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THEMATIC CDP BRIEFS 8

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN A CHANGING WORLD

ACQF
African Continental Qualifications Framework

African Union

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African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)

Capacity development programme 2021-2022

Thematic Brief 8 - Qualifications Frameworks in a changing world

This Thematic brief provides an overview on developments of national and regional qualifications frameworks, based on global inventories, African mapping studies and experience-sharing activities of the ACQF development project

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Acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
AU	African Union
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NAQAA	National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority
NQF	national qualifications framework
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation
QA	quality assurance
RPL	recognition of prior learning
RQF	regional qualifications framework
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
TVET	technical vocational education and training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	vocational education and training

1 Qualifications frameworks in a changing world

Countries and regions are interested in attaining wide-ranging transparency of qualifications and credentials of all levels and sectors. This implies developing broad systemic approaches to qualifications, flexible and oriented to lifelong learning, integrating digital interoperative instruments for easier information-sharing on qualifications for institutions and the wider public.

The well-known publication "Qualifications systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning" (OECD, 2007) highlighted that "In the quest for more and better lifelong learning, there is a growing awareness that qualifications systems must play a part".

The rapid transformations of our societies, economies, work, and learning have accelerated in the context of the global Covid19 Pandemic. The imperative of the green and digital transitions permeates development policies and large-scale recovery plans in many countries and regions. Learning is now everywhere, anytime. Half of the working population will need upskilling at horizon 2025, to be able to stay employable and competitive in a context of rapidly changing tasks and occupational roles, work with automated processes and advanced technologies, and with growing demands related to the greening of enterprises and production processes. Skills are the new energy of recovery in fair and sustainable societies.

Qualifications are changing, and education and training institutions must open up to new types of learning, be learner-centred, and recognise learning outcomes from non-formal and informal contexts. New concepts and instruments, such as micro-credentials, and digital technologies to recognise learning (digital certificates) are gradually becoming part of the mainstream reality of our education and training systems. Qualifications frameworks have a window of opportunity to contribute to rethinking learning, skills, and work.

1.1 NQFs continue to spread globally

Qualifications frameworks have been in development in different regions of the globe for approximately four decades. The National qualifications frameworks (NQF) with the longest experience are those of Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland, England, and France. Noticeable examples on the African continent of NQFs with longstanding experience, are in Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, and South Africa.

The development of qualifications frameworks around the world shows no signs of abating, as highlights the *Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks,* a joint initiative of Cedefop, European Training Foundation (ETF) and Unesco, updated and renewed every two years (Cedefop, 2019). In 2021 a new version of the Inventory was concluded, to be published in 2022. The Global Inventory is a fundamental source of information, and the publication combines two volumes with complementary perspectives – one focuses on thematic analysis; the other is the actual inventory composed of standardised fiches of country and regional scope. According to the Inventory, over 150 countries have developed or are establishing national qualifications frameworks.

The dynamics of regional qualifications frameworks have been captured in 2021 by an inventory of global scope conducted by the ETF (ETF, 2021b). This overview took stock of seventeen regional qualifications frameworks initiatives across all continents, in various stages of development and implementation.

1.2 NQFs are developing in all regions of the African continent

NQFs in Africa are at different stages of development and implementation. Dynamics in the last three years show a surge in the number of countries starting development of NQFs, while others are adopting the policy and legal basis, putting in place governance structures and technical tools to operationalise the NQF.

The project developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF, 2021a), implemented under the umbrella of the African Union-European Union Partnership (period: 2019-2022), has produced
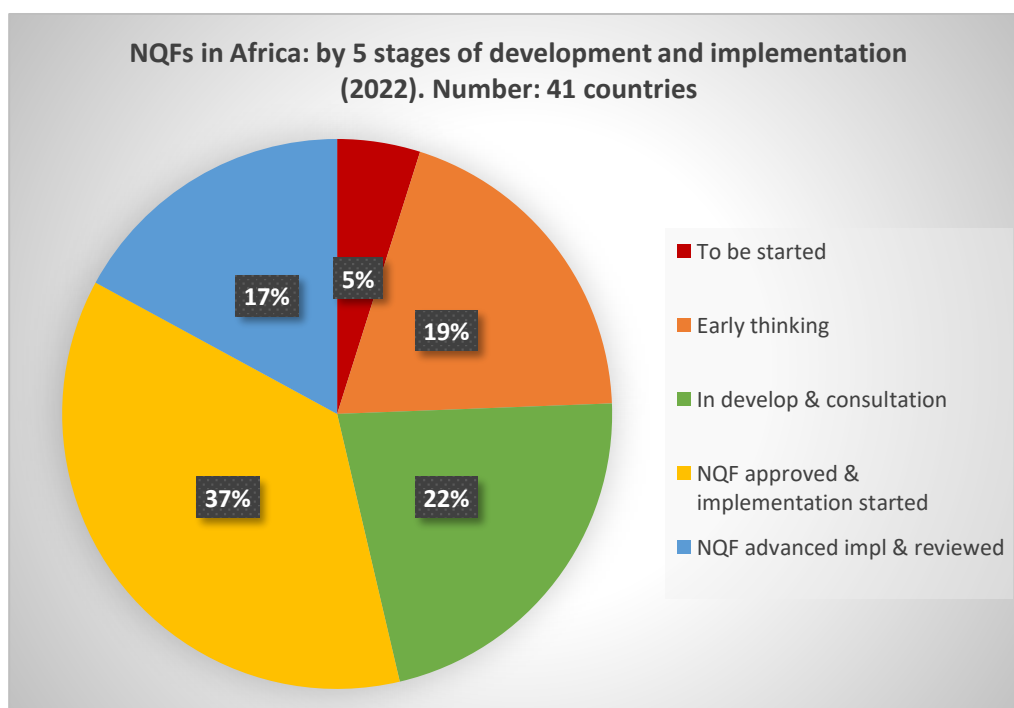
in 2020 the first comprehensive mapping study on qualifications frameworks and systems in Africa. This mapping study is a collection of 13 national reports, 3 regional reports and a comprehensive comparative analysis. Three country reports were updated in 2021 (Cape Verde, Egypt and Mozambique). The overview provided in this chapter is entirely based on ACQF research, accessible on the ACQF website. Complementary analyses and updates carried out by the ACQF project in 2021 show a dynamic process of development of new qualifications frameworks in different regions of the continent (table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1: Qualifications frameworks in Africa by stage of development and implementation - overview (end 2021). Highlighted: countries with qualifications framework of sectoral scope (mostly focused on qualifications of TVET systems)

