



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

REPORT 2023

10+1 core messages from the NOVA-Nordic project

How can NQFs better help harness the potential of all skills?



Swedish National Agency for
Higher Vocational Education

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: 978-91-89815-25-4



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Preface

Non-formal qualifications play a crucial role in recognising and validating the skills and competences developed outside formal educational settings. They provide individuals with opportunities to showcase their abilities and enhance their employability. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) serve as a vital tool in aligning different types of qualifications across different education and training systems within a country as well as between countries. They establish a common structure for developing and understanding qualifications, including non-formal ones.

The links between non-formal qualifications and the validation of non-formal and informal learning are essential for promoting lifelong learning and ensuring inclusive education and training systems. Validation helps individuals gain recognition for the skills they have acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

This is the NOVA-Nordic project mission statement. These core messages are the conclusion of three years of work for the project, and are inspired by the comparative study, the identified good practice cases, and the work on the NOVA quality tool. The collaboration between the partners in the NOVA project has a long history and the messages are also inspired by the extensive experience the partners have, working with Nordic cooperation on the topics of qualifications and the EQF, validation of prior learning, adult learning, guidance, and VET. The project has aimed to enhance the recognition and validation arrangements for non-formal qualifications in the Nordic countries. By collaboration, identifying and sharing good practices, the project has strived to support the development of effective validation processes that are aligned with National Qualifications Frameworks. Through the outputs of the project, stakeholders in the Nordic countries can develop guidelines and tools for assessing and validating non-formal and informal learning. This will facilitate the recognition of skills acquired through work experience, volunteering, and in other learning contexts. The project's outcomes will hopefully contribute to improving individuals' mobility within and across the Nordic countries by contributing to the transferability and recognition of non-formal qualifications. This, in turn, will support peoples career progression and foster a skilled workforce across the region.

The NOVA-Nordic project highlights the importance of involving working life actors, educational institutions, and other relevant stakeholders in both the development of non-formal qualifications and the validation process. By engaging these key actors, the project aimed to enhance the relevance and value as well as the use of non-formal qualifications in the labour market. The project also focused on raising awareness about the benefits of non-formal qualifications and the validation of prior learning. This increased awareness will hopefully, in turn, help encourage individuals to engage in lifelong learning and strengthen the value of their skills.

NOVA-Nordic also sought to help establish a sustainable network and platform for exchanging knowledge and experiences related to non-formal qualifications and validation. Increased networking will help enable more in-depth collaboration and support the continuous development of NQFs and validation arrangements in the Nordic countries.

The NOVA-Nordic project is aligned with the broader European efforts to promote the recognition and portability of skills and validation of non-formal and informal learning, as outlined in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European guidelines on validation.

Acknowledgements

The NOVA-Nordic project would like to thank all those who have supported the project:

- The Nordic expert network for validation under the Nordic Adult Learning Network (NVL) and the Nordic EQF Network for acting as the projects reference groups.
- The EQF NCPs in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands for supporting the project in data-collection through questionnaires and interviews.
- Everyone who has helped the project identify and describe good practise cases.
- Colleagues at Cedefop and ETF for being critical friends and for contributing to seminars and workshops.
- And last but not least, all who have followed the project, taking part in seminars and workshops, and contributed to fruitful discussions.

Without all of you and your expertise and input, the NOVA-Nordic project would not have been able to reach its objectives.

The core messages in short

- 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

1. Comprehensive inclusion: An effective NQF must encompass all qualifications to achieve the promise of the EQF

The purpose of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning is to promote the employability and mobility of individuals for both study and work within the EU by making qualifications more comparable and transparent. The EQF is thus one of the most important instruments for creating real opportunities for lifelong learning for EU citizens. Of course, the EQF cannot achieve this on its own, rather it is the common structure for how to design qualifications the EQF brings to the table and the link between the EQF and the various national qualifications frameworks that together can achieve the wanted outcomes. The added value of national qualifications frameworks are not the frameworks themselves, but rather the qualifications linked with them. In short, an empty NQF is a useless NQF.

