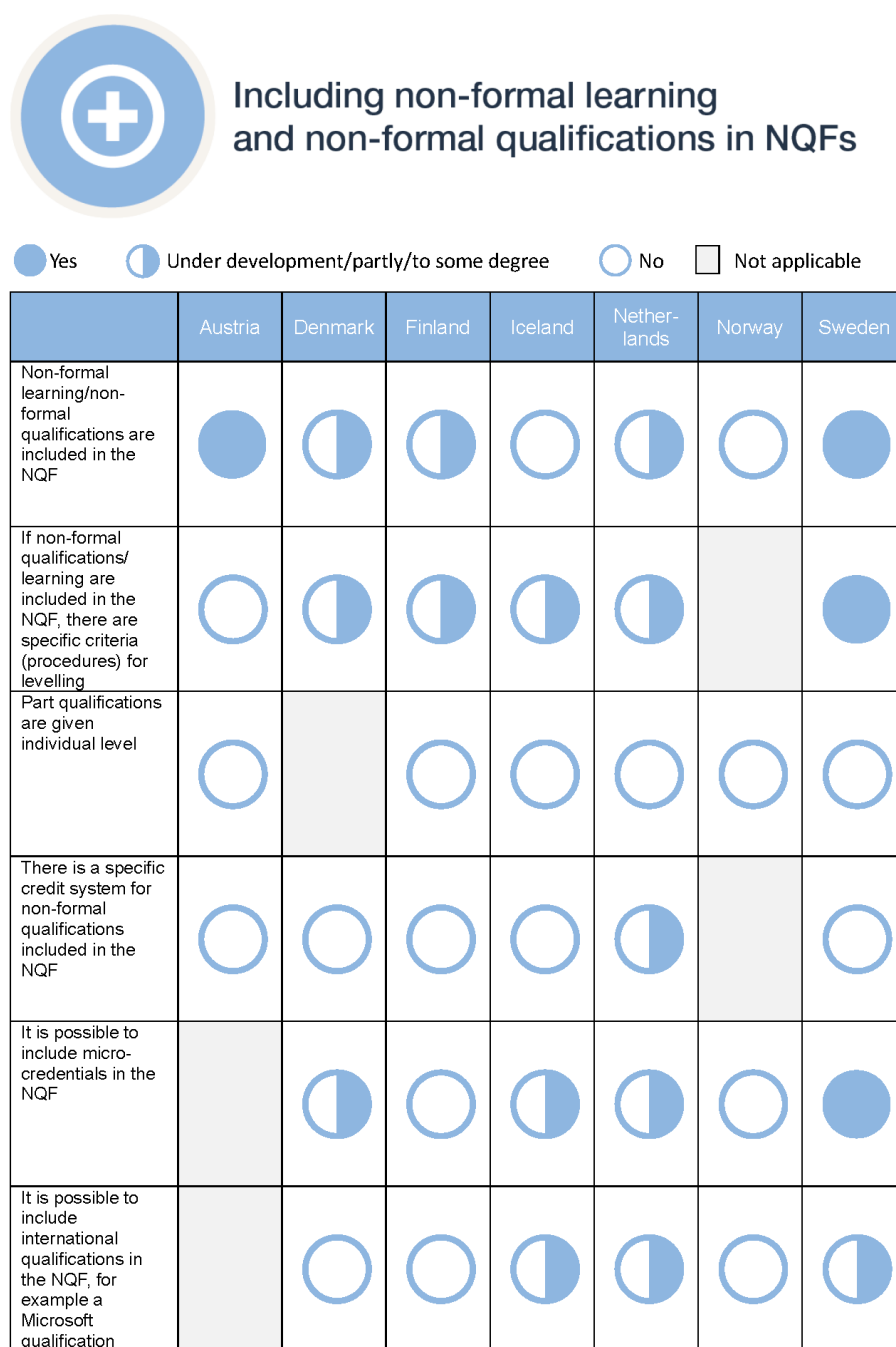
Fig. 4 Results of the web-survey from the Nordic countries, Austria, and the Netherlands



Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs

This particular area mainly concerns the openness of the NQFs of the seven countries in question. Additionally, levelling procedures were of interest. The online survey results can be examined in the below grid. However, it should be noted that the survey statements were interpreted somewhat differently by the countries, which was revealed through desk research and the in-depth interviews. The discrepancies will be discussed below, and a summary of the main differences is provided.

Figure 5. Summary of answers regarding the *Inclusion of non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs*.



When looking at the online survey results, it became clear that different National Coordination Points interpreted the statements a bit differently. For example, the core statement “Non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF” was replied by Denmark and the Netherlands as “partly, or to some degree”, but Austria and Sweden replied “yes”. Arguably, the Danish and Dutch NQFs are relatively more open – or at least as open as the Swedish or the Austrian NQFs.

Another discrepancy concerns the statement “there is a specific credit system...”. Perhaps the word “specific” was interpreted as special or separate from other credit systems. For example, Finland had replied “no”, even if the use of ECTS credits is mandatory and there is a similar credit system used in Iceland concerning non-formal qualifications.

However, all in all, the survey provided a comprehensive overview of the state of play of including non-formal qualifications in their NQFs.

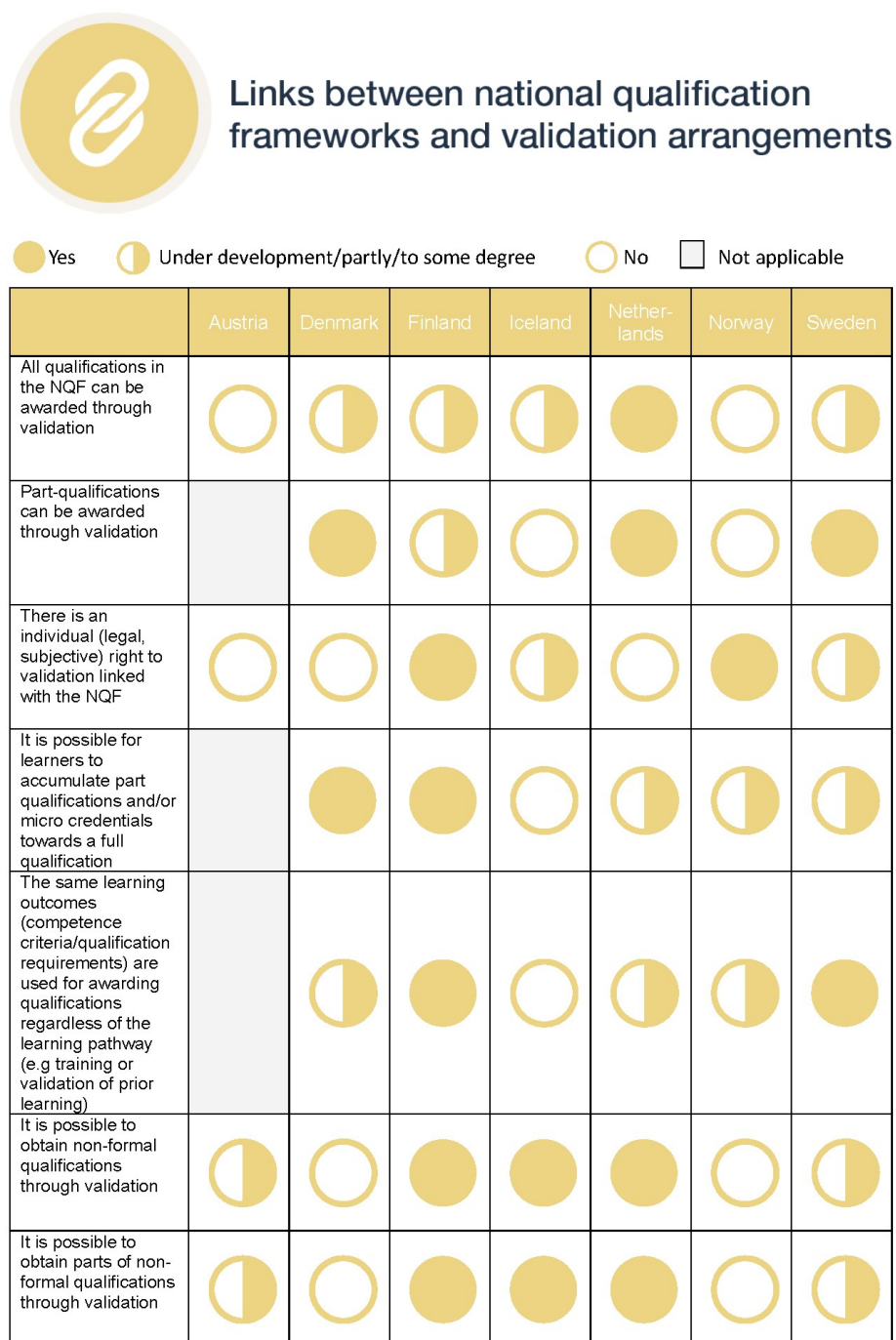
Main differences in approaches to NQFs and non-formal qualifications