Stage of NQF development and implementation	Number of NQFs Africa	Countries
NQF development to be started (2)	2	Chad, Republic of Congo
NQF in early thinking (8)	8	Burkina Faso, Union of Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, São Tomé e Príncipe, Togo
NQF in development and consultation (9)	9	Angola, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique (comprehensive), Sierra Leone, Somalia
NQF legal act approved, implementation started (15)	15	Burundi, Eswatini, Egypt, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe
NQF in advanced implementation and reviewed (7)	7	Cape Verde, Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Zambia

Source: Dataset of ACQF Mapping Study. ACQF. 2021d:7)

Figure 1: NQFs in Africa – distribution by stages of development. Number of countries included: 41.

NQFs in Africa: by 5 stages of development and implementation (2022). Number: 41 countries

- To be started — 5%
- Early thinking — 19%
- In develop & consultation — 22%
- NQF approved & implementation started — 37%
- NQF advanced impl & reviewed — 17%

Source: Database of ACQF project. [ACQF website - resources](#).

Up to now the Southern African Development Community has been the region with highest number of countries with developed and operational NQFs (ACQF, 2021a). But currently other regions are seeing a growing number of countries adopting NQFs and operationalising them. Rwanda and Egypt are amongst the most recent adopters of legal acts establishing the NQF: in October 2021 Rwanda approved a new comprehensive 10-level NQF, and Egypt approved the legal amendments establishing their 8-level NQF. Other countries are on the road to approve comprehensive NQFs in 2022. Moreover, several countries have started their processes of reflection, analysis, and inter-stakeholder consultation towards a future NQF – the cases of Guinea-Bissau and Cameroon are worth mentioning.

These developments are taking place in all regions of the continent. Some examples of recent dynamics of NQF development and implementation in all regions are summarised in table 2.

Table 2: High-level summary of NQF development in different regions of Africa.

Region in Africa	Some examples of NQF development processes and milestones
North	- In 2021-2022 Egypt approved legislative amendments on the NQF, establishes governance structures and NQF register of qualifications. - In 2021 Morocco works on legal basis and governance of the NQF; and on the register of qualifications. - In 2021-2022 Tunisia develops the concept and tools of the register of qualifications
West	- In 2020-2022 Cape Verde approved renewed legislation on the NQF and on the National Catalogue of Qualifications; reinforces the governance set-up; improves the website and tools of the NQF; started operationalization of the RPL system: methodology framework, training of assessors and facilitators, piloting RPL processes in key sectors and award of qualifications. - In 2020-2022 Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone are developing comprehensive NQFs. - Ghana takes steps to develop a comprehensive NQF, based on the experience of the TVET Qualifications Framework. - In 2021 The Gambia adopted the 10-levels NQF and started implementation, led by the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA). - In 2021-2022 Guinea-Bissau started reflection and analysis on the NQF, formed a dedicated multi-stakeholder working group and capacity development actions.
East	- Kenya made progress with the development of policies, standards and guidelines, e.g.: for developing national occupational standards and national curriculum development; on quality assurance of qualifications. Developed and tested RPL policy and Guidelines; Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. A new digital register of qualifications is in construction. - Rwanda approved in October 2021 the comprehensive NQF integrating all sub-sectors of education and training. - Burundi approved the NQF. - IGAD is developing a regional qualifications framework (RQF)
Central	- Cameroon resumed work on development of the policy and legal basis of NQF. - São Tomé and Príncipe started the first steps towards development of the NQF, with a baseline analysis, and capacity development actions.

Moving from initial concepts and plans on the NQF to adoption of policies and instruments can be more challenging and lengthier in some countries than in others. While in some contexts the national institutions

benefit from enabling conditions, such as socio-economic demand for better qualifications, active social partners, and technical and financial resources, in other contexts the implementation of education and training reforms and NQF projects is adversely affected by persisting political instability and insecurity. In many countries NQF development is related to wider reforms of education and training systems, reinforcement of employment policies, and often supported by international projects and expertise. In many cases the national authorities work with projects supported by the EU.

"Considering a total of 41 countries included in the data collected by the ACQF Mapping Study, the continent has a higher number of qualifications frameworks (approved, implementation started or implementation advanced) than other larger regions had when they enacted their overarching RQFs. Although thirteen years separate the advent of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the development of the ACQF, it is very useful to note that when the legal base of the EQF was approved (2008), only three countries had NQFs in place and operational (France, Ireland and the United Kingdom)." (ACQF. 2021d: 6).

The continent is creating a critical mass of NQFs, and this is good news for the much-needed transparency of qualifications, for the establishment of learning outcomes-based assessment and certification allowing people in Africa to obtain qualifications (or part thereof) via high-quality processes of recognition of prior learning (or 'validation des acquis de l'expérience'), as well as for the comparability of qualifications across countries, supporting more efficient processes of recognition and portability of qualifications for learners and workers.

1.3 A newcomer: ACQF

The ACQF, as continental policy instrument, is aimed at connecting all NQFs, supporting countries to develop their NQFs and tools, promoting information-sharing on qualifications of all types, levels and sub-sectors, and creating an area of trusted qualifications among all African countries and regions.

"The African continent is marked by a wide diversity of education and qualifications systems, with different structures and typology of qualifications and limited updated information on qualifications in the public domain. International qualifications related to dynamic professional sectors, technologies and global companies gain ground, but often are not linked with qualifications frameworks and systems. A range of new transversal, digital and green skills are required for people to be employable in the context of the transformation of work and learning, digitalisation of public and private organisations and demands for a greener and sustainable economy. Migrants and refugees carry potentialities, skills, and hopes for safer life and work – but often no qualifications documents. Furthermore, continental free trade has started operations in a range of sectors, a process likely to trigger demand for new skills and qualifications and more efficient recognition. The informal sector of the economy in Africa remains all important and there is a vast need for better quality programmes of recognition of prior learning and access to modular skills development opportunities with certification. The ACQF and the Qualifications Platform (database) will provide a contribution of continental scope to address these issues, complementing and enhancing national policies and systems and regional cooperation on these matters." (ACQF, 2021d: 5).