The various member states have created National Qualifications Framework based on their respective conditions and with specific aims in mind. This has meant that we today have a number of NQFs that on the surface are similar to each other. But if we start to dig beneath the surface, we soon see that the principles and processes governing how qualifications are linked to the NQFs can differ significantly. In addition, different countries have chosen in varying degrees to enable qualifications used outside the formal education systems to be formally linked to NQFs and thereby make it clear which level they correspond to. To ensure the effectiveness of a National Qualifications Framework, and by extension the EQF, it is essential to include all types of qualifications, including non-formal ones. Only by encompassing the entire spectrum of qualifications can the NQF fulfil its purpose of aligning qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). If the EQF creates a chain between countries, that chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

With micro-credentials, which in recent years have sailed onto the horizon as one of the most important tools for achieving effective and flexible skills provision, it becomes even more important to have an NQF that is open and inclusive. Another aspect of an open and inclusive framework is to link opportunities for validation of prior learning to the qualifications included in the NQF. In this way, it becomes possible for individuals to make all their skills visible and put to use.

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

If Europe is facing a skills crisis, as all indications suggest at the moment, what efforts and tools can help address this crisis? One of the most fundamental questions is how we value people's experiences and what they have learned throughout their lives, even outside the traditional classroom setting. Unfortunately, not all learning is valued equally, and many individuals with extensive work experience but lacking formal credentials may struggle to both retain and secure new employment. This impacts labour market mobility and, in the long run, adversely affects sustainable growth.

To meet the challenges posed by the green and digital transitions, the shortage of skilled personnel in healthcare, and more, we cannot afford to overlook any learning or the skills that people bring to the table. To deliver all the expertise that will be needed in the coming years, learning in the traditional sense and formal education systems alone will not suffice. We must explore alternative solutions to strengthen the supply of the right skills at the right time.

The conclusion is that we must systematically and structurally value and recognise all learning much more effectively. To address skill shortages, all skills are needed, and non-formal learning is a central part of the solution to the skills crisis. To put all learning to work, we require qualifications that bridge the gap between the labour market and education and training systems. We need more validation of non-formal and informal learning to tap into the full range of skills needed and maximise the potential of all individuals. In essence, we need to ensure that we utilise the tools we already have for this purpose – open and inclusive NQFs with links to validation opportunities.

3. Qualifications + validation = flexible skills provision: Creating efficient learning pathways that benefit both individuals and employers

To harness all learning, regardless of where, when, or how it occurred, is essential for both skills supply and lifelong learning. The primary tool at our disposal for achieving this is the validation of prior learning. Validation is most effective when there is a clear and relevant qualification against which to assess an individual's prior learning.

To accomplish this, there must be a clear connection between a country's qualifications framework and the possibilities for validation, as highlighted by both the EU recommendation on the EQF and the recommendation on validation. Prior learning, often referred to as real competence in the Nordic countries, should give access to formal education. It should also form a basis for shortening and adjusting educational pathways, for example through the right to exemptions and credit transfer, so individuals don't have to undergo formal training for what they already know and can do.

For learning that occurs outside formal education systems to be beneficial, it is necessary for both an NQF to be open to non-formal qualifications and for the validation of all prior learning towards the qualifications in the framework. Qualifications should with other words be learning pathway neutral. Validation enables the streamlining of training efforts for transition, re- and upskilling. It allows for the individualisation and customisation of competence development that works for adults while their life commitments align.

Well-designed validation initiatives, with the opportunity to supplement skills based on the outcome of the validation process, mean individuals with sought-after skills become available to the labour market more quickly. This benefits employers, individuals, and society at large. It can also lead to economic efficiency, as education costs can be reduced when training efforts are shortened. Achieving this requires that validation systems are funded in a way that enables integration into various skills provision and education and training systems.

4. Skills first:

Learning outcomes is the core of efficient skills provision

Shifting the focus from the input into education and training systems to the skills an individual should possess when being awarded a qualification is at the core of up-to-date, flexible, and demand-driven skills provision. This highlights the critical role of clearly defined, learning outcome-based qualifications. The learning outcome approach enables flexible and efficient transition, upskilling, and reskilling, adapted to ever faster changing skill demands in working life. It also plays a crucial role in validating skills efficiently and facilitating the recognition of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning. National Qualifications Frameworks are instrumental in this process by making qualifications and learning outcomes visible and comprehensible to employers, simplifying the alignment of skills with labour market demands.