- Openness of the NQFs between the seven compared countries differ from practically open without many restrictions (DK, NL, AT, SE) to countries that are in the process of widening access (IS, FI) to one country that has not opened its NQF to any other than formal qualifications (NO). Norway published a paper in 2023, in which the future of the NQFs was discussed.
- Costs of including and levelling a non-formal qualification vary between countries (SE – 15 900 SEK; NL 2 000 € + costs for quality assurance; DK 33 000 DKK; AT no indicative cost for levelling, but often private providers require help from consultancies to describe the learning outcomes to standard, which can be costly; FI and IS no indicative costs for levelling, help provided by the NCP or other related organisations).
- Focus of main objective varies between countries: e.g. in NL the main focus is to market the NLQF to non-formal qualification providers and to make the framework and its benefits known by employers and employees. In Sweden the approach is heavily a bottom-up approach, where sector industry organisations have started developing “job profiles” with learning outcomes that can be levelled to the SeQF and used as the basis for VPL. In contrast, e.g. in Norway the NQF is seen merely as a technical tool for comparing formal qualifications.
- Credit systems in terms of non-formal qualifications also vary a lot between countries: DK, NL, AT, and SE have no requirements for credits in non-formal qualifications. FI and IS use the ECTS credit system or similar to it.
- Countries have different approaches regarding the minimum size of the non-formal qualification that can be levelled in the NQF. Currently, for example the Finnish NQF requirement is 20-30 ECTS points, qualifications to be levelled in the NLQF need to be a minimum of 400 “learning hours”, whereas Denmark has no restrictions concerning the size.
- The criteria on the basis of which the countries make levelling decisions also differs greatly: in countries, like Sweden and Austria, the main emphasis is in the quality of the learning outcomes; in Denmark, the programme has to be established, the Netherlands adheres to a wider quality criteria concerning the provider as well as the programme in question; in Finland the eligible programmes must be stipulated by legislation (e.g. border patrols or clergy).

Links between NQFs and validation arrangements

Validation and its link to NQFs is the second core area of the comparative framework. The main aim here was to take a look at different countries' approaches to validation and the extent to which validation procedures are linked to NQFs. This area, all in all, was the weakest of all the six areas examined and should be strengthened in the future.

Figure 6. Summary of answers regarding *Links between NQFs and validation arrangements*.



There were some discrepancies in the results of the online survey. For example, Finland reported that only to some degree can part qualifications be validated. There are few exceptions in so called regulated professions, where validation of certain part qualification is not possible. Typically, these restrictions concern qualifications in health care or rescue services. On the other hand, in the Netherlands, all qualifications and part qualifications can – in theory – be awarded through validation. However, in the interview it became evident that the private providers of non-formal qualifications are not inclined to validate fully or partially, due to the specialised nature of the programmes. Some of the main features and differences are listed below.

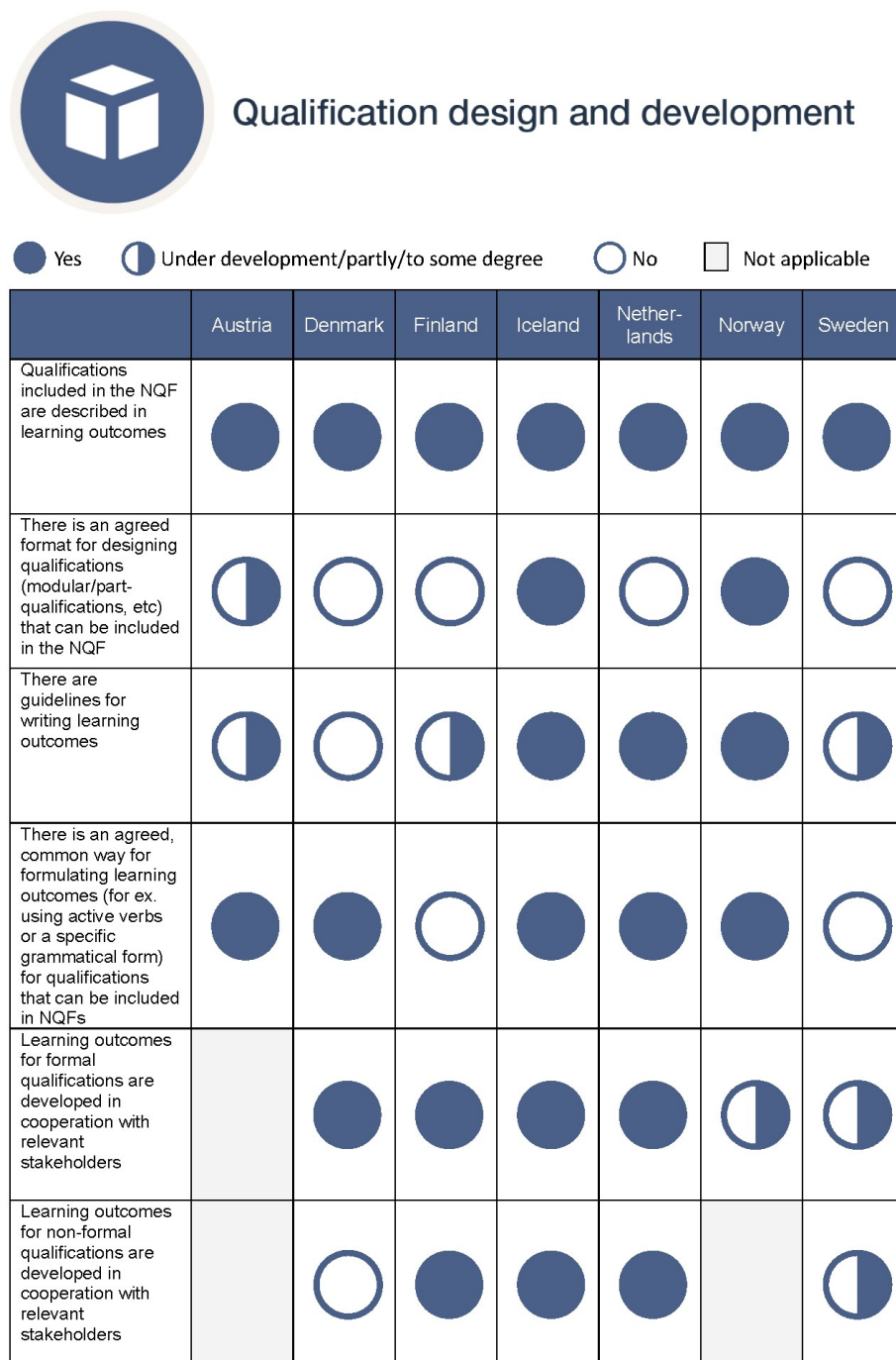
Differences in country approaches to NQFs and validation

