

NOVA

NQFs, non-formal learning/qualifications and validation arrangements in the Nordic countries

A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

The NOVA-Nordic project

How can learning outside of formal education be made visible and put to use to benefit both citizens and working life? What systems and tools are important to work towards that aim? Two such tools are National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) and validation of prior learning (VPL). How can these two tools better support continuous learning and how do we strengthen the links between non-formal learning, non-formal qualifications, NQFs and VPL?

These are some of the questions being asked by the Nordic countries and explored in the NOVA-Nordic project, funded by Erasmus+.

Why is this important?

From the viewpoint of the individual, it is paramount 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 as a whole to leave the gained competences hidden.

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 or levelling 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.

The *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* addresses the links between NQFs and validation arrangements and states that the development of validation and of NQFs “share a common objective” ¹:

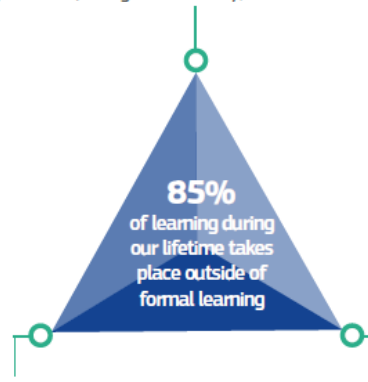
The recommendation stresses the importance of linking validation arrangements to national qualifications systems and frameworks: Member States should enable individuals to ‘obtain a full qualification or, where applicable, part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences’ (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 1b). They should ensure that ‘validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European qualifications framework’ (ibid. point 3a), that

Formal learning is learning through a structured programme with the aim of receiving a qualification (e.g. in school, college or university).

Non-formal learning is structured learning that takes place outside of institutions (e.g. in-company training or volunteering).

Informal learning is unstructured learning that takes place as a part of daily life (e.g. during work or leisure).

Source: European Commission, 2018



¹ Cedefop (2015). European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 104. (p.27).
[European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/documents/working-papers/2015/WP104_en.pdf)

'synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system such as ECTS and ECVET' (ibid. p. 4, point 3j). They should also ensure that 'education and training providers [...] facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings.' (ibid., point 4b).

The situation in Finland, Iceland, and Sweden

In **Finland**, validation practices are becoming more and more commonplace in the non-formal sector, mostly in the liberal adult education. There is a big push towards learning outcome-based systems, including validation of prior learning. The national database KOSKI, which includes personal accounts for Finnish residents, through which they are able to display their qualifications and micro credentials to for example employers or education and training providers, will be accessible also to liberal adult education providers in 2021. Many liberal adult education organisations have adopted Open Badges to making learning visible.

Finland adopted its NQF in 2017. Even though it is officially called The Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules, there are currently only formal qualifications and educations based on National Curricula included in the framework. In 2019 a national working group for validation in liberal adult education recommended to develop the NQF levelling procedure so that learning gained in liberal adult education could be referred to the NQF levels. However, there is little or no development toward that recommendation as of yet.

The **Icelandic** Qualification Framework (**ISQF**, since 2016) has seven qualification **levels**. Higher education qualifications are at **levels 5, 6 and 7** in the **ISQF**, with two sublevels at 5 and 6. So far, only formal qualifications are included in the framework based on National Curricula criteria (unit based). Validation processes linked to the majority of those are available. In the non-formal sector of adult learning, learning pathways can be accredited by the Directorate of education (based on an application process) on a level but they do not stand as formal qualifications. Up till now, 34 such curricula have been accredited through that process. In addition, in the non-formal sector job analyses can lead to job specific learning outcomes which are based on ISQF levels and used in the process of validation.

SeQF, the **Swedish** National Qualifications Framework, was adopted late 2015. There are two principal ways to include qualifications in the framework – “formal” qualifications through a government decision (formally by referencing them to the SeQF-ordinance) and “non-formal” qualifications through an application process. Non-formal qualifications in the Swedish system are all qualifications, public as well as private, that do not have their learning outcomes regulated by law/ordinance. Organisations that award such qualifications can apply to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan, MYH) to have their qualifications “levelled”, at all 8 levels of the SeQF. Since 2016, 11² such non-formal qualifications have been included in the SeQF, and a central aim for the ongoing work is to increase that number.

² Sök kvalifikation - seqf.se (link to the register of qualifications in the SeQF)

A few of those 11 qualifications are available through validation, but there is no pre-requisite for that in the regulation for the levelling process. Several sector industry organisations, working on validation procedures for awarding their certificates, are using the SeQF as a reference point when developing their validation models, and there is an increasing interest in also levelling the “competence standard” behind such sectoral certificates etc.

How to compare different country approaches

Based on the state-of-play in our countries the NOVA-Nordic project will - in more depth - compare and analyse these different approaches with the aim of learning more and ultimately offer better support for those involved in developing both qualifications and validation schemes.