2 Key definitions

Literature on qualifications frameworks may sometimes be confusing, given the range and variety of qualifications and even the terminology used as these initiatives evolve. Qualifications frameworks are an aspect of a nation's qualifications system, which in turn is part of the larger education and training system. Qualifications systems can be defined as including all structures and activities leading to the award of a qualification, including the implementation of qualification policy, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, evaluation, and finally award processes.

National qualifications framework

The [European Qualifications Framework Recommendation of 2017](#) defines NQF as 'A policy and instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims at integrating and coordinating national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression, and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

According to the [ILO Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks (2007)](#), NQF is an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes – clear statements of what the learner must know or be able to do, whether learned in a classroom, on the job, or less formally. The qualifications framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another, within and across occupations or industrial sectors (and even across vocational and academic fields if the NQF is designed to include both vocational and academic qualifications in a single framework).

Qualifications system

This includes all aspects of a country's activity that lead to the award of recognised qualifications. These systems include the means used to develop and operationalise national or regional qualifications policy, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and award processes, recognition of skills and other mechanisms linking education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems can be more or less integrated and coherent. One of the features of a qualifications system can be an explicit qualifications framework ([OECD 2007](#)).

Regional qualifications framework

Definitions of a regional qualifications framework (RQF) tend to focus on what they do, rather than what they are. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Qualifications Reference Framework (ASEAN 2015: 17) offers the following useful definition of a RQF:

A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a geographical region. A means of enabling one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for a qualification in one country to be compared to a qualification from another country.

3   Objectives of NQFs

The ACQF Mapping study (ACQF, 2021) compared the stated objectives of NQFs in Africa, noting they are associated with a range of strategic and policy objectives, which can be clustered as related to:

- Integration, coherence and permeability between the learning outcomes and qualifications of sub-systems.
- Quality, transparency, enhanced visibility and trust of end-users: by introducing learning outcomes approaches, stakeholders' participation in qualifications development and approval, and accessible users' information through digital and online instruments.
- Parity of esteem and value of learning in different contexts and sub-systems: academic, vocational, formal and non-formal.
- Inclusion: qualifications can be obtained via validation of non-formal learning, recognition of experience from work and life, accessible for people with little schooling.
- Regional and global comparability and recognition of diplomas and certificates; and

- Wider societal and economic goals, in particular: increase the stock of the qualified labour force, enhanced employability of holders of qualifications, strengthen competitiveness and productivity of the economic sectors, align the qualifications system with demand and changing skills needs.

These observations of the ACQF Mapping study are well aligned with conclusions from a new global overview of NQFs. The analysis of information collected in 2021 on 87 NQFs from all regions of the world, as a contribution to the Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks) presents a similar view of a NQFs' objectives (Figure 2).

Among the commonly named objectives of NQFs, it is worth mentioning:

- Transparency, comparability, recognition of qualifications
- Lifelong learning, access, permeability, progression
- Integration of education and training sub-systems, parity of esteem
- Quality of education and training and qualifications
- Socio-economic goals: inclusion, employability, qualified labour force, matching with labour market needs
- International comparability and cooperation

