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Quality qualifications:

A quality tool for developing, managing, and awarding labour market qualifications

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

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A quality tool for developing, managing, and awarding non-formal qualifications for the labour market

Introduction

In today's dynamic labour markets, the need for individuals to acquire specific skills and competence is ever-growing. Non-formal qualifications play a pivotal role in addressing this demand by offering learning for skills tailored to labour market needs. Non-formal qualifications facilitate re- and upskilling, efficient transitions and skills provision, validation of prior learning and, not least, lifelong learning. The NOVA-Nordic project has been at the forefront of this endeavour, aiming to provide support and tools for the development of robust non-formal qualifications that meet the highest standards of quality and relevance. Read more about the NOVA-project and its outputs here: novanordic.eu

At the heart of this effort lies a quality tool, developed by the project to assist organisations engaged in developing and managing non-formal qualifications for the labour market that can be linked to National Qualifications Frameworks. There are rarely new things under the sun, only new combinations and points of departure and the tool draws upon insights from on the one hand the project's research, including the comparative study and the identified good practices. On the other hand, it incorporates lessons learned from the Nordic Quality Compass on Validation of Prior Learning developed by the Nordic expert network for validation (NVL) and a similar quality tool – Kvalitetskompassen – for the development sector-specific validation models in Sweden, to mention a few sources of inspiration.

The overarching objective of the NOVA quality tool is to help foster the development of qualifications that are both relevant and of high quality. Recognising the diversity of contexts and regulations across different regions and countries, the tool offers flexibility for local or national adaptations, allowing users to tailor it to their specific circumstances. Instead of a more rigid roadmap, it serves as a supportive framework, permitting users to extract and apply elements most relevant to their unique context. The tool should be used to identify strong points as well as needs for further development and can be used as a gap-analysis that can serve as the basis for an action plan or checklist for those managing non-formal qualifications.

This tool is structured around a general, iterative process for developing non-formal qualifications that aim at being integrated into a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Each section of the tool is characterised by distinct subsections and a range of indicators with varying levels of abstraction. These indicators serve as points for attention, ensuring that every facet of qualification development aligns with industry standards and good practices.

The tool spans from defining the scope of the qualification to be developed and identifying core tasks to setting clear learning outcomes, managing stakeholder involvement, and navigating quality assurance, and aims to cover all key aspects of qualification development and administration in a comprehensive approach. It emphasises the paramount importance of stakeholder engagement, continuous improvement, and transparency to create qualifications that are not only credible but also highly valued in the labour market.

Below, we will take a closer look at the key components of each section, highlighting the indicators and good practices that contribute to the development, management, and awarding of non-formal qualifications that empower individuals with the skills needed to thrive in their chosen careers. The tool itself is built in an Excel-file format and this document gives an easier overview of all sections and indicators. The tool can be found at

The process of developing non-formal qualifications

The tool is based on a general process for developing non-formal qualifications that can be linked to a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), as shown in the images below.

The process should be seen as iterative, and there is some overlap between the different steps and sections of indicators, even though each part has a primary focus and is linked to a specific stage in the process. The quality tool is mainly zooming in on the step of developing non-formal qualifications, as highlighted below. Some aspects for awarding qualifications that are important to address when developing a qualification is also included in the tool.

The tool does not go into either needs analysis or the process of levelling the qualification to a specific NQF. Levelling processes, procedures and regulations vary greatly between different countries and generic indicators will not be of use in a quality tool such as this. There is however the option to adapt the tool and add a section with subsections addressing the prerequisites and conditions of levelling to a specific NQF. Methods for doing skills needs analysis have not been within the scope of the NOVA project, and there are a number of methods, sources, etc. that can be used for this, see among others the section on Skills intelligence from Cedefop: Skills intelligence | CEDEFOP (europa.eu)