The focus of the comparative analysis is on what processes and procedures countries are adopting to include non-formal learning and qualifications in NQFs, what the criteria for inclusion are and how validation practices are linked with such qualifications. The so-called comparative framework will be used for collecting data and analysing the state of play in the Nordic countries. In addition, for the purpose of widening our understanding of these issues, Austria and the Netherlands will be included in the comparative study. This document presents the proposal for questions to be addressed when comparing different approaches.

Terms and concepts used by the project

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 standards³.
- **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, that can for example be both a formal application and decision procedure or a more informal process of deciding what level best corresponds to a specific learning programme etc.
- **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

³ This definition is used in both the recommendation on validation and EQF:

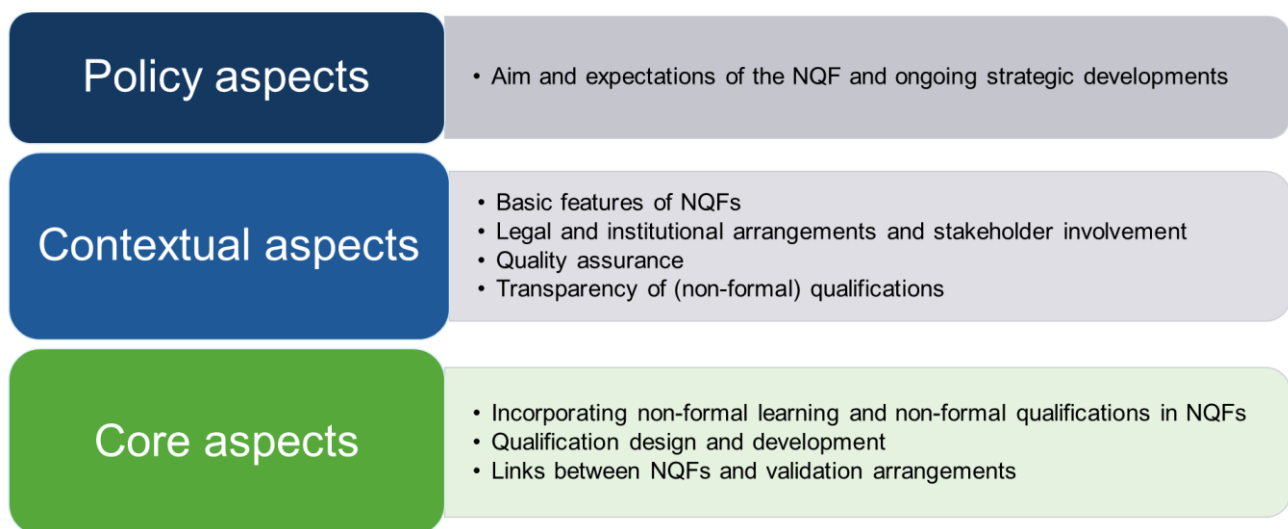
[Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning \(europa.eu\)](#)

[Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning \(europa.eu\)](#)

of where that learning has taken place and takes into account all learning up to the point of assessment.

Proposal for a comparative framework

The comparative framework is structured in eight categories of questions as seen below. Five of those are policy and contextual aspects and the outstanding three are the core focus of the NOVA-project. Questions in each category are presented under the corresponding headline.



Aim and expectations of the NQF and strategic developments

Purpose

- What is the overall purpose of the implementation of a National Qualifications Framework?
- 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 do countries expect from their NQFs?
- What is the intended effect/result?

What is a qualification?

- Is there a common definition of what a qualification is?
- Is it a specific definition linked with the NQF?
- Is it aligned with the definition in the EQF recommendation?

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?

- Is the NQF seen as (or used as) a driver for enhancing the possibilities/uptake of validation in general or specifically for non-formal learning? If yes, how? Or was validation a driver for the NQF?
- Are there developments in terms of strengthening VPL in the non-formal learning sector?
 - Are there strategic developments?
 - Are there projects?
 - Is there grassroots development?

Basic features of NQFs

Inclusiveness

- Is the NQF open for all types of qualifications? Only qualifications from the "formal" system? Which education sub-sectors and types of qualifications are included in the NQF? Are qualifications that are not the outcomes of formal education included? What is the rationale behind the choice?

Number of levels:

- How many levels and sub-levels is the framework comprised of?

Level descriptors

- What are the categories of level descriptors? Same as in the EQF or other (knowledge; skills; autonomy & responsibility)? Why those descriptors?

Credit systems

- Is there a credit system linked with the NQF? No credit system? Several credit systems? What is the rationale behind?

