



# CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (CDP) 2021

THEMATIC CDP BRIEFS **11**

## Governance and Management of NQFs

## AFRICAN CONTINENTAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF)

Capacity development programme (CDP) 2021



### Thematic CDP brief 11 Governance and Management of NQFs

This brief explores different models of NQF governance, with emphasis on the role of legislation, institutions, stakeholders, and quality assurance. Effective NQF governance needs to take account of the wider qualifications eco-system.



#### INTRODUCTION

For an NQF to function as intended it must be governed and managed properly. Governance is the setting of strategic direction and determination of the NQF policy. It is usually carried out by a board, although the nature of the arrangements for governance will depend on the organizational structure of the NQF and what has been set out in the law. Management is the implementation of the agreed policy, usually carried out by executive officers in the main organization that are responsible for managing the NQF. Management will usually be accountable to the governing board. It is normal international practice for the management of the NQF to be assigned to a standalone body, such as a national qualifications authority, which is independent of the government but accountable to it.

#### 1.1 Governance of the NQF

NQFs do not operate in isolation. The effectiveness and impact of NQFs is a function of many factors, notably their contextualization in the qualifications system. The objectives defined for the NQF and the national or regional context in which NQFs evolve influence the governance models and the interplay between key stakeholders and lead institutions. There are at least three reasons why a national authority (unit/agency) tasked with the implementation of the NQF is recommended. These include:

- The interests of government in an NQF are strategic. They lie in ensuring that certain broad policy goals are achieved. The process of building an NQF may involve disagreements among social partners in which the government may not wish to get directly involved
- An NQF will be more successful if it generates a sense of ownership among the social partners, and education and training providers. This is easier to achieve if the government is not seen to be directly managing the process
- From a practical point of view, NQF management is an ongoing operational responsibility that government may prefer to allocate to a separate body.

#### Governance entails two key issues:

- Coordination of policy across government ministries thus ensuring adequate involvement of stakeholders, usually across two ministries, being education and labour, will have a strong interest in the NQF. It is not recommended, however, that the national agency responsible for the NQF be directly accountable to two ministries; that would be a recipe for confusion and non-accountability. It is necessary for the government to decide which ministry has the lead role, but also to create an effective internal policy coordination mechanism.

➤ Involvement of the stakeholders is vital to ensure that the agency responsible for the NQF maintains its flexibility and responsiveness, avoids becoming overly bureaucratic and works existing institutions. Adequate involvement of stakeholders may be achieved in three main ways. These include:

- a. Representation of all categories of stakeholders on the governing board of the agency. These include workers unions, employers, and professional bodies etc. This will enable the stakeholders to have a say in the overall direction of NQF implementation. A situation where board members are appointed for their skills rather than to represent particular constituencies. As the key informants of labour market information and as facilitators of better recognition of workers' skills, employers' and workers' organizations can play an active role in both approaches.
- b. To establish a series of sector councils or committees, each representing a broad occupational or subject area. Particularly in respect of vocational, higher education or university level qualifications, the stakeholders will want to be able to influence the pattern of developments. In some countries, industry-based training organizations have also played a major role in developing skills/competency standards (e.g. UK)
- c. Agreed consultation procedures should be established to ensure that employers, trade unions, community and civil society organizations, and education and training providers have the opportunity to express their views directly and not just through their representatives on the governing board or sector councils. This is an area which can usually be dealt with through the formal legislative instruments which establish the NQF, by giving it a duty to take account of the views of stakeholders.

## 1.2 NQF Management

For an NQF to operate effectively and with a systemic perspective, four sets of functions are to be considered:

- Management of the framework
- Standards and qualifications development
- Quality assurance of education and training providers
- Assessment and certification.

## 1.3 Roles of the NQF Management Body

The national agency responsible for the governance and management of the NQF usually has the following functions:

- Developing, implementing and reviewing NQF procedures
- Consulting with stakeholders on NQF development and implementation
- Registering qualifications on the NQF
- Disseminating public information and advice on the NQF
- Advising the ministry (ministries) on policy and resource implications.

