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The NQF in practice

by the example of qualifications of the commercial and administrative sector

Qualifications will be assigned to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) on the basis of learning outcomes. In this process, the eight levels – and therefore also the qualifications which will be assigned to these levels – will be characterised by learning outcomes which are formulated in a general manner, so-called descriptors. The descriptors used for the NQF in Austria are those of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), as within the framework of the NQF consultation process the majority of stakeholders spoke out against developing own Austria-specific descriptors. Instead they advocated compiling explanations which specify the EQF descriptors in greater detail and, in this way, aim to make them easier to understand and apply.

These explanations form the main part of the publication of criteria which was drawn up by ibw in 2010 on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture (BMUKK). The publication also comprises the specification of the formal requirements made for qualifications to fulfil the classification criteria and includes the form sheet used to describe qualifications within the framework of the classification application. This publication of criteria was discussed and tested in the second half of 2010 by using qualifications of the business-oriented and administrative sector in order to obtain feedback to improve content and user-friendliness.

Project design

The main part of this project (project duration: May to December 2010) consisted of three workshops, which were attended by experts from the vocational education and training (VET) and adult learning and education (ALE) sectors, from educational administration, the social partnership and other relevant associations of interest, as well as the business sphere. Using key questions about the three main chapters of the publication of criteria, these workshops aimed to obtain feedback about whether any changes should be made to this publication's current version – and, if so, what changes were necessary to optimise its content and structure.

The publication of criteria

The **target group** for the publication of criteria, which will be combined with information about the classification procedure in an NQF manual in early 2011, will mainly comprise bodies with competence on qualifications in all educational contexts. In the formal segment (in the NQF also termed “corridor 1”) these are the ministries and provincial governments with ultimate responsi-

bility for qualifications (e.g. the Education Ministry for qualifications in the VET schools and colleges). In the non-formal segment (“corridor 2”) these will (probably) be bodies which will be authorised by the NQF steering group, will submit a classification application for private qualification providers and will be responsible that the qualification for which the application will be filed conforms with the NQF.¹

The allocation of qualifications to the NQF aims to build on **three sets of criteria**, which form the **main chapters** of the publication of criteria. These chapters have the following content:

Chapter “Requirements on qualifications”:

Only the **qualifications** themselves will be assigned to the NQF. Not all education programmes (that is: courses, etc.) and the resulting examinations necessarily lead to a qualification as defined by the NQF. It will only be considered a qualification if, as a result of a assessment procedure (this means: an examination), a competent body (the qualification provider or a certifying institution) issues proof in the form of a certificate. This evidence of a qualification certifies that graduates have the knowledge, skills and competence (i.e. the standards) which have been defined by the qualification provider as requirements for positive completion of this assessment procedure.

This means that the **assessment procedure** and the **evidence of a qualification** form key aspects of a qua-

¹ As at the time this project is completed (Dec. 2010) discussions are still ongoing about the classification procedure, the governance structure as well as the connected distribution of tasks among the involved institutions, no more detailed information about the bodies responsible for qualifications in the non-formal segment is available.

lification. For these elements the NQF will lay down certain minimum requirements which will distinguish the qualifications from non-qualifications. These minimum requirements primarily concern the accessibility and transparency of information about the final examination, the clarity of assessment, the definition of learning outcome standards, the acquisition of which needs to be verifiably demonstrated in the examination, as well as the formal structure of the final certificate. In the publication of criteria, a checklist is provided to help qualification providers determine if the qualifications fulfil the classification criteria. This checklist consists of 13 statements which must be answered with “yes” and “no”. Unless all requirements are met (that is, all statements can be answered with “yes”), the qualification does not fulfil the classification criteria.

Chapter “EQF descriptors and explanations”:

The main basis for classifying qualifications are the **EQF descriptors**. The formulations have been chosen to express the increasing requirements in every dimension from the lower to the upper levels. Here every level includes the statements of previous levels although, to avoid repetitions, these are not explicitly mentioned in the descriptions. To make the abstract descriptions of the EQF descriptors more easily understandable for Austrian qualification providers, these are complemented by explanations. They are the implicit or explicit result of the analysis and learning outcome-oriented appraisal of existing qualification descriptions (e.g. curricula, training regulations, legal texts, etc.). This also aims to make the differences between the levels more easily recognisable.

As well as the explanations, specific **reference qualifications** are published for every level. These are primarily the result of the educational hierarchy prevailing in the Austrian qualification landscape (compulsory school – apprenticeship/VET school – upper secondary school-leaving certificate – post-secondary VET college – higher education institution). In addition, the expert discussions within the framework of NQF pilot projects led to wide agreement for the level allocation of the given reference qualifications. The reference qualifications should form “qualification cornerstones”, an aid for orientation in the allocation of additional qualifications and the enhanced illustration of the requirements associated with the levels.