Figure 2: Objectives of NQFs (87 countries, 2021).
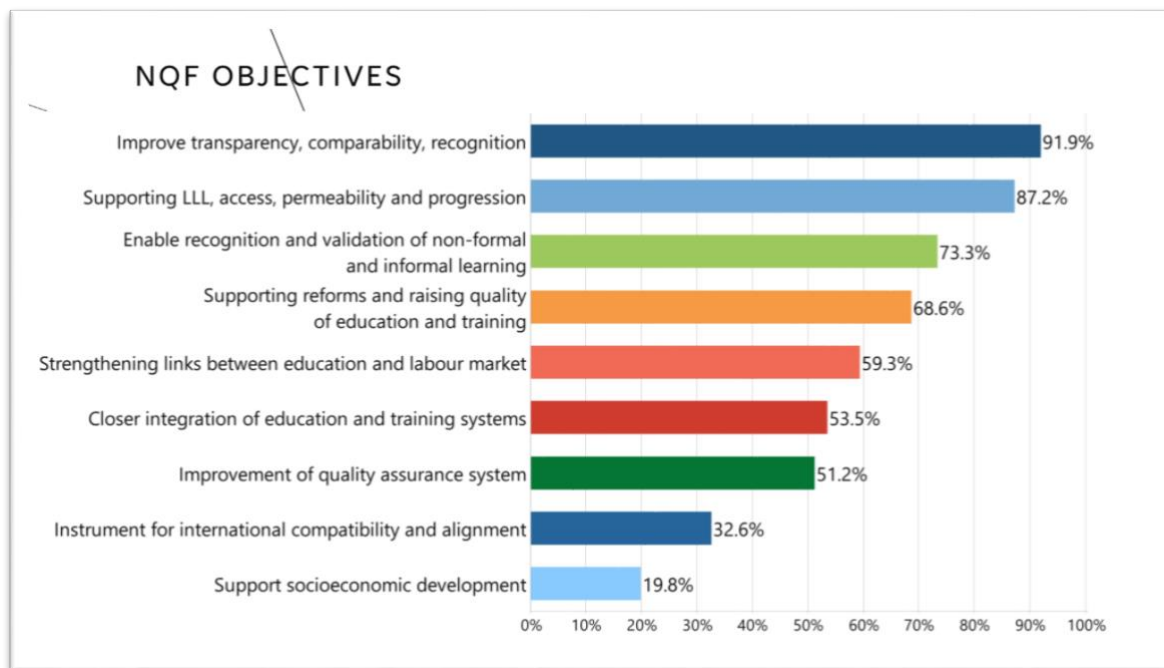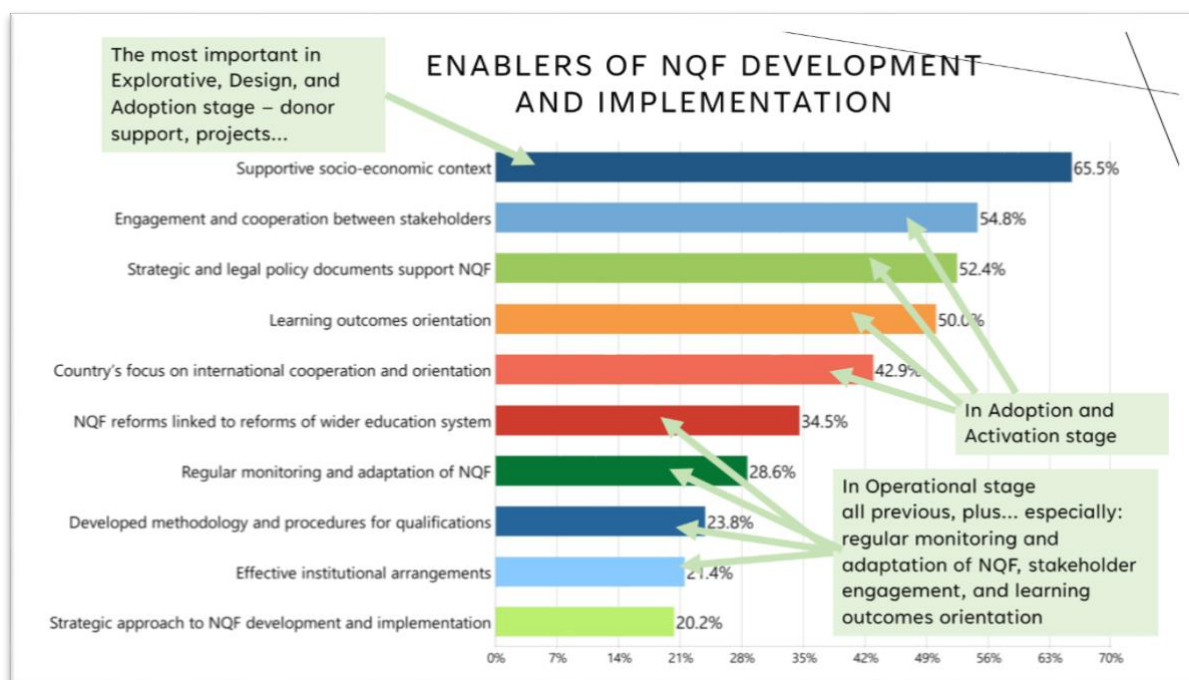

Source: ETF, working paper (2021)

4   Enablers of NQFs' development and implementation

The factors and conditions for moving from stated aspirations and objectives to policies, action and impact of NQFs is a subject of high importance. NQF histories in different countries vary. The processes from design and consultation to approval and start of implementation can take years in certain conditions; in certain cases the approved legal act of the NQF plays only a limited role in the eco-system of education and training, often due to lack of a robust strategy and governance. Change and reforms need enablers and support at all levels – macro, policy-makers, implementation agencies, providers at local level, socio-economic partners and civil society.

The analysis of information collected in 2021 on 87 NQFs from all regions of the world (related with the Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks), identified ten major enablers of NQF development and implementation, visualised in figure 3. This analysis considers the importance of different enablers by stage of NQF development and implementation.

- In the earlier stages of development (explorative, design and adoption stage): the supporting socio-economic context appears as an important enabler. Support from partners and projects, and buy-in of stakeholders from the worlds of education and work belong to this category of enablers.
- In the intermediary stages (adoption and activation), major enablers include: engagement and cooperation between stakeholders, strategic and legal policy documents supporting NQF, learning outcomes orientation and focus on international cooperation.
- In the more advanced stages (operational), NQFs need such enablers as: linking of NQF reforms to reforms of the wider education system; regular monitoring and adaptation of the NQF, methodology and procedures for awarding qualifications; as well as effective institutional arrangements.

Figure 3: Enablers of NQFs development and implementation (87 countries, 2021).

Source: ETF, working paper (2021)

5   Scope of qualifications frameworks

In general, a qualifications framework serves as a mechanism for classifying qualifications according to a hierarchy of levels of complexity and, in many cases, it also includes a volume of learning measures.

The scope of frameworks in AU countries may be **inclusive and comprehensive** (all levels and subsectors of qualifications, learning outcomes and pathways) or may be limited to specific sectors of education – for example, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), known as **sectoral qualifications frameworks**.

Over the last four decades, qualifications frameworks have also been developed at sectoral levels, sometimes within a country, and in other cases between countries but limited to one sector, and at

transnational levels. However, the most frequent qualification framework development cases were observed at national and regional levels.

Most NQFs in the world are comprehensive and inclusive. Their conceptual-technical design, level structure and learning outcomes embrace all levels of qualifications from all (sub)-sectors of education and training: from primary to higher education. Some NQFs are increasingly open to qualifications from outside of formal education and training.

Table 3 summarises two dimensions of analysis on the scope of NQFs: a) comprehensiveness of levels of qualification; b) openness to qualifications outside of the formal education system.

Table 3: Scope of NQFs (87 countries, 2021).

Dimension	Distribution (%)			
a) scope - levels	NQF includes all levels: **88%**	NQF includes only TVET qualifications: **9%**	NQF includes only higher education qualifications: **5%**	NQF includes only occupational qualifications: **2%**
b) scope – qualifications outside formal education	NQF includes only qualifications from formal education: **45%**	NQF includes qualifications from formal plus outside formal system: **26%**	No data provided: **17%**	

Source: ETF working paper (2021).

In several African countries, development of the NQF started from initiatives related with reforms and revitalisation of the TVET system, supported by international partners and donors. The ACQF Mapping Study analyses cases in which two qualifications frameworks (higher education and TVET) have co-existed for years, before the national stakeholders and authorities decided to move to design a comprehensive and integrated qualifications framework. Cases illustrating this trend include Ghana, Malawi, and Mozambique.