The staffing and resource requirements for an agency with the above responsibilities (i.e. with no responsibilities for developing standards or qualifications, or conducting assessment processes) would be relatively light. If there are existing agencies responsible for curriculum and qualifications development and for assessment and certification, the role of the NQF body can be confined to the core functions outlined above. This would create the preconditions for a linked framework, with the NQF agency responsible for the overall development and maintenance of the framework, and other national agencies, or the education and training institutions themselves, responsible for managing curriculum and qualifications development, assessment and certification in line with NQF policies.

When designing the NQF and its roles, it is important that a clear map of existing institutions and their mandates be identified and respected. This will ensure that the NQF does not duplicate the work of these other agencies, and that way it will have a better chance of performing its roles and responsibilities. In some countries, there are regulatory bodies for the technical-vocational education and training (TVET), university and other sectors. The roles of these institutions should be carefully isolated from those of the NQF.

Structures akin to the model described above have been adopted in England, Australia, Kenya, South Africa and Ireland. New Zealand offers a different model in that one body is responsible for managing the NQF, development of standards for qualifications and assessment/quality assurance of assessment for these qualifications, except in the university sector. Scotland lies somewhere between these two models. The role of the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#) is akin to that of the [New Zealand Qualifications Authority](#), covering all school and VET qualifications. Since the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) includes higher education, which has its own representative and quality assurance bodies, a stakeholder

committee has been established to coordinate the work of SQA and these higher education bodies in developing the SCQF. However, it seems likely that, as the SCQF takes in the qualifications of other awarding bodies, such as professional bodies, Scotland will evolve towards a model like the above.

Two general issues are worth highlighting: (i) the extent to which the 'NQF body' has a strong regulatory function. In most

countries, this is the case. In Australia and Scotland, however, the NQF body has an advisory or coordinating function; decision-making powers rest with bodies responsible for component parts of the framework, and (ii) whether the NQF body is responsible only for management of the framework or whether it also has responsibilities for standards and qualifications development, and assessment and certification (as in New Zealand and Scotland).



## THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

**Countries in Africa need to speed up their NQF implementation. After an initial surge five or six years ago, especially in Southern Africa, in most cases, the momentum is slowing. Many are yet to start establishing their NQFs, and even where they are established, their effectiveness remains questionable. Most of the countries aiming at an NQF have a consensus to proceed, have NQF laws, and have allocated roles to institutions. Some have developed implementation plans, designed quality assurance systems, and have developed criteria for structure and content of qualifications framework.**

Some have been piloting new methodologies and approaches. A few are already at the real implementation stage where they have qualifications in their framework levels. These are significant advances, however, a broad majority are somewhere in the middle – their NQFs are partially implemented. It is generally agreed that an NQF is useful – they see NQFs working in some neighboring countries. For NQFs to succeed, they need sound governance and management. This brief explores how NQFs can be governed and managed for them to be effective so that they can fulfil the purposes for which they were set up.

For this to work, one has to look at the laws, stakeholders, institutions and quality assurance systems. In this brief we explore how AU member countries organize their qualification systems to produce better qualifications, and how they are seeking to re-structure to support reform. We look at the systems, institutions, actors, and processes involved, and how regulation and legislation, stakeholder interaction, institutional arrangements, and quality assurance arrangements contribute to improved qualifications. This brief offers new countries a possible pathway on how they organize and manage the NQFs. As Africa becomes more integrated with the rest of the world,

there is need for assurance that the qualifications that countries in Africa produce are good, up to standards, and meet both national and international expectations.

### 2.1 Building from scratch

NQFs are a relatively new phenomena in Africa. Different countries have established NQFs with different legal frameworks and objectives. Because of their recent nature, many NQFs have run into legal competition with existing institutions. This has led to fragmentation and slow take off. Qualification systems are effective if the organizational arrangements which comprise them work together to ensure that more individuals have access to, and can choose and obtain qualifications that are fit for purpose, meet the needs of society, and offer opportunities for employment, recognition, career development, and lifelong learning.