Learning outcomes are indispensable for flexible skills provision because they provide explicit and specific descriptions of the skills expected of qualification holders – and qualifications are a proxy for skills. These outcomes allow for customised learning experiences tailored to individual needs and objectives as well as to labour market needs. Learning outcomes serve as reference points to ascertain whether learners have attained the desired skills, which is vital for acknowledging skills acquired through a variety of learning contexts, including non-formal and informal learning. This recognition enhances the credibility and value of skills obtained outside traditional educational settings.

In conclusion, it is imperative to underscore the significance of clear, demand-driven learning outcomes aligned with National Qualifications Frameworks. To achieve this, it is essential to provide support to those responsible for developing and formulating these learning outcomes. Such support is pivotal in shaping qualifications that align with the skills-first approach and in leveraging all available learning resources for the labour market's benefit. Furthermore, enhancing capacity for non-formal qualification development necessitates more collaborative learning, cooperation, and shared support tools for crafting learning outcomes. Good practices need to be shared and used as learning examples both between countries and between different sectors.

5. Relevance and trust are key: Ensuring the value of qualifications and NQFs for end-users

It must be emphasised that irrelevant qualifications are unfortunately of no use. Moreover, NQFs that lack the trust of end users will also prove to be ineffective tools. Qualifications must be fit for purpose and relevant for their intended use, whether for workforce skills supply or other purposes such as liberal adult education (folkbildning), culture, or leisure activities. The NQFs must serve as quality gatekeepers, ensuring that all included qualifications meet sufficient quality standards while remaining relevant and adding value.

To ensure quality and relevance when opening a framework to non-formal qualifications and to strike a balance with formal education qualifications, it is crucial to engage a diverse group of stakeholders in qualification development. Regular updates should align qualifications with evolving industry needs and consider their validity over time. Transparent quality assurance processes are essential, along with clear pathways for learners, information and guidance provision, and promotion of the value of qualifications through public awareness campaigns. Whenever possible, qualifications should be aligned with international standards, and the framework's effectiveness should be continually monitored and evaluated. Building trust is also vital through transparency and accountability measures. Last but certainly not least, allocating sufficient resources to the NQF is essential for its success, as elaborated in message 7. While this may seem like an extensive, and perhaps daunting, list, an NQF will not be an effective tool for lifelong learning or skills supply without a wholehearted commitment to these principles.

6. Empowering Quality: Supporting and Building Capacity for the development and use of (Non- Formal) Qualifications

When opening a National Qualifications Framework to include non-formal qualifications, only half of the work is done. The other half is ensuring that the qualifications levelled to the framework are of high quality and generate added value for end-users. Developing, managing, awarding, and quality-assuring non-formal qualifications that also meet the requirements of inclusion in a framework is a craft that requires both time, funding, and expertise. Large, well-established providers of non-formal learning, sector skills organisations, social partners, and other stakeholders may have extensive experience in handling qualifications and training, validation, and assessment of learning, and they often possess the necessary capacity.

On the other hand, smaller industries or newly established providers of non-formal learning may not have the required resources or expertise to accomplish this task. For an open and inclusive NQF to deliver the desired outcomes, it needs to be populated with high-quality qualifications. This, in turn, requires that the actors responsible for developing qualifications have the proper support and conditions in place to do so. A key aspect is the capacity of formulating learning outcomes that support the validation of prior learning and flexible and adaptable learning pathways. This support may come in the form of guidelines, handbooks, instructions, seminars, as well as access to expertise for consultation. In many cases, it also necessitates development funds and collaborative partners for learning and knowledge exchange.

Ensuring the quality of qualifications, especially non-formal ones, requires dedicated capacity building and support mechanisms. By investing in training, support materials, guidance, and quality indicators, we can empower institutions to develop, deliver, and assess high-quality qualifications. Failing to do so risks the NQF not achieving its intended outcomes.