6   Level descriptors in qualifications frameworks

In NQFs and RQFs, each of the levels is described by a set of *descriptors*, which indicate the learner acquisitions (not the years of study). *Level descriptors* are formulated on the basis of horizontal logic (through the domains of learning) and vertical logic (progression from lower to higher levels). Level descriptors of NQFs and RQFs translate the nature and scope of the qualifications framework. Level descriptors are called "The 'glue' in qualifications frameworks" (ETF, 2021c: 12).

In the document *Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework* (SAQA 2012), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) states that the purpose of level descriptors (levels 1 to 10) is to ensure coherence in learning achievement in the allocation of qualifications and part qualifications to particular levels, and to facilitate the assessment of the national and international comparability of qualifications and part qualifications.

SAQA (2012) defines *level descriptors* as follows:

> 'Level descriptor' means that statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of the NQF that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level (SAQA 2012: 4).

In addition, SAQA (2012) notes:

- there is one common set of level descriptors for the NQF to be used in different contexts;

- the NQF level descriptors are designed to meet the needs of academic as well as occupational qualifications;
- level descriptors are descriptive and not prescriptive; and
- level descriptors do not describe years of study.

The AQRF notes that learning outcomes are:

> A general statement that summarises the learning outcomes appropriate to a specific level in a qualifications framework. They are usually grouped in domains of learning (2018: 31).

Level descriptors are formulated as learning outcomes, which are statements of what the learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at completion of a process and period of learning.

Level descriptors are fundamental elements of the technical-conceptual design of qualifications frameworks. Level descriptors are designed to act as a guide and a starting point for, inter alia:

- pegging a qualification at an appropriate level on the NQF, used together with purpose statements, outcomes and assessment criteria;
- writing learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria for qualifications and part qualifications;
- validation of acquired skills, knowledge and competence against a particular level for an award; and
- assisting learners to gain admission through RPL at an appropriate level on the NQF (SAQA 2012: 4–5).

The General Directorate of National Qualifications Framework of the Kingdom of Bahrain (n.d.) published a guidance note, *Using the NQF level descriptors*, clarifying how the role of level descriptors can be optimised in the real work of qualifications developers and assessors, noting their possibilities and limitations. A few suggestions from Bahrain's guidance note:

> NQF level descriptors are used along with other sources of information to place qualifications on the NQF. Other sources, which will become more widely available as qualifications, are placed on the NQF, include subject benchmarks, qualifications at the same level, and comparable qualifications on other frameworks.

> NQF level descriptors are not qualification specifications. On the contrary, while level descriptors confirm learning outcomes for a series of predefined characteristics, qualification specifications (descriptors) set out:

> - What the learner is expected to do on successful completion of the qualification on the qualification structure i.e. level and number of units;
> - The minimum number and level of credits required at each level.

> The NQF level descriptors are generic and equally applicable to academic, vocational and work-based qualifications. There will be qualifications with units that comprise learning outcomes at different levels, and it may also be that one or more of the sub-strands does not appear in particular units. A best-fit approach is used to determine the level of the units of a qualification on the NQF.

> Professional judgement can be assisted by reading and becoming familiar with the level descriptors in order to make an informed determination as to where a qualification sits and to provide supporting rationales that can be understood by others who may not be expert in the subject/discipline area.

> Although level descriptors can act as a useful guide when designing qualifications, it is not recommended that the design of a qualification be based solely on these descriptors. It is important

that qualifications are designed to meet the needs of learners and other stakeholders such as employers, universities and training institutions.

To help with interpretation of the level descriptors, the Bahrain Qualifications Authority developed a glossary of words and terms in which the meaning is provided specifically in relation to the NQF. To become familiar with the progressive nature of the language being used, it can be useful to consider and compare key words used within the level descriptors.

The Bahrain Qualifications Authority provides guidance on the formulation of progression between levels. An example:

'At Level 4, learners would not cover all the theories of the subject/discipline, only some of them, with a decision on the eventual number being covered left to those designing the qualification. At Level 5, learners would cover more of the main theories. Theories are not directly referenced in Level 6, being already covered in Levels 4 and 5, but this does not prevent the continuance of activity relating to core theories at Level 6. At Level 7, learners would study more in-depth theories that are central to the subject/discipline.'

Figure 4: NQFs in Africa – overview of level structure
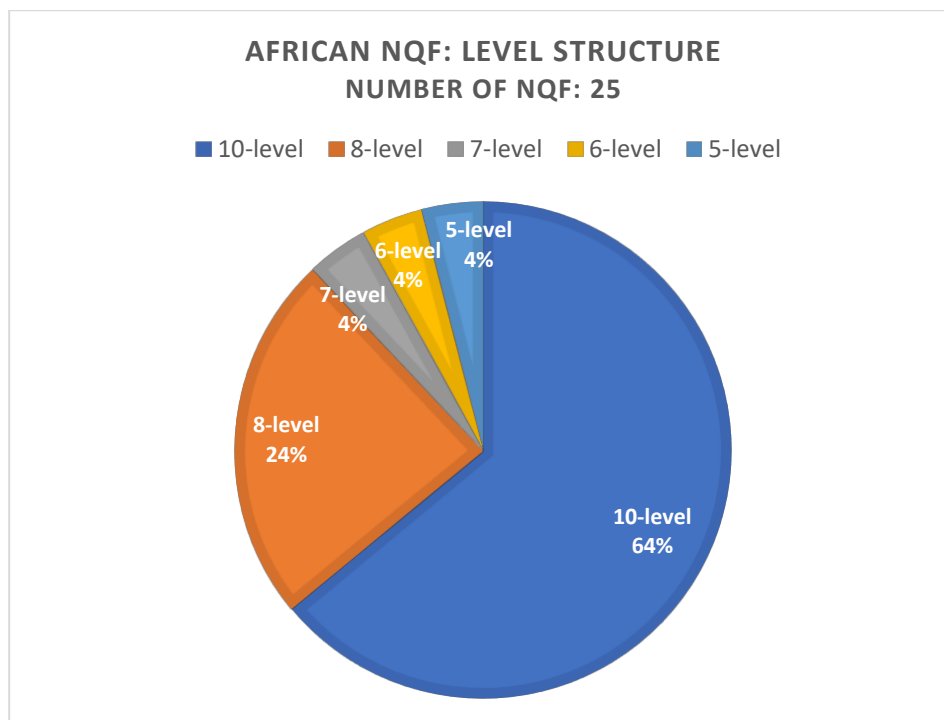
Source: ACQF Database of African NQFs.