These organizational arrangements are not usually implemented systemically or in a linear fashion, but rather organically over time. They have strong interdependencies and should be viewed as part of a common system of governance (or organization) of qualification systems. We identify four elements common to all qualification systems: legislation, stakeholder involvement, institutional arrangements, and quality assurance.

Legislation is a fundamental enabler of the production of better qualifications. We look at eight key parts of legislation for a systemic approach towards better qualifications, starting with the basic purpose and principles involved, and covering the main components that laws are designed to regulate. Examining the legislative process reveals the importance of aligning old and

new legislation, and highlights key differences between primary and secondary legislation. Different legal and cultural traditions inform the way countries strike a balance between tight and loose legislation, and influence accepted ways of involving stakeholders. Critically, the discussion turns to how to ensure that legislation can be implemented. Drawing on research into legislation in eleven countries, we refer to a range of legislative processes, participants, and outcomes that concretely illustrate what can otherwise be a somewhat abstract discussion.

## 2.2 Organizing Qualification Frameworks

Part of the reason why NQFs are important is because they help to better coordinate qualifications and bring harmony in the countries where they exist. Hence there is always a need to better organize an effective and efficient qualification system to make effective system-wide and system-deep reforms. The reforms are needed to create a clear understanding of the distinction between the term ‘national qualifications framework’ and the qualification system.

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are tools which classify qualifications according to a hierarchy of levels, typically in a grid structure. Each level is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes applicable at that level. Levels vary in number as determined by national need. Qualifications are allocated to NQF levels based on learning outcomes. An NQF helps to classify the qualifications in order to distinguish and to link them. NQFs can have additional functions in terms of criteria for describing qualifications (e.g. by type, purpose, pathways, unit structures, or credit values) and for adopting qualifications to the NQF register. An NQF brings order to the landscape of qualifications. A national qualifications framework is thus a specific policy instrument that functions as a tool within an overall qualification system. A qualification system is everything in a country’s education and training system which leads to the issuing of a qualification: schools, authorities, stakeholder bodies, laws, institutions, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks. All countries have qualifications, so all have qualification systems (ETF, 2016).

## 2.3 Critical components in Managing NQFs

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are complex and consolidate a large number of interests in any given country. Stakeholder engagement should articulate labour

market needs and other stakeholders needs to contribute to qualifications that are relevant to the changing needs of the country so that they are attractive to the learner. There is need for a systemic way of identifying and engaging with all stakeholders, and avoiding sabotage and undermining of the NQFs by disgruntled stakeholders. With the participation and inclusion of most (if not all) stakeholders, new partnerships can be built to produce better qualifications, and make better and more binding decisions. Once stakeholders are identified, there is a need to develop a communication strategy that fits each of them, both in the short and long term. Distinguishing between stakeholders with differing levels of interest in -, and power to affect reforms is vital, as it has long-term implications on the success of the NQF.

Qualification systems are effective if the organizational arrangements work together properly to achieve the intended objectives of the NQF. This means creating a system that consistently produces high-quality qualifications that meet the national standards and need. There are four components in the organization of a qualification system, which are common to all systems and are independent of local or other specific environmental factors (ETF, 2016). These include:

- Legal and regulatory context
- Effective stakeholder dialogue
- Institutional arrangements
- Quality assurance arrangements.

### 2.3.1 Legal and regulatory context

Rather than looking at national differences, we wish to identify the commonalities for well-functioning systems. Within these four fundamental building blocks, it is possible to identify what works and what does not, and the best practices from those who have been doing it for a long time.

Laws or regulations stipulate functions of the NQF and criteria for qualifications, and allocate tasks and responsibilities to associated institutions. They also regulate the rules of the game so that each party can play their role fully within the system. Laws or regulations often specify the practical purpose of the NQF, articulating the basic requirements for qualifications that are part of the framework, their relationships, and how they are used.