7. Financing for impact: Urgent need to address the underfunding challenge of NQFs

It is impossible to discuss how national qualifications frameworks can contribute to better skills supply or genuine opportunities for lifelong learning for individuals without addressing the elephant in the room. And that elephant is the notion that "you get what you pay for" – NQFs are underfunded. Moreover, the issue of financing exists in a sort of limbo, a catch-22, if you will. Without adequate funding, an NQF cannot produce sufficient and clear results, making it difficult to argue for increased funding because the framework is not delivering results. Conversely, without increased funding, the framework will not achieve the desired outcomes, creating a perpetual loop with no apparent exit.

However, the financing question can be divided into three parts – we likely all agree that sufficient financial resources are crucial for the successful establishment and maintenance of NQFs. Additionally, questions about who should pay for the opening a framework to non-formal qualifications and the costs associated with developing relevant, high-quality qualifications need to be addressed. Who is paying for what?

In many countries with open frameworks, the costs associated with assessing the level of non-formal qualifications are financed through fees. Organisations seeking inclusion of their qualifications in a framework are responsible for paying those fees. Often, the same organisation also funds various aspects of qualification development, management, awarding, marketing, and more for as long as the qualification is in use. While this arrangement is reasonable, the question we need to ask is who ultimately benefits from the ability to describe skill requirements more clearly, contributing to a more efficient utilisation of skills in the labour market. A significant portion of the gains from efficient skill utilisation and improved skills supply naturally translates into more sustainable growth. In turn, more sustainable growth contributes to a country's GDP and increased tax revenue. So, in the end, the state and society at large will benefit and perhaps therefor should bear part of the costs.

If education is agreed to be a sound public investment, we should acknowledge that investing in the development of qualifications needed in the labour market, for validation opportunities, and in National Qualifications Frameworks is a wise choice. It's also a good idea to support organisations responsible for non-formal qualifications that can be used for both skills provision and validation, ensuring that different actors and sectors have more equitable opportunities. By addressing the issue of underfunding, we can ensure that NQFs have the necessary support and resources to function effectively and deliver their intended outcomes.

8. Enhancing Comparability: Size matters to achieve better skills matching

One of the main purposes of the EQF and the National Qualifications Frameworks is to make different qualifications more comparable. Comparability is achieved by designing qualifications and describing their learning outcomes according to a common basic structure. So far, so good. But to be able to compare, you must understand what it is you are comparing. When national frameworks are opened up to include various types of qualifications, including so-called non-formal qualifications, comparisons become more complex. Recognition processes also become more complex. Qualifications that correspond to the same level in a framework can have vastly different purposes, grant the holder different "rights," and open up opportunities for further learning or skills development in different ways. To compare qualifications that can be very different, it's not enough to know only the level or for the learning outcomes of the qualification to be designed in a similar way. To provide those who will use the qualifications with a better understanding of what a specific qualification actually represents, it's important to be able to express the qualification's "size." This is also addressed in the EQF recommendation.

For qualifications in higher education, this is done by using ECTS credits. In some cases, other equivalents to ECTS are also linked to qualifications included in different national frameworks, especially various credit systems linked to formal education. A few countries have created frameworks that always and for all included qualifications specify the scope or "size." However, it seems that few NQFs that are open to so-called non-formal qualifications have developed ways to express the size of such qualifications. To enable comparisons between different types of qualifications, it is necessary to develop ways to specify the size of non-formal qualifications as well. The added value of doing so is that it becomes clearer what individual qualifications represent but also that it will facilitate the recognition of full or parts of non-formal qualifications, for example for validation purposes or when gaining access to or for exemptions within the formal education system. Another important aspect is that clearer and more consistent ways of specifying the size of qualifications would contribute to better matching of skills and by categorising and aligning qualifications based on both their size and complexity, the added value of the NQFs will increase for end users such as individuals and employers. Countries with open and inclusive national frameworks should consider jointly developing ways to express size and create translation keys between any existing credit systems.