- Generally, in all of the seven countries the main focus of validation of prior learning activities is in formal education (including legislation and/or policies).
- Sweden has a bottom-up approach in terms of validation in working life; sector industry validation has reached significant results in terms of qualification development and levelling of non-formal qualifications in the SeQF, and validation is an integral part of the system.
- Iceland has started to develop validation procedures that are based on job profiles instead of formal curricula. These non-formal validation results are not included or levelled in the IsQF as of yet, even if there are no legal restrictions in doing so.
- In the Netherlands, Austria, and Denmark, that have open NQFs, non-formal learning providers hardly take up validation activities, neither is it especially encouraged by the National Coordination Points. The reasons vary: many of the “private” non-formal training providers do not have experience in validation and/or the training programmes are considered so specialised that validation is not seen as useful. There are no specific legal restrictions.
- The Finnish NQF is still relatively restrictive. The new qualifications/programmes that have been levelled to the FiNQF are quite established or are regulated by national curriculum. There are no established validation procedures in a majority of the programmes, with the exception of some preparatory training programmes. However, in the Liberal Adult education sector (not levelled to NQF) validation procedures are increasingly taking place since 2020. The competences are assessed and made visible through a national database KOSKI.
- Norway has a relatively long-established validation system, but the NQF is currently completely closed. Part-qualifications or non-formal qualifications cannot be awarded through validation.

Qualification design and development

Qualification design and development is the third and last core aspect in the comparative framework. The purpose here is to find out about the use of learning outcomes as well as the stakeholder involvement in qualification design.

Figure 7. Summary of answers regarding *Qualification design and development*.



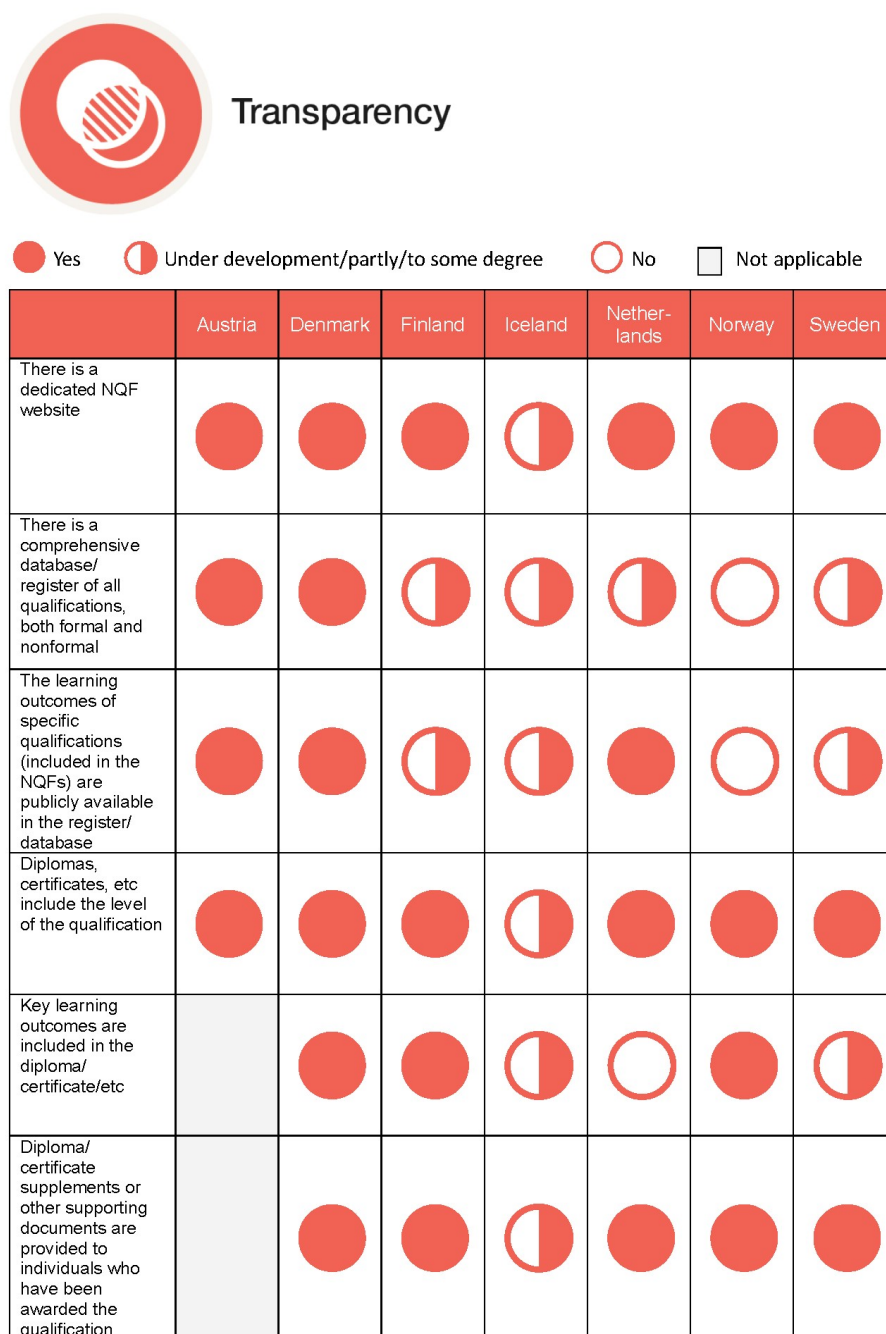
Differences in qualification design and development

- Qualification design was one of the strongest areas in the comparative framework all in all.
- Learning outcomes have a central role in all of the seven countries, even if there may not in all cases be a common agreement nationally as to how to describe or write learning outcomes. However, guidelines or support appear to exist in all countries, except for Denmark.
- In most countries the stakeholders are strongly involved in the qualification design. Most commonly the stakeholders involve social partners and education and training providers.
- None of the countries reported on using e.g. occupational or educational standards in qualification design. The assumption is that the formal qualifications serve as standards as such, and the non-formal qualifications stem out of a direct need from the labour market or other private qualification providers.
- In terms of non-formal qualifications – where applicable – the National Coordination Points have a central role, often along with stakeholders, to support and advise in the qualification design process.
- Qualification design and development will bear a more and more important role as the NQFs are opening up, e.g., including micro-credentials.

Transparency

Transparency as a contextual aspect in the comparative framework looks into communications and visibility with regards to the NQF and the content of the qualifications (such as learning outcomes) and how they are presented to stakeholders as well as end-users.

Figure 8. Summary of answers regarding *Transparency*.