NQFs in Africa are predominantly comprehensive, inclusive of all sub-sectors and levels, although a few countries have been implementing sectoral qualifications frameworks (TVET or HE separately) and are planning or started integration into comprehensive frameworks (refer to Table 1).

Considering 25 NQFs in African countries (22 NQFs approved and three in development and consultation), there is a predominance of the ten-level structure (16 countries, including 13 members of the Southern African Development Community). Six NQFs are eight-level, and one has seven levels. Among the NQFs covering one sector (TVET), the level structure spans from eight levels (e.g., Ghana) to six (Nigerian National Skills Qualifications Framework) and five levels (Senegal - TVET) – Figure 4.

7 NQFs: elements for a systemic view

7.1 NQFs do not work in isolation

- NQFs do not work in isolation. They must be articulated with the wider education, training and lifelong learning eco-system and be supported by a range of policies, standards and instruments, and by using the potentialities of digitalisation of processes and services.
- NQFs are not the panacea of all problems in education and qualifications systems. NQFs are "not quick fixes".

But they contribute to systemic change, if they are fit for purpose, supported by participative governance, equipped with capacities, tools and resources, and work in complementarity with other components of the education and lifelong learning system, and in synergy with other relevant domains of policy (e.g. labour market and employment, migration, skills for economic sectors, greening and digitalisation).

NQFs need to be conceived for action and implementation, based on a strategic and systemic perspective (Figure 5).

- To be effective, every NQFs needs a combination of enablers: leadership and institutions, legislation, stakeholders, and quality assurance (ETF. 2017). It is not enough to validate and approve the NQF policy document, legal act and implementation regulations. Operationalisation of the NQF requires political will, governance, shared goals, and instruments.
- The governance setting of the NQF must provide for planning and support to operationaiisation, coordination with stakeholders from the worlds of education and work, resources and instruments, analysis and monitoring, dissemination, and outreach to users of all groups.
- Countries in the process of initiating or consolidating their NQF development can learn from regional and international experience through peer learning and exchanges, comparative research and analysis. Peer learning is not the same as policy borrowing or copying and should be part of the continuous improvement process of a system such as the NQF.

Figure 5: NQF – as a system
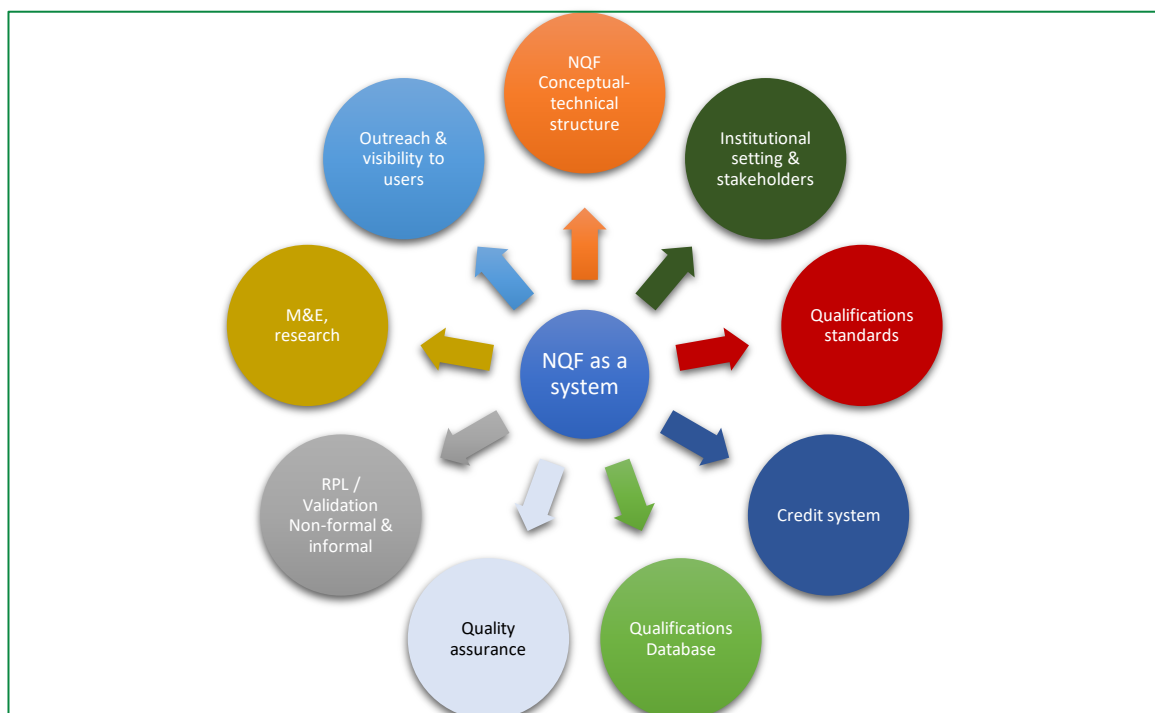
7.2   Developing an NQF: a process of dialogue

Besides conceptual-technical robustness, political support, NQFs need participation, dialogue and shared views (Figure 6). The NQF concept and policy document should consider and be clear about the scope, objectives, principles, actors, coordination, main supporting instruments, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and resources. Success in implementation needs to be prepared for by securing a sound policy and governance basis.

