

NQF law enters into force on 15 March 2016

The Federal Act on the National Qualifications Framework (*Bundesgesetz über den Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmen* or *NQR-Gesetz*) will enter into force on 15 March and thus officially establish the NQF in Austria. At the same time, this law marks the end of an extended development process which aimed to specify the key points of the NQF with broad participation of relevant stakeholder groups. These points are now laid down with legal effect in the NQF law. This creates a clear basis for allocating qualifications.

The objectives and non-objectives of the NQF are set out at the start of the law: the objective of the NQF is to promote the transparency and comparability of qualifications in Austria and Europe but it will not have any legal impact on professional or other rights and entitlements (i.e. the Austrian NQF is not a regulatory framework). The NQF will be a private-sector service provided by the federal government rather than part of the government's administrative jurisdiction.

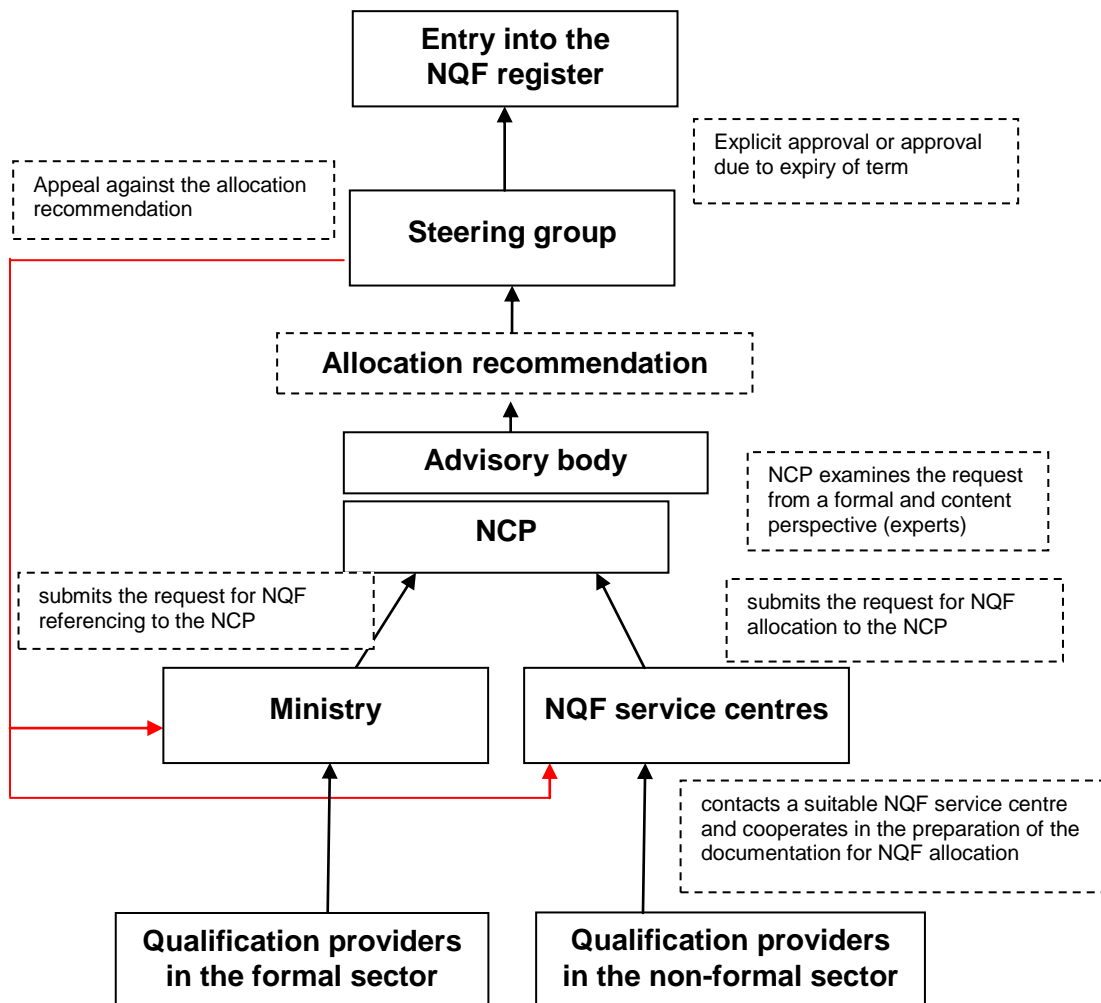
At the core of the NQF law there are provisions governing the design of the allocation procedure of qualifications as well as the responsible bodies and institutions. According to the law, NQF allocations are based on the descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and of the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (the so-called Dublin descriptors). In this way, a 'Y-model' is legally enshrined, based on which bachelor's, master's and PhD/doctoral degrees are directly classified to levels 6, 7 and 8. All the other qualifications are classified on the basis of an allocation request.

One major part of the law is the definition of tasks assigned to relevant NQF bodies. The NQF Coordination Point (NCP) will be in charge of examining allocation requests from a formal and content-related perspective, and for this task it can use the know-how of relevant experts. An NQF Advisory Board will be set up to advise the NQF Coordination Point. It will comprise seven experts from various qualification contexts (from 'professional practice' and from 'initial, further and continuing education and training', as formulated by the law). Following the examination of the allocation requests, the NCP will submit an allocation recommendation to the NQF steering group. This central political body will comprise representatives of the different ministries, social partners, interest representations of higher education establishments and adult education, Public Employment Service Austria, the federal youth representation and the provinces. The NQF steering group will advise the federal ministries coordinating the NQF (the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy) on strategic matters and will have the right to appeal against the NCP's allocation recommendations.

As regards the allocation procedure, the law distinguishes between the classification of formal (i.e. legally regulated) and non-formal (i.e. not legally regulated) qualifications (cf. Diagram 1). In both cases it will be necessary to submit an allocation request to the NCP with a detailed description of the qualification, related learning outcomes and its assessment procedure. The applicants for formal qualifications are the federal ministries that are in charge of these qualifications. The applicants for non-formal qualifications are so-called NQF

service centres, which aim to serve as intermediaries between the providers of non-formal qualifications and the NQF bodies. The reason for the establishment of intermediary service centres stems from the fact that there are no superordinate responsibilities or competences for non-formal qualifications. The NQF service centres aim to support the qualification providers in the classification process and safeguard the quality and validity of allocation requests. They will be nominated by the Ministry of Education in consultation with the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy and will be authorised to submit requests for allocation on behalf of qualification providers.

Diagram 1 Classification procedure



NCP = NQF National Coordination Point
Source: ibw based on the NQF law

Following the entry into force of the law, formal qualifications will be classified first. After the establishment of NQF service centres (expected for the end of 2016/beginning of 2017) the first allocations of non-formal qualifications will be made.

For more information on the Austrian NQF please refer to:

Mayr, Thomas und Tritscher-Archan, Sabine (2016): Der österreichische Qualifikationsrahmen: Umsetzungsstand, Ziele und Erwartungen [The Austrian Qualifications Framework: Status of Implementation, Objectives and Expectations]. ibw aktuell no. 18. Vienna. Download: http://www.ibw.at/images/aktuell/oesterreichische_qualifikationsrahmen.pdf (retrieved on 3.3.2016)