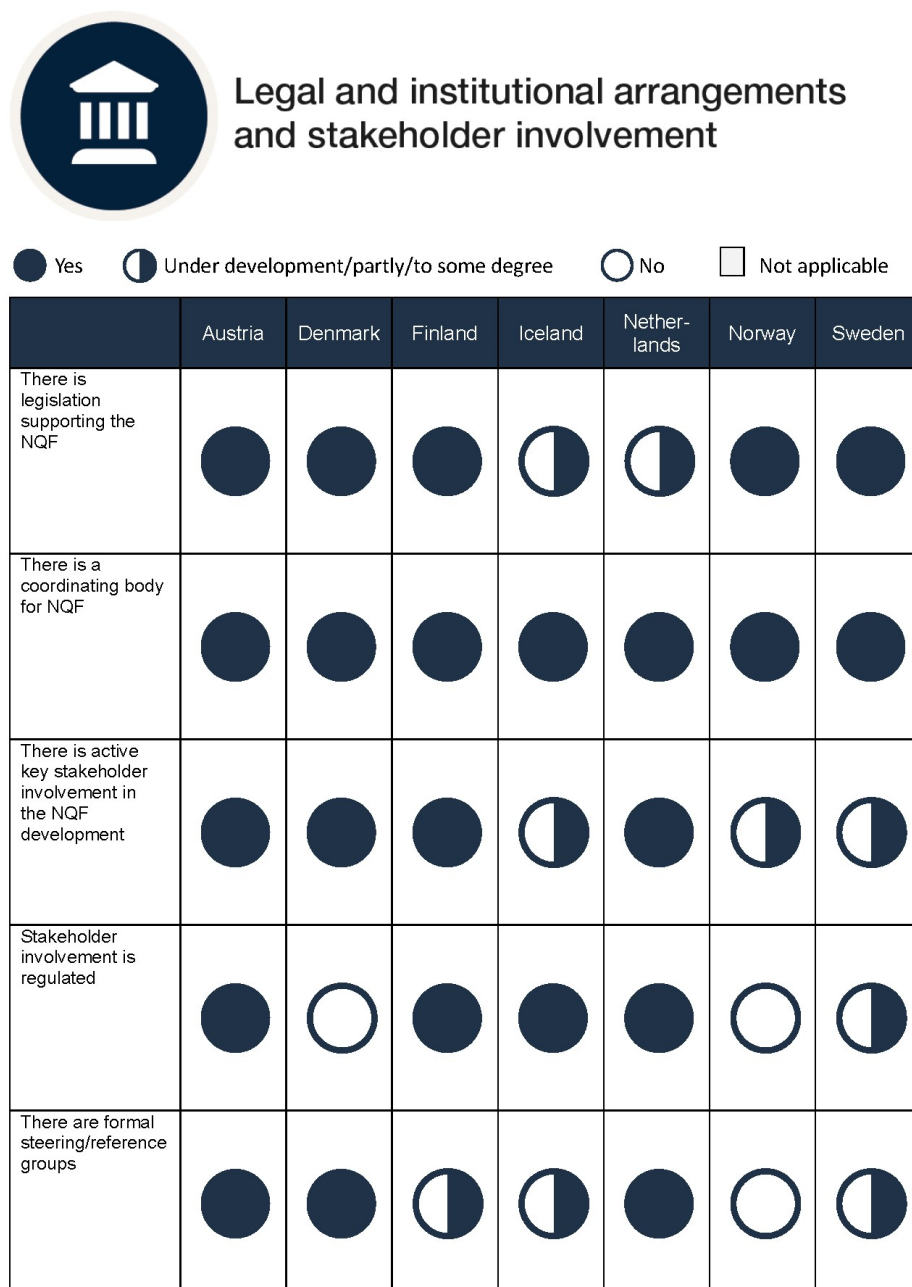
Differences in transparency

- In general, the transparency of the NQFs is on a good level in all of the seven countries.
- The Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden have dedicated NQF registers, where also all non-formal levelled qualifications are visible (except for Denmark), and some basic features of the qualification descriptions are available.
- In Finland there is no dedicated NQF register, but a separate website, Studyinfo.fi, in which all formal education (General Upper Secondary, Vocational Education and training, Higher education) provided in Finland is listed (including the NQF level and a short description). The new levelled programmes/qualifications are not included on the website. All qualification requirements (learning objectives and assessment criteria) are also publicly available of all VET qualifications and other programmes with national curricula. Not available for HEIs.
- In Iceland and Norway there is no dedicated NQF register. In Norway all formal qualifications are listed on a website, but no NQF level or learning outcomes are described in connection with the qualifications. In Iceland the Directorate of Education publishes relevant information on their website.
- The main target groups for NQF communications are quite similar in the seven countries (education and training providers and other relevant stakeholders and the labour market). However, the NCP in the Netherlands concentrates mainly on the private providers, i.e., the end-users with robust marketing efforts. The role of the individuals is not emphasised in any country as of yet, but e.g., Sweden sees that target group as important in the future.

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

One of the most important contextual aspects of the comparative framework is the legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement. This was the strongest area of all in the comparison all in all. This area takes a closer look at the laws in place, the role of the National Coordination Points and other stakeholders in maintaining and further developing the NQF.

Figure 9. Summary of answers regarding *Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement*.



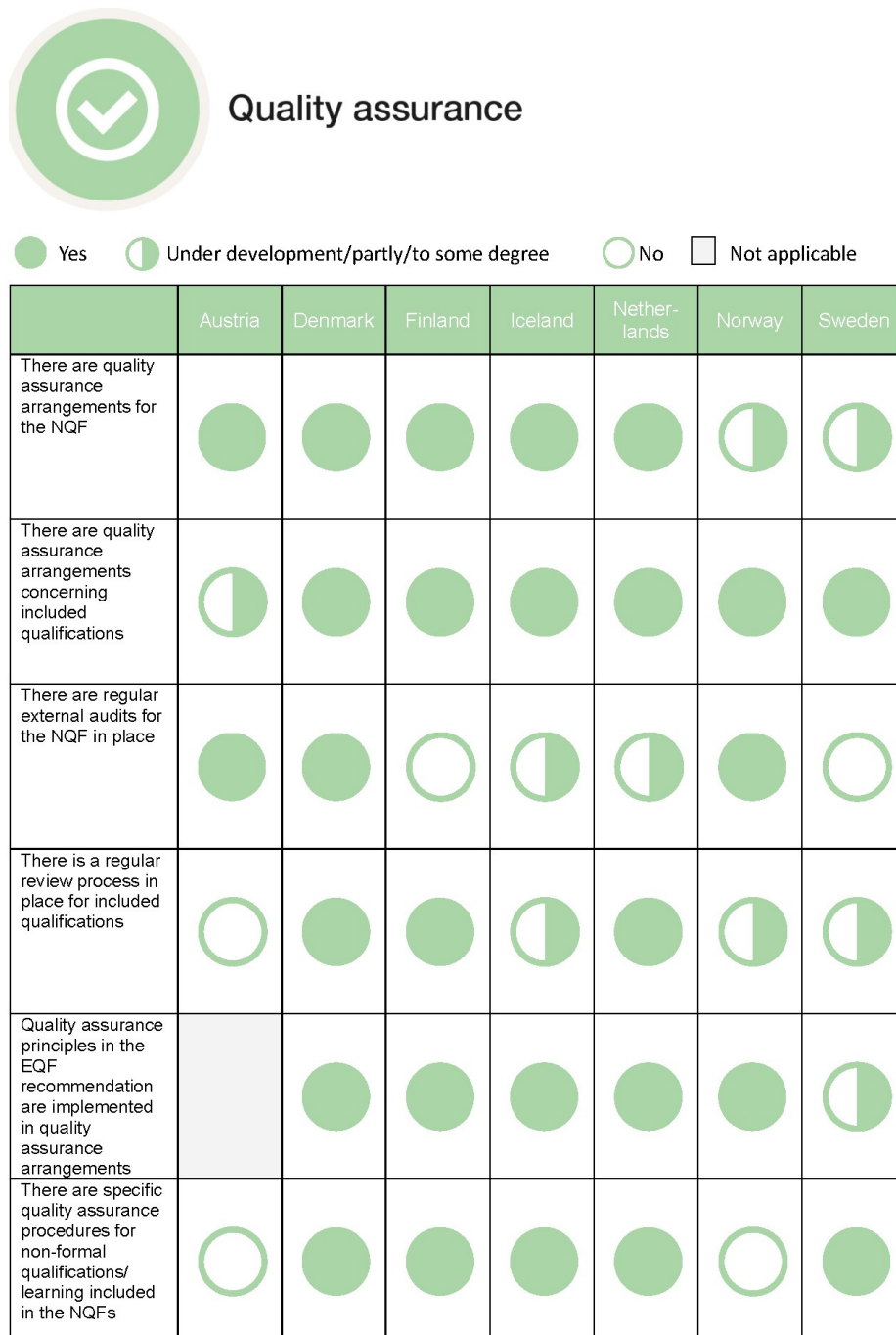
Differences in legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