Planning, designing and constructing the NQF is a process entailing:

- Leadership, coordination, and clarity on the objectives to be achieved
- Dialogue: meaningful participation and consultation of stakeholders
- Shared concepts and goals
- Technical capacity and expertise: methodological support, analysis, references from regional and global practice and development, documentation

Figure 6: NQF/NQS: Construction is a process of dialogue
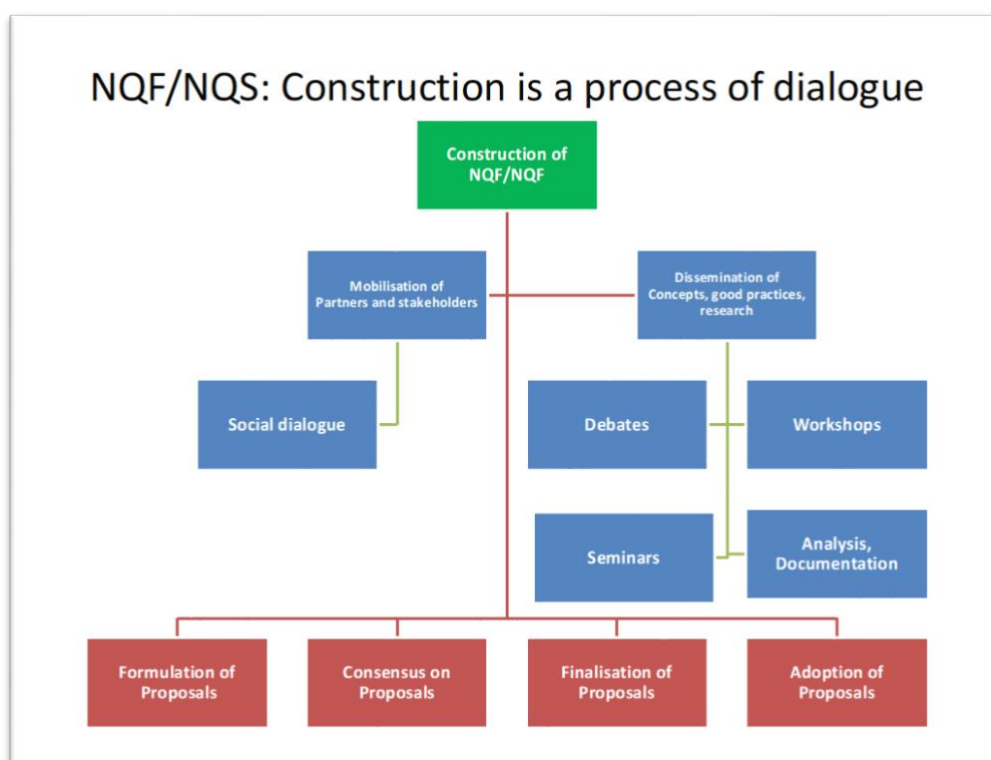
Source: Correia O., Presentation at 10th ACQF Peer Learning Webinar, 22/07/2021. At: ACQF Website.

A generic roadmap for NQF development could consider the following elements and steps:

1. Define the rationale for the NQF: issues, problems and objectives; links to relevant national/regional strategies and policies
2. Stakeholders
   a. Define the panorama of stakeholders and interested institutions.
   b. Form a representative working group of relevant stakeholders and lead institutions, with defined tasks and roles related with the process of NQF development.
   c. Inform and communicate with institutions and wider stakeholders' groups about the NQF process, share main concepts and objectives.
3. Prepare and implement the process of NQF development

a. Outline a roadmap/plan of action supporting a coordinated approach to develop or consolidate the NQF.
    b. Ensure expert and technical support for the process, and other resources.
    c. Analyse the baseline situation, elaborate a baseline inventory of qualifications in all sub-sectors/levels of the existing system, identify important issues and information gaps.
    d. Learn from similar processes of NQFs in countries of the region and beyond
4. Structure the NQF
    a. Define the scope of the NQF and the main components of the policy and technical documents.
    b. Conduct the technical activities, collect feedback and comments, monitor the process.
5. Prepare and document the consultation and adoption process
    a. Conduct public consultation on the drafts of NQF policy and technical documents.
    b. Plan the steps related with consultation and approval of the proposals within the government channels/legislative process.
    c. Monitor the process, clarify issues, and respond to comments and requests from the different institutions, be prepared with timely information.
6. Prepare the operationalisation of the NQF
    a. Ensure public resources for the starting governance set-up supporting NQF implementation.
    b. Conduct capacity development activities for stakeholders and the representatives of the institutions to be involved in NQF governance.

8   Regional Qualifications Frameworks

RQFs are meta-frameworks, which support approximation and trust building between national qualifications frameworks, contributing to the wider and strategic objectives of regional cooperation, notably good quality qualifications, transparency and mutual trust, facilitation of recognition of qualifications, mobility of learners and workers, and ultimately to free trade and regional integration (ACQF, 4021c).

Table 4: List of RQF initiatives (ETF 2021b)

RQF initiatives identified and investigated	
1. African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)	9. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa
2. Arab Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (AQF; ANQAHE Model)	10. Marco de cualificaciones Alianza del Pacífico (Pacific Alliance) (MCAP)
3. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)	11. Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación superior centroamericana (MCESCA)
4. CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF)	12. Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards/Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF)
5. Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement supérieur (CAMES)[8]	13. Southern African Development Community (SADC) Qualifications Framework
6. ECOWAS Regional Qualifications Framework of West Africa	14. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Qualifications Framework
7. East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)	15. Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (TQF VUSSC)
8. Gulf Qualifications Framework (GQF)	

ETF (2021a) published an Orientation Note on Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs) providing a useful analysis on lessons learned from implementation of RQFs, based on comparative analysis of five RQFs.

RQFs do not supersede the national qualifications frameworks and systems. Instead RQFs work on the basis of common principles geared towards enhanced transparency and portability of qualifications. RQFs build on shared concepts, emphasise quality assurance, support sharing of information and data among countries and application of common instruments (such as qualifications databases, common guidelines on key processes of recognition and transparency). RQFs also act as catalysts for development of NQFs.

Referencing/alignment (of NQFs to the RQF) is a major milestone in the implementation of RQFs. Referencing is based on agreed criteria and procedures, which are essential for transparency, credibility and quality of the process and outcomes. The use of RQF levels on qualifications documents and databases of the referenced NQFs is a major step towards portability of qualifications and mobility of learners and workers.

The recent ETF report (ETF 2021b) identified and studied 15 regional initiatives (excluding the EQF and QF-EHEA) which are listed in Table 5.