Legislation is needed to enable reform and confirm changes in policies, and to regulate the qualification system. This helps to facilitate the quality and comparability of individual qualifications, and ensures the necessary resources and capacities are set aside to move from pilots to system-wide implementation.

Laws can be enablers, but can also create rigidities that only inhibit reform. Legislation is a process, and laws are likely to be amended during the early years of implementation. A single act, legislating the NQF, the qualifications agency, or standards and vocational qualifications, often proves a blunt instrument. Education or labour laws need to be adapted as well, to integrate the principles of the qualification system reforms.

### 2.3.2 Effective stakeholder dialogue

Effective stakeholder dialogue is about making sure that all are committed to making better qualifications, and are engaged in the necessary processes. This doesn't mean getting as many organizations as possible involved, but making sure that all those who need to be involved can participate, understand what is expected from them, and know how to contribute. Stakeholder involvement can strengthen ownership and relevance of qualifications, and their acceptance in both the labour market and the education system. Stakeholders can be involved at different levels, in setting policies or in implementation.

It is important to note that the private sector is the main motor for employment growth in partner countries, even if the public sector remains an important part of national economies. Generally, the participation of the private sector in qualification systems is weak. The problem is often recognized by public actors who show readiness to legislate, organize, and even subsidize private sector involvement. The main challenge is to engage representatives from the private sector effectively in a structural capacity to work on improving qualifications. Another essential group of stakeholders is education and training providers. They can become the main obstacle to system-deep reforms if they have not been engaged in the process.

### 2.3.3 Institutional arrangements

The responsibilities and possible institutional arrangements that can support effective implementation of an NQF need to be clarified, by reviewing both existing institutional capacities and the need for additional capacities. In some cases, this will include creating new, specialized institutions for coordination and quality assurance, or for developing, assessing, or awarding qualifications. Institutions are needed to ensure a professional process for the development and use of qualifications; to organize the involvement of stakeholders; and to coordinate between different actors at different levels. In so doing, they can empower the developers and users of qualifications to fulfil their functions effectively, and to externally quality assure the work performed by different actors so that qualifications are trusted.

### 2.3.4 Quality assurance

The main function of quality assurance is to provide more confidence in qualifications and the competence of people who hold qualifications. Quality assurance focuses on two aspects: i. ensuring that all qualifications that are part of the NQF register are relevant and have value, and that all the people who are certificated meet the conditions of the qualification; ii. Quality assurance of the qualification system in its totality also plays an important role in regularly reviewing the functionality of the arrangements, as priorities for implementing the NQF are frequently changing.

The issue of quality is an integrated part of the system of governance, rather than a separate issue. This is by no means a new insight as the 'regulatory' approach always had within it the issue of regulating the qualifications and the actors involved in qualifications frameworks. Moreover, since the lack of trust in existing qualifications and arrangements is one of the main drivers for greater transparency, a stronger focus on learning outcomes, and the comparability of qualifications, quality has never been decoupled from legal and institutional arrangements.

At the heart of our overall rationale for getting organized through an NQF is the belief that comprehensive, coherent systems produce better qualifications.

### 3 FINANCING OF NQFS

It is necessary to estimate the cost of managing the NQF and much of this cost will be the setting up and running costs of the body or bodies responsible for this role. Also, it will facilitate smoother implementation if the body that is to be responsible for NQF implementation is also involved in the design. There will be many costs associated with running the NQF. These include personal costs, training and capacity development costs, research and outreach costs, and costs for developing guides, tools and standards etc.

Since qualifications are a public good; it is always better that NQFs and the bodies that run them are financed through disbursements from government. This will also help to protect the NQFs from competing private interests in case private companies start to finance the NQFs process and institutions. The amount of funds required depends on the size of the NQF management body and the roles and responsibilities that it plays. It is important that the NQF is well funded to help create confidence in national qualifications.

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Send us your questions and suggestions!  
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