- In all seven countries there is an existing law or regulation that governs the NQF. However, there are underlying developments with regard to the scope – especially concerning non-formal qualifications- and purpose of the NQF going on.
- The stakeholders reported by each country are very similar, mainly social partners, educational institutions, student unions etc.
- Stakeholder cooperation is strong and even regulated in all other countries except for Denmark and Norway.
- The role of the National Coordination Points varies between countries, due to the scope of their NQFs. For example, the main scope of the NCP in the Netherlands is to promote the NLQF to non-formal qualifications providers and support them in the levelling process, whereas in Norway the role is to follow up European processes, advise the ministry, participate in projects and networks regarding EQF, information about NQF.
- Here are some examples of the different roles that the National coordination points can have:
 - participate in the development of the national qualifications framework and the implementation of the EQF
 - communicate on its website information both on the opportunity to propose the inclusion of new competence modules in the framework and on the process of dealing with the proposals
 - compile the proposals received from other administrative sectors and stakeholders into new competence modules to be placed into the framework, issue an opinion on the received proposals, and submit the proposals and the opinions concerning them to the Ministry of Education and Culture
 - draw up a referencing report related to the quality assurance of the national qualifications framework for international use when changes require a new referencing report
 - inform stakeholders and citizens about the EQF, the National Qualifications Framework and the place of qualifications in the frameworks
 - provide different stakeholders with guidance and advice on how to apply the framework
 - review the form and substance of reference requests with the goal of referencing a qualification to one of the NQF qualification levels
 - support the development and further implementation of the NQF by assisting and supporting organisations involved in the reference process
 - maintain an NQF register of referenced qualifications
 - conduct public relations activities, holding events, and advising organisations requesting the mapping of a qualification
 - supports the strategy on lifelong learning and the development and implementation of the national validation strategy for non-formal and informal learning
 - being a critical friend
 - promote the NQF to non-formal qualifications providers
 - assessing applications for levelling non-formal qualifications and conduct quality audit of levelled non-formal qualifications

Quality assurance

The quality assurance area of the comparative framework is included in the contextual aspect. Here the aim was to take an overall look of the quality arrangements, their frequency as well as focus regarding both the NQFs and qualifications, with special interest in non-formal qualifications.

Figure 10. Summary of answers regarding *Quality assurance*.



Differences in quality assurance

- Revision or validity of non-formal qualifications differs between countries: In Sweden the levelling decision is valid for 10 years (subject to a minimum of one external quality audit during the 10 years), in the Netherlands for 6 years and in Denmark for 4 years. Finland, Austria, Norway, and Iceland do not have specific time spans for qualifications.
- Revoking a qualification has different approaches as well: In the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark a qualification can be revoked e.g., due to misconduct or misrepresentation. There are no specific procedures or need for revoking a qualification in Finland, Norway and Iceland. In Sweden, new procedures are under consideration, in case a levelled non-formal qualification does not meet the quality criteria or uphold the decided level.
- The differences between countries result partly due to the openness of the NQF: In Finland, there are no qualifications that are offered by private providers included in the NQF, which reduces the need for extensive quality assurance or auditing. Norway only has formal qualifications included. Iceland has few non-formal qualifications levelled in their NQF. However, as or if the frameworks are further opened in the future, more elaborate quality assurance methods are foreseen.

The user's voice

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are designed to provide a common reference point for qualifications in a country or region. They are intended to be used by a wide range of stakeholders, including employers, education and training providers, learners, and policy makers.

An NQF is a system used in many countries to classify and regulate qualifications and levels of learning. It serves as a way to ensure that qualifications are recognised and aligned across different education and training providers. Various end-users play a critical role in the NQF to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. The specific roles of different end-users can vary by country and context, but generally, they include:

- **Government and regulatory bodies**
Government agencies and regulatory bodies are responsible for creating and maintaining the NQF. They establish the qualifications framework, set standards, and ensure that it is implemented effectively. This includes accrediting institutions, monitoring quality, and regulating the qualifications offered.
- **Educational institutions**
Schools, colleges, universities, and other training providers use the NQF to design curricula, develop programs, and award qualifications that are consistent with the framework. They also ensure that the qualifications they offer align with the levels and standards set by the NQF. As the NQFs are opening towards non-formal qualifications, this is a crucial in terms of qualifications development and design to maintain the quality and consistency of qualifications. Furthermore, NQFs provide a solid foundation for validation of prior learning both in the formal as well as non-formal sectors. All teachers, and not only curricula or program developers, should be made aware of the benefits and different kinds of uses of the NQF.
- **Industry and trade associations**
These organisations may use the NQF to help develop industry specific training and qualifications. This could ensure that the workforce is well prepared to meet industry standards and demands. However, there is still quite a lot of work to be done in terms of awareness raising on the benefits of applying the NQF and the importance of validation of prior learning among the industry and trade associations in many countries.
- **Employers**
Employers play a vital role in recognising and valuing qualifications and learning. They could use the NQF to understand the skills and knowledge that potential employees possess. This helps in the recruitment and hiring process, and also in the development of training programs for employees. In countries, where the employers are familiar with the NQF, it has brought forth very positive outcomes (cf. the Netherlands, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark).
- **International recognition bodies**
In some cases, the NQF is used to facilitate international recognition of qualifications. This is important for students, professionals, and employers seeking to engage with the global workforce or education community.
- **Learners/Students**
Learners should be at the core of the NQF. They could benefit from the framework by having a clear and consistent understanding of qualifications and learning pathways. It could help them make informed decisions about their education and training choices, understand the levels of qualifications, and plan their career progression. However, according to the NOVA-Nordic study, the learners are possibly the most ignored end-users in terms of awareness raising. It is crucial that all students are made aware of the NQF level of their learning, so that they can take full advantage of it when seeking employment, new training opportunities or any other purpose.

- **Community and society**

A well-implemented NQF can contribute to social mobility, economic development, and overall societal well-being. Communities and society at large benefit when individuals have access to education and training that aligns with the NQF.

The NQF is a collaborative effort that should always involve multiple stakeholders, and the roles of end-users should be interconnected. The framework helps create a transparent and consistent learning infrastructure that benefits learners, educational institutions, employers, and society as a whole by ensuring that qualifications are relevant, standardised, and (inter)nationally recognised. NCPs and other government institutions should design and implement more efficient marketing strategies to reach all the different stakeholders. This requires multiple approaches in terms of what kind of language is applied to each target group, and how the benefits are presented to them. If many of the stakeholders do not know, the full potential of the NQF remains unfulfilled.

Core messages in short

Based on the analysis of both the comparative data and the good practice cases gathered, the project drew up 10 + 1 core messages that summarises our view of what need to be prioritised moving forward, both in terms of policy developments, in practice, and to support capacity building. In figure 11 you find the headings of these core messages that can be find in full on the project website (novanordic.eu).

Figure 11. Core messages from the NOVA-Nordic project

1	Comprehensive inclusion: An effective NQF must encompass all qualifications to achieve the promise of the EQF
2	Non-formal learning is part of the solution: Unlocking the potential of all skills regardless of where, when, and how they have been developed
3	Qualifications + validation = flexible skills provision: Creating efficient learning pathways that benefit both individuals and employers
4	Skills first: Learning outcomes is the core of efficient skills provision
5	Relevance and trust are key: Ensuring the value of qualifications and NQFs for end-users
6	Empowering quality: Supporting and building capacity for the development and use of (non-formal) Qualifications
7	Financing for impact: Urgent need to address the underfunding challenge of NQFs
8	Enhancing comparability: Size matters to achieve better skills matching
9	Boosting awareness: Making NQFs known and utilised to achieve wanted outcomes
10	Collaboration and mutual learning are paramount: The operating of NQFs thrive through cooperation
+1	Reinforcing the added value: Time to revisit the benefits of the EQF and NQFs for skills policies

While many member states have similar-looking National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), the principles and processes of linking qualifications to NQFs can vary significantly. To ensure the EQF's effectiveness, all types of qualifications, including non-formal ones, must be included, as the NQF's purpose is to align qualifications with the EQF.