Incorporating qualifications in NQFs

- Are there clear criteria for new qualifications or other learning to be included in the NQF?
- Is the "best fit" principle applied when levelling qualifications and other learning on the NQF levels? Does the "best fit" principle provide an accurate enough picture of the overall level vs. part qualifications and micro credentials?
- Is there a classification of different types of qualifications? Or a way to categorise different qualifications, for example by purpose?

Stage of implementation⁴

- At what stage of implementation is the NQF?

Legal and institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

Legislation

- Is the framework supported/implemented by law/decreed/by-law? When was legislation put in place? What does it regulate?

Coordination

- Is there a coordinating body? If so, what is its role and mandate?

⁴ According to the Cedefop six stages of NQF development and implementation, in *Overview of national qualifications framework developments in Europe 2020* | Cedefop (europa.eu)

Stakeholders

- How are relevant stakeholders involved? Is their involvement regulated?

Reference groups/national councils/etc

- Are there formal reference groups supporting the NQF? If so, what is their role and or mandate?

Quality assurance

QA/audit arrangements

- Are there QA arrangements for the NQF? For included/levelled qualifications?
- Are there any arrangements for external audits in place?
- Is there a regular review process in place? For the NQF? For included qualifications?
- Are the QA principles in the EQF recommendation Annex IV⁵ used in QA arrangements?

QA of non-formal qualifications

- Are there specific QA arrangements for “non-formal” qualifications included in the NQFs?

Transparency of (non-formal) qualifications

Database/register of qualifications included in the NQF

- Is there a comprehensive database/register of qualifications?
- Does the register/database only contain qualifications that are included in the NQF or also other qualifications – for example, legacy qualifications, that are not any longer awarded, but held by many people in the labour market?
- Is there a dedicated NQF website?

Target groups

- What are the main target groups for information/communication?

Including non-formal qualifications in national qualification frameworks

Non-formal inclusion

- 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?
- Is there a national strategy/plan to include non-formal qualifications in the NQF in the future?

Levelling of non-formal qualifications

- If non-formal qualifications are included, what are the criteria? How are they included? How is the "levelling"-process and procedures organised?
- Who decides on the level? What factors are considered when deciding level?

⁵ [Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning \(europa.eu\)](#)

- What is the "smallest" qualification that can be included?
- What is the official body that decides, which qualifications can be included and levelled in the NQF? Who is involved in the process of validating the qualification before/during a "levelling" procedure?
- Who is allowed/authorised to have qualifications included in NQFs? Who is allowed/authorised to have non-formal qualifications included in NQFs? Who can apply for "levelling"?

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

- How long is a levelling decision valid?
- Is there a difference of validity between formal and non-formal qualifications?
- Are there clear procedures for revising qualifications? How often are the learning outcomes revised during the lifespan of a qualification?
- How often/how much can the learning outcomes in a qualification be changed before it should be considered a new qualification?
- Can a decision of qualification level be revoked? If so, when/why?

Qualification design and development

Who develops/designs non-formal qualifications

- Which actors/stakeholders are involved in developing non-formal qualifications?

Standards behind the qualification

- What types of standards, for example national occupational standards, training standards etc. are behind qualifications?
- What type of bodies are responsible for designing the standards? Are the standards developed in cooperation with relevant stakeholders?

How are non-formal qualifications designed

- Are there examples of qualification dossiers/files? What information is included in the dossier/file? Are the criteria in the EQF recommendation annex VI⁶ met?
- Are the qualifications modular and are part-qualifications included in the NQF? Are part qualifications given an individual level?
- Are micro-credentials included in the NQF?

Use of learning outcomes for designing non-formal qualifications

- Are qualifications/standards behind qualifications described in learning outcomes?
- Are there national guidelines for writing learning outcomes?
- Are the learning outcomes included in the diploma/certificate/etc? Are diploma/certificate supplements or other supporting documents used?
- Who oversees developing and formulating the learning outcomes in non-formal learning?
- Is there stakeholder cooperation in terms of learning outcome development? If yes, how?
- How are the learning outcomes quality assured?

⁶ [Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning \(europa.eu\)](#)

Use of learning outcomes in validation

- Are assessment criteria described in learning outcomes?

Links between NQFs and validation arrangements

Linking validation arrangements with NQFs

- Are VPL arrangements seen a normal route to qualifications? Are formal qualifications open for VPL in general? Is that limited to specific NQF levels?
- Are full qualifications awarded through validation?
- Are part-qualifications awarded through validation? Is it possible for learners to accumulate part-qualifications towards a full qualification?
- Is there an individual (legal, subjective) right to validation linked with the NQF?
- Is the same “standard” being used when validating prior learning as for awarding qualifications through a formal pathway?

Awarding of non-formal qualifications

- Is it possible for individuals to be awarded non-formal qualifications through validation?
- Is it possible for individuals to be awarded parts of non-formal qualifications through validation?