Chapter “Description of qualifications”:

For a qualification to be assigned to the NQF, the qualification provider needs to apply for allocation. This **application** comprises a detailed description based on a template that is applicable for all qualifications. This description covers **four information blocks**:

The first block is about the **qualification provider**, i.e. the institution defining the learning outcome standards which need to be proven within the framework of the assessment procedure to acquire the qualification. The second information block focuses on the **qualification**. Essential in this block is the description of the qualification profile which forms the foundation for the key learning outcomes proven by the qualification holders. The third information block is about the **assessment procedure**. It should include a detailed description of the structure and the assessment scheme, the requirements made on the examiners, whether and what opportunities the qualification applicants have in terms of access to examination results, appealing against assessments and repeating the procedure or individual parts of the procedure. The final information block is about **NQF classification**. Here, first of all reasons need to be given for the NQF level which the institution applied for by referring to the EQF descriptors. In this connection the explanations can be helpful. To support the statement of reasons, the institution should specify the relation of the respective qualification to other qualifications of the same field of work or field of learning (e.g. to the reference qualifications or to other qualifications that have already been classified). The statement of reasons for the classification can also refer to international comparisons (such as bilateral or multilateral agreements on the mutual recognition of the qualification, European comparative projects, etc.) which enable the NQF steering group to reach a well-founded decision about the NQF level. In addition it is possible to specify other evidence substantiating the classification that has been applied for (such as statistical data about the holders’ direct entry into the world of work, their rates of self-employment and company size, about information provided in job advertisements, about findings of graduates’ surveys, etc.).

Project results

The discussions on the publication of criteria which were held in the three workshops have led to the following **main results**.

Chapter “Requirements on qualifications”:

The workshop participants declare their **broad agreement** with the formal requirements which specify that the qualifications fundamentally fulfil the classification criteria. It is noted positively by the participants that they do not include any statements about the content of the qualifications for which the qualification provider is still responsible.

According to the discussion participants, the checklist does not clarify completely if the **end-of-year report sheet of individual classes** is also considered a qualification within the meaning of the NQF. Basically, if

every statement in the checklist for these report sheets could be answered with „yes“ then these would be qualifications within the meaning of the NQF. Wherever such a classification is not intended, they think the checklist or the requirements should be made “stricter” in a way that the end-of-year report sheets do not fulfil the classification criteria.

A similar problem arises with respect to **partial qualifications**, where the majority of the discussion participants think that their handling in the NQF still needs to be clarified. Examples for partial qualifications which are mentioned by them include the partial examinations for the acquisition of the *Berufsaugabeprüfung* (i.e. the certificate providing university access for skilled workers or BRP) and the modular examinations of the master craftsperson examination. They argue that every BRP subject/every module leads to an assessment procedure, positive completion of which is proven by a certificate. On the basis of the checklist it would in principle be possible to apply for an assignment for these partial qualifications. Should this not be desired, the checklist would have to be phrased “more strictly”.

In addition, the discussion participants question whether the **end-of-year report sheets** will be classified for school forms where there is a **voluntary, separately certified final examination** as well. Examples mentioned are the qualifications obtained upon completion of the final classes of academic secondary school and VET college as well as after part-time vocational school and the apprenticeship diploma. Both the upper secondary school-leaving examination and the apprenticeship-leave examination are voluntary examinations which are assessed independent of the final qualification. The checklist should be re-examined in this respect and corrected where an allocation of these certificates is not possible.

Some discussion participants advocate that a “**minimum volume**” (e.g. in the form of lessons or content) be defined for qualifications which fulfil the classification criteria (mainly from the non-formal sector) and added to the checklist as a requirement. This is meant to guarantee that too “small” qualifications should not have any access to the NQF. The project author emphasises that such a distinction is currently not planned: all qualifications which meet the formal requirements can – independent of their content focus, the location of training, the learning context as well as the scope – be classified in principle.

The term “**assessment procedure**” is considered ambiguous by some workshop participants because it might be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, this can be understood as the assessment procedure which is con-

ducted by the qualification provider with graduates (i.e. the assessment and validation procedure or final examination), on the other hand, it could refer to the procedure which needs to be completed for the classification and assignment of the NQF number. It is recommended to consider whether the term “assessment procedure” should be replaced with the more common term “examination” to avoid misunderstandings.