Describing the process of how to develop a qualification can be done in many ways, and the NOVA project is far from the first to tackle this task. The NOVA project has arrived at a process description based on identified common denominators from the good practice cases, from the comparative study, and from the project's research on similar support tools. In order for the tool to function as support for those developing non-formal qualifications that can also be used for validation, the project has settled on the following process description. The process includes the central steps: identify core tasks; design and write the intended learning outcomes; set assessment criteria and methods; and last but not least, set up the system for how to award the qualification. As an umbrella for these steps, a system for managing and ensuring the quality of the entire process—thus, a quality management system for the qualification—needs to be designed and put in place. The tool does not encompass the learning pathway itself, as the qualification should be neutral in relation to how the individual develops the required skills.

Based on the overarching process and steps, the quality tool has been divided into three sections:

- Develop a non-formal qualification
- Manage a non-formal qualification
- Award a non-formal qualification

Each of these sections is further divided into subsections with a number of indicators. The indicators have varying levels of abstraction depending among other things on how crucial they are for developing qualifications that are useful and of high quality.
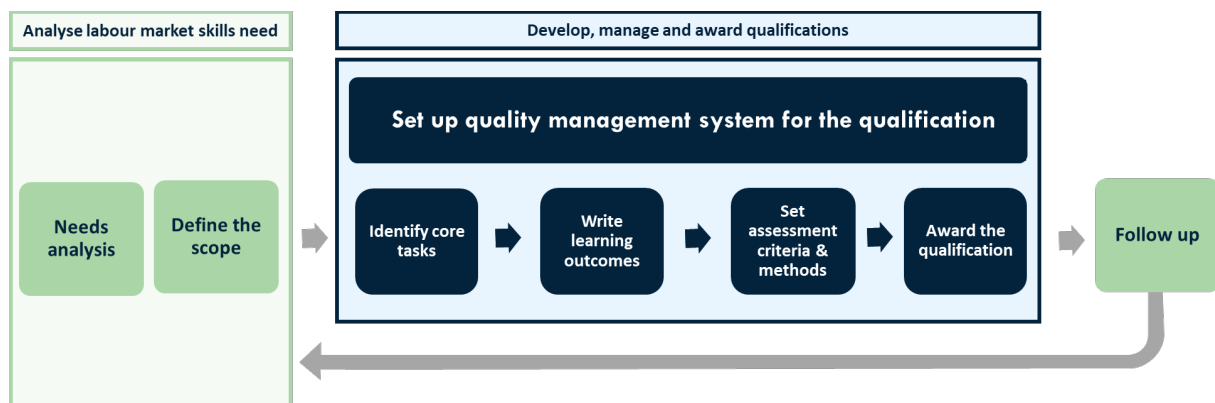
Overview of the Non-Formal Qualification Development Process

The overall content of the three sections is summarised below. After the short summary you will find all sub-sections and the respective indications listed to give an easy overview. To use the tool please see further instructions in the quality tool in excel-format, you will find it at novanordic.eu

Develop a Non-Formal Qualification:

- Define the qualification's scope, analyse its relationship with existing qualifications, link it to relevant occupational classifications, involve stakeholders in identifying core tasks, and ensure feedback from stakeholders.
- Design the qualification using clear, measurable intended learning outcomes, aligned with assessment methods, and focused on essential job-related skills.
- Structure the qualification for integration into a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), dividing it into part qualifications and modules, with specific assessment criteria.
- Gain stakeholder agreement, promote awareness, and ensure recognition by relevant parties, including employers and public employment agencies.
- Establish clear quality management responsibilities, policies, and objectives, with continuous monitoring and staff competence development.

Manage the Qualification:

- Organise cooperation, roles, and responsibilities for qualification management, actively involve stakeholders in updates and quality assurance, and collect feedback for improvement.
- Ensure compliance with laws and regulations, conduct regular internal reviews and audits, continually improve the QMS, involve stakeholders, and maintain quality assurance.
- Provide information about the qualification's purpose, learning pathways, learning outcomes, and assessment methods, ensuring accessibility.
- Implement procedures for documentation, internal reviews/audits, follow-up, and evaluation.
- Involve learners and peers, establish version control, and consider external review/audit if applicable.
- Define procedures for approving/accrediting awarding bodies/providers, focusing on organisational ability, premises, assessor competence, and data protection.