The advent of micro-credentials, which can be crucial for flexible skills provision, makes an open and inclusive NQF even more important. Furthermore, an inclusive framework should offer opportunities for validating prior learning, allowing individuals to showcase and utilise their skills effectively. The strength of the chain created by the EQF's interconnection among countries relies on the strength of its weakest link.

The key conclusion is that we must systematically and effectively recognise all forms of learning. Non-formal learning is a crucial part of the solution to the skills crisis. To bridge the gap between the labour market and education systems, qualifications are needed. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is essential to harness a full range of skills and maximize individual potential. This requires the use of existing tools, such as open and inclusive National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) with links to validation opportunities.

For learning outside formal education to be valuable, National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) must be open to non-formal qualifications, and validation of prior learning should be applicable to qualifications within the framework. Qualifications should be flexible and adaptable to different learning pathways. Validation streamlines training efforts for transitioning, re-skilling, and up-skilling, offering customised competence development for adults.

Well-designed validation initiatives, with opportunities to supplement skills based on validation outcomes, help individuals with sought-after skills enter the job market faster, benefiting employers, individuals, and society. It can also lead to cost efficiency by reducing education expenses when training efforts are shortened. This requires funding validation systems to integrate into various skill provision and education and training systems effectively.

The shift in education and training systems towards focusing on the skills individuals should have when receiving a qualification is vital for modern, adaptable, and demand-driven skills provision. Learning outcome-based qualifications play a central role in this approach, enabling flexibility, efficiency in responding to rapidly changing skill requirements, and efficient validation of skills obtained through non-formal and informal learning. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are essential in this process as they make qualifications and learning outcomes transparent and align skills with labour market demands.

Relevance is key when it comes to qualifications, and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) must earn the trust of end-users to be effective tools. Qualifications should be fit for their intended purpose, whether for the labour market, adult education, culture, or leisure. NQFs should act as quality gatekeepers, ensuring the qualifications within meet high standards and remain relevant.

The EQF and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) aim to enhance comparability among qualifications by structuring them based on a common framework. However, as NQFs open up to various types of qualifications, including non-formal ones, comparisons and recognition become more complex. Qualifications at the same level can have different purposes and "rights" and open up opportunities in diverse ways. To improve understanding and comparability, it's important to express the qualification's "size," as outlined in the EQF recommendation.

For National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) to be valuable, they must be understood and known by their intended users. An NQF that lacks awareness and understanding serves little purpose. To enhance the recognition and acceptance of NQFs among individuals, employers, educational institutions, and others, there is a need to promote their benefits and significance.

Investing in the development of qualifications required in the labour market, validation opportunities, and NQFs is a wise choice, akin to the sound public investment in education. It's also important to support organisations responsible for non-formal qualifications to ensure equitable opportunities across various sectors. Addressing the issue of underfunding is essential to provide NQFs with the necessary resources to function effectively and achieve their intended goals.

Ensuring the quality of qualifications, particularly non-formal ones, necessitates capacity building and support mechanisms. By investing in training, support materials, guidance, and quality indicators, institutions can develop, deliver, and assess high-quality qualifications. Failing to do so jeopardises the NQF's ability to achieve its intended outcomes.

NQFs cannot operate in isolation; they depend on coordination and cooperation among stakeholders both nationally and internationally. By fostering partnerships and sharing best practices, the value and effectiveness of NQFs can be significantly enhanced, ultimately benefiting the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). To develop NQFs further, increased cooperation and knowledge exchange are essential, primarily among different national coordination points (NCPs) and secondarily with other stakeholders involved in operating the frameworks. Without such collaboration, long-term progress and desired outcomes will be hindered.

It is important to revisit and recognise the value of qualifications frameworks, including the EQF and NQFs, in addressing the skills crisis and contributing to an inclusive skills infrastructure and sustainable growth. This approach can create a win-win-win situation, benefiting society, individuals, and employers.

References

Alsos & Dølvik (eds). (2021). *The Future of Work in the Nordic Countries*. [Nordisk Ministerråd - TemaNord2021-520 \(norden.org\)](#)

Cedefop (2021). *National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019: qualifications frameworks: transparency and added value for end users*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/105773>

Cedefop (2020). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning: 2018 update: final synthesis report: executive summary*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/76420>

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the *Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. (2012/C 398/01). [EUR-Lex - 32012H1222\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the *European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*. (2017/C 189/03). [EUR-Lex - 32017H0615\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 16 June 2022 on a *European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*. (2022/C 243/02). [EUR-Lex - 32022H0627\(02\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

Eurofound (2021). *Tackling labour shortages in EU Member States*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. [Tackling labour shortages in EU Member States | European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions \(europa.eu\)](#)

European commission (2018). *10 years of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*. Resource: [Google search result](#)

European commission (2018). *Unlocking talent – Validation of non-formal and informal learning*. Resource: [Google search result](#)

European commission (2018). *The European Qualifications Framework: supporting learning, work and cross-border mobility*. Resource: https://www.ehea.info/Upload/TPG_A_QF_RO_MK_1_EQF_Brochure.pdf

UNESCO, ETF and CEDEFOP. (2023). *Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks 2022. Volume II – National and Regional case studies*. [Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2022 | CEDEFOP \(europa.eu\)](#)

Consulted websites:

[A European approach to micro-credentials | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

[Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules - OKM - Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland](#)

[English \(nlqf.nl\)](#)

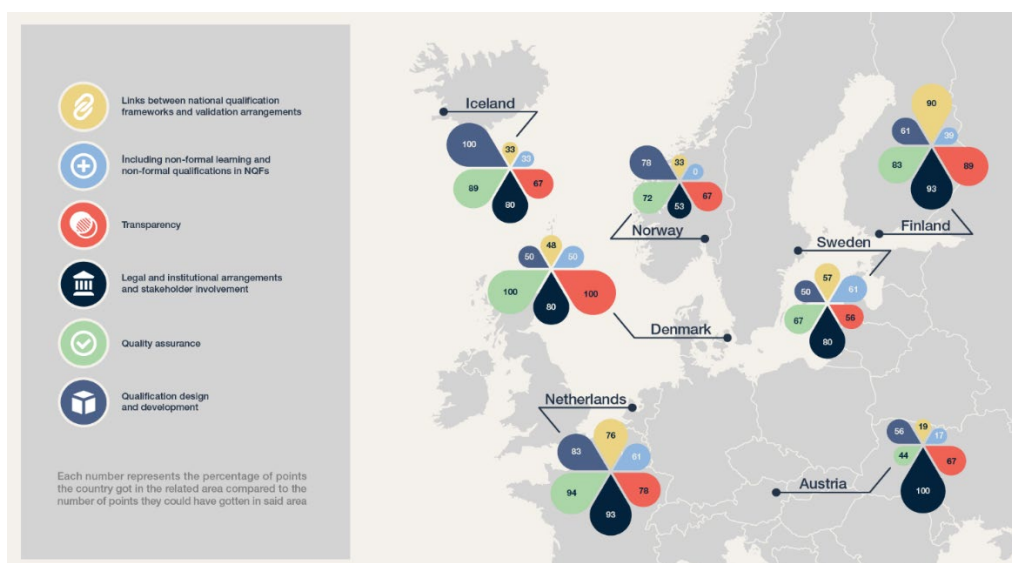
[National qualifications frameworks \(NQFs\) | CEDEFOP \(europa.eu\)](#)

[The European Qualifications Framework \(EQF\) | Europass](#)

[Job vacancy statistics - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#)

Annexes

Annex 1. Interview guide – NOVA Nordic



These are the results of the online survey. Do you agree with the overall picture of your country?

Purpose

What is the overall aim of the NQF?

Was the decision to implement an NQF top-down or bottom-up?

What was the interest from stakeholders outside of formal education?

Expectations

What does your country expect from your NQF?

What is the intended effect/result?