Chapter “EQF descriptors and explanations”:

The workshop participants basically think the explanations of the EQF descriptors are **well done, clear and understandable**. In their eyes no far-reaching changes are necessary. The explanations could prove very helpful when defining new qualifications in the future. They think that, with the explanations, the qualification providers have “key learning outcomes” at hand which could be integrated into specific qualification profiles. This would make it easier to lay down a qualification’s level.

Several school stakeholders point out that there is agreement at BMUKK (General Directorate for VET) that **VET college qualifications** have to be assigned to **Level 6 after three years of professional practice**. Here the business-oriented and the social and services sectors have to be treated as equal to the engineering and agricultural sectors where graduates obtain the “Ingenieur” qualification. The project author emphasises that the acquired professional practice alone, which certainly leads to enhancing knowledge, skills and competence, does not give entitlement to a classification. As far as the VET colleges with the focus on engineering and agriculture are concerned, with the “Ingenieur” there is a qualification which is not undisputed as such but is still perceived as basically eligible for classification into the NQF. This certificate recognises professional practice. In the business-oriented and the social and services sectors there is no such qualification at present.

School stakeholders also encourage assigning the **VET colleges for people in employment** to a higher level than the long forms. The reasons given are that the graduates of these forms for people in employment have professional practice whereas those of the long forms do not. The project author explains that all the qualifications are in principle treated as equal in the NQF classification, independent of whether they are acquired in the long form, in the form for people in employment, or at a post-secondary VET course. Decisive for classification are not the education programme’s access requirements or its structure but only the knowledge, skills and competence associated with the qualification.

The majority of the workshop participants in the discussions accept the given **reference qualifications**, with some considering the (not yet finally agreed) classifica-

tion of VET colleges at Level 5 as too low. Particularly with a view to the (also not yet finally agreed) classification of the master craftsperson qualification, the allocation to Level 6 is thoroughly justified in their opinion.

They note critically that specific examples are given as reference qualifications despite the planned **systemic allocation of qualification types**. This is thought to lead to confusion and uncertainty, mainly among those responsible for the non-specified qualifications. In their eyes this uncertainty would be enhanced by the use of the word “typically”, as this term rather excludes other qualifications and cannot be interpreted as meaning “by way of example”. They repeatedly demand that the qualification type should be specified and some examples should be mentioned in brackets.

Chapter “Description of qualifications”:

The majority of the workshop participants **agree with** the template although they rate the involved **work and research effort required** as considerable. They advocate linking this description with other, already existing instruments – such as the **Europass Certificate Supplement** – to take advantage of synergies and avoid the creation of overlaps. It is seen as **positive** that the template needs to be filled in for all qualifications, both from the formal and the non-formal segment, because, in this way, the template provides a standardised description for relevant information on qualifications, which can be retrieved by interested people via the NQF register.

The participants are particularly critical of the issue of “**costs for the acquisition of the qualification**”, because on the one hand it is not clear what costs exactly this refers to, and on the other hand the costs can often be identified only with difficulty. In addition they question the importance of this information for the decision on classification. They suggest deleting this category from the template.

Regarding the **statistical data** (“indicators”) they observe that due to the lack of relevant facts and figures and the research effort required, some qualification providers will surely refrain from submitting an application for classification. It should be ensured that not only large providers which boast the necessary staff and financial resources should be able to file an application but rather

that all have the same opportunities.

The workshop participants suggest including the **certificate’s period of validity** in the template as information. It should be specified clearly on what version of the legal basis (in the formal segment) and on what description (in the non-formal segment) the qualification is based on (specific year, reference number, etc.). There should also be information on how long the certificate is valid and what continuing education and training (CET) requirements it is connected with.

The **qualification’s profile** should be specified in greater detail. It would be desirable to include some data about how detailed (e.g. by giving more specific information on contents) and long (e.g. by specifying the number of words) the information in this field of the template should be.

They also advocate specifying a **quality management system** as binding rather than – as is currently the case – requesting information about quality assurance measures with the note “if applicable”.

Publication in general

Overall the publication is received **positively** by the workshop participants. However, they suggest clearly stating in the introduction **what the NQF can do and what it cannot do** in order to remove any misunderstandings. At present a lot of informative work still needs to be conducted to inform all those involved about what is connected with the NQF and what consequences it has. In addition it would be desirable to point towards **future developments** (e.g. the competence orientation of curricula).

Regarding the publication’s graphic design they recommend integrating **informative and illustrative diagrams** because, on the one hand, these convey the message clearly and concisely and, on the other hand, enhance user-friendliness. They also think that more **examples** (e.g. in the sections “Requirements on qualifications” and “Description of qualifications”) should be given.

The entire study can be obtained from ibw as a print copy (ibw-Forschungsbericht Nr. 160) or [online](#).