Award the Qualification:

- Ensure assessors have relevant competence in the qualification's field, understand assessment methods, have a mandate to assess, and can provide support and assess various types of learning.
- Award qualifications in compliance with regulations and policies, ensuring fairness, equality, and professionalism in the assessment process.
- Use relevant, unbiased, coherent, and evidence-based assessment methods that can be adapted to individual needs.
- Perform identity checks, use provided templates for certificates, handle personal data according to regulations, transfer assessment results correctly, gather statistical data, and report irregularities for corrective actions.

Develop a qualification	
Scope of the qualification and core tasks	Stakeholders have agreed and defined the scope of the proposed qualification, for example a job profile or specific task
	Stakeholders have analysed how the proposed qualification is related to other existing qualifications (both formal and non-formal)
	There is a clear link between the proposed qualification and the relevant occupational classification system (nomenclature, e.g. ISCO/ESCO)
	Stakeholders are involved in identifying core tasks and competence requirements for the qualification
	A representative team of relevant stakeholders with a designated process manager is responsible for identifying core tasks and competence requirements
	The qualification is based on agreed competence requirements which in turn are based on core tasks for each job profile
	Stakeholders are involved in testing and giving feedback on resulting qualification standards
Learning outcomes	The qualification is designed using intended learning outcomes
	Intended learning outcomes are described using active verbs from an established taxonomy
	Intended learning outcomes are measurable to enable assessment
	Assessment methods are fit for purpose in relation to the proposed learning outcomes
	The learning outcomes focus on what is most essential for the job profile or task (approximately a maximum of 10 learning outcomes)
	The notional workload for attaining the learning outcomes is defined
Overall design of the qualification	The qualification is designed to be able to be levelled in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
	The qualification is divided into part qualifications to support adaptation to flexible learning pathways (when necessary)
	The qualification is divided into modules that fit into a description consisting of full qualification and part qualifications (when necessary, for more extensive qualifications)
	The full qualification describes overall competence requirements related to level descriptors in the NQF
	The part qualifications consist of detailed competence requirements in terms of learning outcomes
	Part qualifications have specific assessment criteria and methods and if relevant grading criteria
	The sum of part qualifications is equal to the competence requirements of the full qualification
	The qualification is designed to be able to be levelled in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
Labour market relevance	The qualification is nationally and/or regionally agreed and established among relevant stakeholders
	The qualification is known and used in career and life-long guidance
	The qualification is known and used by employers
	The qualification is recognised by public employment agencies
	The qualification is recognised by the national education system and educational actors
	The qualification is transparent, and information is available in the relevant EU platforms
Quality policy	The responsible body (owner) has overall responsibility for the quality management system (QMS) for the qualification
	There is a clear and documented quality policy including defined objectives
	Key performance indicators and statistics on awarded qualifications are used to maintain relevance
	There are policies and guidelines to ensure the fairness, equality, non-discrimination, and accessibility for individuals
	There are specified competence requirements for staff involved in the development, management and awarding of the qualification
	There are possibilities for continuous professional development for staff involved in the development, management and awarding of the qualification