9. Boosting awareness: Making NQFs known and utilised to achieve wanted outcomes

If a National Qualifications Framework is to be useful, it must be known by those for whom it is intended. An NQF no one knows or understands is a useless NQF, which will not deliver the desired outcomes. By promoting the benefits and significance of NQFs among individuals, employers, and educational institutions, among others, we can enhance their value, fostering their widespread acceptance and utilisation. Here, too, there is a risk of a catch-22, the lower the awareness, the fewer who use the framework, and the fewer who use the framework, the lower the awareness of it and its potential usefulness will be. Since the first EQF recommendation, a lot of effort and energy has been put into communicating technical aspects linked to both the EQF and the national ones, the focus going forward should be on the NQFs usefulness and what they contribute with towards creating real opportunities for lifelong learning, including to make better use of informal and non-formal learning, and how they form a foundation for effective skills provision. Those who will use the framework do not necessarily need to know and understand the technical, and sometimes complex aspects behind it – what is “under the hood” – they need to know “what's in it” for them. Trust and awareness go hand in hand, a framework needs to be known and put to use to be trusted and vice versa.

Who then are the frameworks for? Information and dissemination of knowledge needs to be directed at different target groups and above all needs to focus on those who can act as intermediaries such as career and lifelong guidance counsellors, HR-specialists, public employment officers and vocational teachers. Educational organisations and validation providers are also target groups whose knowledge of the EQF and the various NQFs needs to increase. Here, the emerging national qualification databases play a key role. The Europass platform and ELM is also central parts in building an infrastructure where data on qualifications is shared and used for planning education, validation, matching, recognition and to enable even greater mobility for both students and workers within the EU.

10. Collaboration and mutual learning are paramount:

The operating of NQFs thrive through cooperation

If the National Qualifications Frameworks are collectively to create an infrastructure for skills, close collaboration is required among those responsible for the daily operation of the frameworks. This includes those working on implementation and information dissemination, as well as the technical details and support for end-users. While the EQF Advisory Group engages in policy discussions, there is no clear forum for those dealing with the more technical aspects of National Qualifications Frameworks. The NOVA project hopes that its results can contribute to opening discussions about the nitty-gritty work taking place in all countries with an NQF. We also hope that the project has facilitated such discussions among the various national coordination points (NCP) responsible for the national frameworks in the Nordic countries, as well as further across Europe.

NQFs cannot function effectively in isolation; they require collaboration and coordination among stakeholders at both national and international levels. By fostering partnerships and sharing good practices, we can significantly enhance the value and effectiveness of NQFs, which in turn benefits the EQF. The EQF and NQFs should promote a shared understanding of the challenges at hand. To further develop NQFs, increased cooperation and knowledge exchange, are essential. Primarily between the different NCPs, and secondly between other stakeholders involved in the operating of the frameworks. Without such collaboration, progress and desired outcomes will be hindered in the long term.

+1. Reinforcing the added value: Time to revisit the benefits of EQF and NQFs for skills policies

Quality qualifications that are labour market relevant are at the core of skills supply. Qualifications serve as the bridge between the demand for skills and the skills individuals carry. To harness the skills people have developed, we need systems that allow both the labour market's demand for skills and the required competence to be expressed in a way that is understandable and communicable. This makes requirements clear and transparent, contributing to mobility within and between sectors, as well as within and between countries. In other words, systems and structures that enable demanded skills and competence requirements to be packaged in a manner as uniform as possible across all of Europe and perhaps beyond Europe as well.

EQF and the National Qualifications Frameworks linked to EQF achieve precisely this. However, qualifications as a proxy for skills, the EQF, and the National Qualifications Frameworks appear to have been overlooked in the ongoing discourse about the skills crisis, both at policy and operational levels. Based on the work of the NOVA project over the past three years, the project consortium believes it is time to raise the discussion once again about the EQF as a key element in skills supply and lifelong learning policies. It is essential to re-evaluate and communicate the added value that both the European Qualifications Framework and the NQFs bring to the table in terms of creating a skills infrastructure. By emphasising their benefits, we can strengthen their role in supporting lifelong learning and facilitating efficient skills provision.

So as a final point in these core messages, we hope to re-ignite the discussion on the value of qualifications frameworks, both EQF and NQFs – and what qualifications and qualifications frameworks bring to the table for solving the skills crises and for contributing to an inclusive skills infrastructure that can create a win-win-win, benefiting society at large as well as people and employers.

The right skills at the right time.



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