Stakeholders

How are relevant stakeholders involved? Is their involvement regulated?

Non-formal qualifications/learning

Are non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications included in the NQF? If not, why?

Are some sub-sectors (of the "non-formal" sector) being left out/excluded, for example companies, volunteer organisations, etc?

What are the benefits of an inclusive framework vs a non-inclusive?

Lifespan of formal/non-formal qualifications and validity of levelling decisions

Is there a difference of validity between formal and non-formal qualifications (duration)?

How often are the learning outcomes revised during the lifespan of a qualification?

How often/how much can the learning outcomes be changed before it is a new qualification?

Framework

Are qualifications in NQF "neutral", i.e. in terms of valuation?

Are some sectors being left out/excluded?

Individual in the system

How is the NQF used in practice or is it just a paper tiger?

Can an individual attain a qualification in multiple different ways?

What is the benefit of NQF for the individuals?

Strategic developments and future plans

Are there foreseeable strategic developments in terms of VPL and linking non-formal qualifications including micro-credentials to the NQF?

Annex 2. Terminology

Different countries use different terms and concepts in relation to qualifications, NQFs and validation arrangements. For the purpose of creating a common understanding the project is using the following terms:

Qualification:

A formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.

Non-formal qualification:

All qualifications that are not awarded through formal learning or a formal education programme. What is defined as a non-formal qualifications or non-formal learning differ in different contexts/countries.

Levelling/mapping of qualifications:

The process in which a qualification is referred to a level of an NQF. It is commonly a formal application and decision process of deciding what level best corresponds to a specific learning programme/competence standard according to the country's NQF descriptors.

Validation of prior learning (VPL):

The Nordic countries often use the term "reell kompetens" or "realkompetense" (real or actual competence in English) and not NFIL (non-formal and informal learning) when working with validation. Prior learning includes all forms of learning regardless of where that learning has taken place and takes into account all learning up to the point of assessment.

Annex 3. EU policies and recommendations

Council recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning

The Council recommendation of 22 May 2017¹⁵ on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning aims to promote and facilitate lifelong learning in Europe. It establishes a common reference framework for qualifications, enabling better comparability and transparency across different education and training systems within the European Union.

The key points of the recommendation include:

Lifelong learning focus: The framework emphasizes the importance of continuous learning throughout an individual's life, regardless of their age or employment status.

Qualification levels: It defines eight levels of qualifications, ranging from basic to advanced, to provide a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, and competencies associated with each level.

Learning outcomes: The framework highlights learning outcomes, which describe what a learner is expected to know, understand, and be able to do after completing a qualification.

Recognition and validation: The recommendation encourages member states to develop mechanisms for the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, promoting greater recognition of skills acquired outside formal education.

European credit system: The framework supports the use of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to facilitate the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes.

Quality assurance: The recommendation emphasizes the importance of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the credibility and reliability of qualifications.

Support for mobility: The framework aims to enhance mobility opportunities within the EU by facilitating the recognition of qualifications acquired in different member states.

Overall, the Council recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning seeks to foster a more coherent and flexible European education and training landscape, enabling individuals to acquire and develop skills that can be recognized and valued across borders and sectors.

Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability

The Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability¹⁶ is a proposal aimed at enhancing the education and employment landscape in Europe. It suggests the implementation of a standardized framework for micro-credentials to support individuals in their continuous learning journey throughout their careers. Micro-credentials are short, focused qualifications that allow learners to acquire specific skills and competencies.

The key points of the recommendation are:

Recognition and quality assurance: Adhere to consistent quality assurance standards to maintain their credibility and value in the labour market to ensure that micro-credentials could be recognized across European countries

Learner-centred approach: Focus on the needs of individual learners by providing accessible, flexible, and personalized learning opportunities that cater to their specific skills gaps and career goals.

¹⁵ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03)

¹⁶ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2022/C 243/02)

Collaboration and partnerships: Encourage collaboration between education providers, employers, and relevant stakeholders to design and deliver micro-credentials that align with industry demands and workforce needs.

Digital infrastructure: Develop a robust digital infrastructure that facilitates the issuance, storage, and validation of micro-credentials, making them easily accessible and shareable by learners and employers.

Inclusivity and diversity: Ensure that micro-credentials are accessible to all learners, regardless of their background, age, or prior education, promoting social inclusion and diversity in the workforce.

European dimension: Establish a European framework to enable the recognition and portability of micro-credentials across the continent, fostering mobility and employability.

Continuous learning and upskilling: Promote a culture of continuous learning and upskilling, encouraging individuals to continually update their skills to remain relevant in the evolving job market.

Overall, the European approach to micro-credentials aims to create a dynamic and adaptable learning ecosystem that empowers individuals to acquire new skills throughout their lives, enhancing their employability and contributing to a competitive and resilient European workforce.¹⁷

Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning¹⁸

The key points of the recommendation include:

Recognition of diverse learning: The recommendation emphasizes acknowledging learning experiences that take place outside formal education systems, such as through work, volunteering, or community activities.

Transparent validation procedures: It encourages member states to establish clear and transparent validation procedures to assess and recognize the skills and knowledge gained through non-formal and informal learning.

National qualifications frameworks: The recommendation suggests integrating validation outcomes into national qualifications frameworks to ensure consistency and comparability with formal qualifications.

Inclusive approach: It promotes an inclusive approach to validation, ensuring access to all individuals, regardless of age, background, or previous educational attainment.

Involvement of stakeholders: The involvement of various stakeholders, such as employers, social partners, and civil society organizations, is encouraged in the validation process.

Support and guidance: The document suggests providing support and guidance to individuals seeking validation of their skills, as well as information about available learning opportunities.

Lifelong Learning: It emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning and the continuous development and recognition of skills throughout an individual's life.

The European Skills Agenda

The European Skills Agenda¹⁹ is a five-year plan by the European Union to improve the skills of individuals and businesses in the digital age. It aims to support the green and digital transitions, enhance social fairness and resilience, and boost competitiveness and innovation.

A call to join forces in a collective action:

- Action 1: A Pact for Skills: a flagship initiative to mobilise stakeholders and resources for upskilling and reskilling

Actions to ensure that people have the right skills for jobs:

- Action 2: Strengthening skills intelligence: improving the availability and quality of data on skills needs and outcomes
- Action 3: EU support for strategic national upskilling action: providing guidance and funding for Member States to implement reforms and initiatives on skills development

¹⁷ [A European approach to micro-credentials | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁸ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 20 December 2012 on the *Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. (2012/C 398/01).

¹⁹ [European Skills Agenda - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

- Action 4: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET): enhancing the attractiveness, quality and relevance of VET
- Action 5: Rolling out the European Universities Initiative and upskilling scientists: supporting research and innovation skills through cross-border cooperation and mobility
- Action 6: Skills to support the twin transitions: ensuring that people have the skills to thrive in the changing labour market and society
- Action 7: Increasing STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills: boosting the number and diversity of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates, as well as skills for creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving
- Action 8: Skills for life: promoting lifelong learning and ensuring access to quality and inclusive education and training






Tools and initiatives to support people in their lifelong learning pathways:






- Action 9: Initiative on individual learning accounts: providing working-age adults with a budget for training to improve their skills and employability and developing a common framework for micro-credentials
- Action 10: A European approach to micro-credentials: developing a common definition and standards for recognising short-term learning outcomes
- Action 11: New Europass platform: offering online tools and information to help people manage their learning and career paths


A framework to unlock investments in skills:






- Action 12: Improving the enabling framework to unlock Member States' and private investments in skills: ensuring that public and private investment in skills is effective, efficient and transparent








































Annex 4. Country summaries.