Manage the qualification	
Stakeholder involvement	Cooperation regarding the management and quality assurance of the qualification is organised in a relevant way
	Roles, responsibilities, and mandates for updating and revising the qualification are established
	Relevant stakeholders participate actively to update requirements and the content in terms of learning outcomes for the qualification
	Relevant stakeholders participate actively in the quality assurance of the qualification
	Stakeholders are involved in giving feedback on how demands are being met by the qualification
	Stakeholders participate to promote awareness and the use of the qualification
Quality management system (QMS)	The QMS adhere to applicable laws and regulations
	The QMS for the qualification includes regular internal reviews and audits, and if applicable routines for compliance with external reviews
	The QMS for the qualification includes continuous improvements based on regular reviews, updates, and audits (if applicable)
	The QMS for the qualification includes quality assurance of the learning outcomes
	The QMS includes a system for document control and record keeping
	The QMS includes systematic stakeholder involvement
	The QMS for the qualification includes quality assurance of the assessment and awarding process
	There are steering documents for the division of roles and responsibilities and if applicable for accreditation of awarding bodies
	There are established steering documents for regular internal reviews and audits, and if applicable for the compliance of external reviews
Information and transparency	There is information that describes the purpose, intended use and relevance of the qualification
	There is information about possible learning pathways and their prerequisites to attain the qualification
	There is information on nominal workload for relevant learning pathways or validation of prior learning
	There is information accessible on the learning outcomes that must be met for awarding of a qualification
	There is information accessible that describes the methods of assessment of learning outcomes
	There is information that describes the certification documents that can be issued to an individual after assessment
	There is information that describes the purpose, intended use and relevance of the qualification
Maintaining and updating the qualification	There are established procedures for documentation of the internal review/audit of the qualification
	There are established routines for planning and carrying out regular internal reviews/audits
	There are established procedures for follow-up, evaluation, and actions of improvement
	Learners and peers are involved in follow-up and evaluation of the qualification (in terms of usage, relevance, internal consistency)
	There are established procedures for version management and traceability
	There are established procedures for external review/audit if applicable
Accreditation of providers of the qualification	There are procedures for approving/accrediting awarding bodies/providers (if another organisation than the responsible body)
	There are requirements for the provider's organisational ability and legal status
	There are requirements for premises and equipment necessary during assessment
	There are requirements for assessor competence and assessor training if applicable
	All documentation regarding the qualification meets the requirements of the data protection regulation (GDPR) for data storage and confidentiality
	The provider meets requirements for systematic quality management

Award the qualification

Assessor competence	Assessors have relevant competence for assessment within the specific professional field of the qualification
	Assessors have knowledge of the methods and implementation of the assessment process as well as assessment criteria
	Assessors are appointed and have the mandate to carry out the assessment
	Assessors have the competence to identify the need for and provide relevant support during the assessment
	Assessors have the skills to assess all relevant learning including non-formal and informal learning
	Assessors have the skills to manage relevant tools for documentation and assessment, including digital tools
Assessment and awarding process	The awarding of the qualification meets the requirements of the responsible body (owner) if applicable
	The awarding of the qualification follows policies and guidelines for fairness, equality, non-discrimination, and accessibility
	The awarding of the qualification follows policies and guidelines for the qualifications purpose, recognition, and quality assurance
	The individual is treated professionally with respect for personal integrity
	The individual is informed before the assessment about rights and integrity issues, aims and procedure of the assessment
	The individual is informed about the conditions for the assessment and what is required of the individual
	The individual is informed about the learning outcomes that form the basis of the assessment
	The individual is informed about the results/outcome of the assessment
Assessment methods	Assessment methods are relevant and fit-for-purpose
	Assessment methods and tools are fair and free from bias
	Assessment methods are coherent in their implementation and outputs
	Assessment tools are based on methods that are evidence-based
	Assessment tools and methods can be adapted based on individual needs
	Procedures for using methods, tools, support, and adaptations in assessment are in place
Certification process	Identity checks on individuals according to established requirements are performed when awarding the qualification
	Templates provided for certificates are used when awarding the qualification
	Personal data is handled in accordance with the European Data Protection Directive (GDPR) when awarding the qualification
	Results of assessment are transferred correctly to the individual and responsible body (if other than awarding body)
	Statistical data for follow-up and evaluation is gathered (and transferred to responsible body if other than awarding body)
	There is a routine for reporting irregularities for corrective actions

The right skills at the right time.

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