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	Quality assurance	Transparency	Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	Qualification design and development	Links between national qualification frameworks and validation arrangements
● There is legislation supporting the NQF	● There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF	● There is a dedicated NQF website	● Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF	● Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes	● All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation
● There is a coordinating body for NQF	● There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications	● There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and nonformal	● If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling	● There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF	● Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation
● There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development	● There are regular external audits for the NQF in place	● The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database	● Part qualifications are given individual level	● There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes	● There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF
● Stakeholder involvement is regulated	● There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications	● Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification	● There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF	● There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs	● It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification
● There are formal steering/reference groups	● Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements	● Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/ etc	● It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF	● Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders	● The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway
	● There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/ learning included in the NQFs	● Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification	● It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification	● Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders	● It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation
AUSTRIA  <div>  Yes  No  Under development  Not applicable </div>					● It is possible to obtain parts of non-formal qualifications through validation

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	Quality assurance	Transparency	Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	Qualification design and development	Links between national qualification frameworks and validation arrangements
<p>● There is legislation supporting the NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF</p>	<p>● There is a dedicated NQF website</p>	<p>● Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes</p>	<p>● All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is a coordinating body for NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications</p>	<p>● There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and nonformal</p>	<p>● If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling</p>	<p>● There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development</p>	<p>● There are regular external audits for the NQF in place</p>	<p>● The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database</p>	<p>● Part qualifications are given individual level</p>	<p>● There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes</p>	<p>● There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF</p>
<p>○ Stakeholder involvement is regulated</p>	<p>● There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications</p>	<p>● Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification</p>	<p>● There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF</p>	<p>● There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs</p>	<p>● It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification</p>
<p>● There are formal steering/reference groups</p>	<p>● Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements</p>	<p>● Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/ etc</p>	<p>● It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway</p>
	<p>● There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/ learning included in the NQFs</p>	<p>● Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification</p>	<p>● It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation</p>
<p>DENMARK </p> <p>  Yes  Under development  No  Not applicable </p>					<p>● It is possible to obtain parts of non-formal qualifications through validation</p>

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	Quality assurance	Transparency	Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	Qualification design and development	Links between national qualification frameworks and validation arrangements
<p>● There is legislation supporting the NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF</p>	<p>● There is a dedicated NQF website</p>	<p>● Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes</p>	<p>● All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is a coordinating body for NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications</p>	<p>● There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and non-formal</p>	<p>● If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling</p>	<p>● There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development</p>	<p>● There are regular external audits for the NQF in place</p>	<p>● The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database</p>	<p>● Part qualifications are given individual level</p>	<p>● There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes</p>	<p>● There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF</p>
<p>● Stakeholder involvement is regulated</p>	<p>● There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications</p>	<p>● Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification</p>	<p>● There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF</p>	<p>● There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs</p>	<p>● It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification</p>
<p>● There are formal steering/reference groups</p>	<p>● Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements</p>	<p>● Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/ etc</p>	<p>● It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway</p>
	<p>● There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/ learning included in the NQFs</p>	<p>● Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification</p>	<p>● It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation</p>
<p>FINLAND </p> <p> ● Yes ● Under development ○ No ■ Not applicable </p>					<p>● It is possible to obtain parts of non-formal qualifications through validation</p>

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	Quality assurance	Transparency	Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	Qualification design and development	Links between national qualification frameworks and validation arrangements
<p>There is legislation supporting the NQF</p>	<p>There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF</p>	<p>There is a dedicated NQF website</p>	<p>Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF</p>	<p>Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes</p>	<p>All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>There is a coordinating body for NQF</p>	<p>There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications</p>	<p>There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and nonformal</p>	<p>If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling</p>	<p>There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF</p>	<p>Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development</p>	<p>There are regular external audits for the NQF in place</p>	<p>The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database</p>	<p>Part qualifications are given individual level</p>	<p>There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes</p>	<p>There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF</p>
<p>Stakeholder involvement is regulated</p>	<p>There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications</p>	<p>Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification</p>	<p>There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF</p>	<p>There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs</p>	<p>It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification</p>
<p>There are formal steering/reference groups</p>	<p>Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements</p>	<p>Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/ etc</p>	<p>It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF</p>	<p>Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway</p>
	<p>There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/ learning included in the NQFs</p>	<p>Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification</p>	<p>It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification</p>	<p>Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation</p>
<p>ICELAND </p> <p>  Yes  No  Under development  Not applicable </p>					<p>It is possible to obtain parts of non-formal qualifications through validation</p>

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement	Quality assurance	Transparency	Including non-formal learning and non-formal qualifications in NQFs	Qualification design and development	Links between national qualification frameworks and validation arrangements
 There is legislation supporting the NQF	 There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF	 There is a dedicated NQF website	 Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF	 Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes	 All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation
 There is a coordinating body for NQF	 There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications	 There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and non-formal	 If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling	 There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF	 Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation
 There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development	 There are regular external audits for the NQF in place	 The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database	 Part qualifications are given individual level	 There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes	 There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF
 Stakeholder involvement is regulated	 There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications	 Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification	 There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF	 There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs	 It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification
 There are formal steering/reference groups	 Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements	 Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/etc	 It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF	 Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders	 The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway
	 There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/learning included in the NQFs	 Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification	 It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification	 Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders	 It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation
NETHERLANDS 					 Under development  No  Not applicable

**Legal and institutional
arrangements and
stakeholder involvement**


Quality assurance

Transparency

**Including non-formal
learning and non-formal
qualifications in NQFs**

**Qualification design and
development**

**Links between national
qualification frameworks and
validation arrangements**

<p>● There is legislation supporting the NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements for the NQF</p>	<p>● There is a dedicated NQF website</p>	<p>● Non-formal learning/non-formal qualifications are included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Qualifications included in the NQF are described in learning outcomes</p>	<p>● All qualifications in the NQF can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is a coordinating body for NQF</p>	<p>● There are quality assurance arrangements concerning included qualifications</p>	<p>● There is a comprehensive database/register of all qualifications, both formal and nonformal</p>	<p>● If non-formal qualifications/learning are included in the NQF, there are specific criteria for levelling</p>	<p>● There is an agreed format for designing qualifications that can be included in the NQF</p>	<p>● Part-qualifications can be awarded through validation</p>
<p>● There is active key stakeholder involvement in the NQF development</p>	<p>● There are regular external audits for the NQF in place</p>	<p>● The learning outcomes of specific qualifications are publicly available in the register/database</p>	<p>● Part qualifications are given individual level</p>	<p>● There are guidelines for writing learning outcomes</p>	<p>● There is an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF</p>
<p>● Stakeholder involvement is regulated</p>	<p>● There is a regular review process in place for included qualifications</p>	<p>● Diplomas, certificates, etc include the level of the qualification</p>	<p>● There is a specific credit system for non-formal qualifications included in the NQF</p>	<p>● There is an agreed, common way for formulating learning outcomes for qualifications that can be included in NQFs</p>	<p>● It is possible for learners to accumulate part qualifications and/or micro credentials towards a full qualification</p>
<p>● There are formal steering/reference groups</p>	<p>● Quality assurance principles in the EQF recommendation are implemented in quality assurance arrangements</p>	<p>● Key learning outcomes are included in the diploma/certificate/ etc</p>	<p>● It is possible to include micro-credentials in the NQF</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● The same learning outcomes are used for awarding qualifications regardless of the learning pathway</p>
	<p>● There are specific quality assurance procedures for non-formal qualifications/ learning included in the NQFs</p>	<p>● Diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents are provided to individuals who have been awarded the qualification</p>	<p>● It is possible to include international qualifications in the NQF, for example a Microsoft qualification</p>	<p>● Learning outcomes for non-formal qualifications are developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders</p>	<p>● It is possible to obtain non-formal qualifications through validation</p>
<p>SWEDEN </p> <p> ● Yes ● Under development ○ No ■ Not applicable </p>					
					<p>● It is possible to obtain parts of non-formal qualifications through validation</p>

The right skills at the right time.



**Swedish National Agency for
Higher Vocational Education**

Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan
Box 145, 721 05 Västerås, Sweden
www.myh.se