Experiences show that RQFs aim to have some transformational influence on NQFs or systems. Most RQFs aim to promote lifelong learning, a learning-outcomes approach to qualifications, to improve the quality of qualifications and encourage harmonisation. However, it is possible that RQFs may wish to influence aspects of qualifications frameworks within member countries, including the qualifications formulated. Regardless, the aim to transform NQFs or systems is by mutual agreement and articulated in the design of the RQF. Table 5 provides a summary of the different functions and justifications of regional and national qualifications frameworks.

Table 5: Functions and justifications of national and regional qualifications frameworks

Feature for comparison	Qualifications framework type	
	National	**Regional**
Principal function	Serves as a reference for the level of learning recognised in the national qualifications system	Serves as a translation facility for comparing qualifications levels between member states
Developed by	National governments, in many cases through national agencies set up for this purpose	Countries in a region acting jointly, mostly with the help of a regional body or a regional association
Sensitive to	Local, national and regional priorities (for example, literacy levels and labour market needs)	Collective priorities in member countries (for example, enabling mobility of learners and workers across borders)
Value depends on	Degree of regulatory compliance required; the degree of ownership of key actors (such as industry, educational institutions and professional associations); the perceived or actual value for the whole population	Level of trust between member countries; transparency of national quality assurance systems; mutually agreed regional priorities
Quality guaranteed by	Adherence to nationally agreed quality assurance systems, as illustrated by the practices of national bodies and educational institutions	The common application of referencing criteria and guidelines, as well as the robustness and transparency of the national referencing process and of national quality assurance systems
Levels defined by reference to	National benchmarks, which can be integrated in different learning contexts, such as school education, work or higher education	General progress in learning in all contexts, applicable to all countries

Source: ETF – Bateman (ETF. 2021a), page 9

9 Micro-credentials – the debate goes on

9.1 Micro-credentials: expansion and need for common understanding

The number and diversity of micro-credential offerings have expanded substantially in recent years, accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Micro-credentials hold promises and challenges.

Existing definitions (from OECD, European Commission, UNESCO, Australian Government) point to key characteristics of micro-credentials:

- Referring to learning over a limited time and/or in a specific area

- May form part of or add to formal qualifications

- Potentially 'stackable' over time, adding to individual learning careers

- Given their limited size and focus, more flexible than traditional qualifications

- Based on assessed learning

- Frequently delivered in a digital form.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has adopted a legal-methodological framework to include micro-credentials in the context of the NQF. The register of NZQA-approved Micro-Credentials contains 241 micro-credentials at different levels of the NQF (levels 2 to 8 of the NQF). But only few countries have carved adequate responses to giving micro-credentials a place of clarity and transparency in the qualifications system.

9.2 A country perspective: Australia

The Australian Government (2021) adopted the National Micro-Credentials Framework, which uses the following definition:

> A micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning or competency, with a minimum volume of learning of one hour and less than an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) award qualification, that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification.

What can constitute a micro-credential?

- VET skill sets or units of competency.

- Modularised, assessed components of existing higher education curriculum or subjects.

- Industry learning that is assessed (such as vendor certifications, professional learning).

- Other forms of assessed learning or competencies (e.g. Vocational Education/Higher Education /Industry courses not currently accredited by a regulatory authority, and those by other providers).

What does not constitute a micro-credential?

- Unassessed learning or courses, including work-integrated learning without an assessment.

- Badges which are obtained through participation only (i.e. without an assessment).

- Formal qualifications within the AQF and macro-credentials, including diplomas, certificates and master's degrees.

9.3 Research and debate on micro-credentials are growing

The growing appeal of micro-credentials is visible in the large range of research activities and publications, and policy initiatives addressing micro-credentials from various angles.

The Research Observatory on Micro-credentials (ROM) is an initiative of the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL, Ireland) in partnership with the European Consortium of European Universities (ECIU University). The aim of ROM is to provide a curated and regularly updated collection of major reports, policy initiatives, events and conferences, and research-related publications on the growth of micro-credentials in higher education and lifelong learning more generally.

Interested stakeholders, students, and researchers can access a large number of sources, articles, reports, policy documents, and videos at Research Observatory on Micro-credentials, published since 2016 on the subject.

Figure 7: Video - Unboxing Micro-Credentials. https://youtu.be/Yo8BkzF513k

The NIDL is playing a leading role in helping to shape the rapidly evolving micro-credentialing movement, such as:

- Strategic partnership with Digitary to support development of micro-credentials using this leading international platform.

- Launch of credit-bearing, stackable micro-credentials on the FutureLearn platform.

- Leading the development of a new MOOC (massive open online course), "Higher Education 4.0: Certifying Your Future", on micro-credentials on the FutureLearn platform.

9.4 UNESCO: global debate

In 2019-2021 UNESCO promoted a global debate towards a common definition of micro-credentials, based on extensive expert consultation, analysis of definitions from 15 countries and literature reviews. The key proposals and underpinning reflection were discussed in September at an international conference (UNESCO, 2021). The author of the report (Oliver, 2021) concludes "When it comes to micro-credentials, micro is the distinguishing feature, but to be accepted and trusted, micro-credentials must be seen to bear the quality hallmarks of credentials".

The related concepts mentioned by Oliver (2021) are useful to clarify the boundaries and intersections of micro-credentials and kin concepts:

- **Credentials** verify, validate, confirm, or corroborate a person's learning achievements, knowledge and preparedness for performing tasks. Credentials are diverse with regard to their scope, status and purpose.

- A large subset of credentials can be referred to as **macro-credentials**: generally, these include degrees, diplomas, certificates, and licences, often awarded by accredited, recognised or regulated educational and other institutions or organisations. They indicate learning achievement of a broad body of knowledge, transferable skills or technical proficiency and may take several years to

complete. While some are pursued for personal or general educational advancement, others are associated with qualifying to practice a particular profession or to follow a particular career path.

- Another large **subset of credentials** can be referred to as **micro-credentials**: these are typically focused on a specific set of learning outcomes in a narrow field of learning and achieved over a short time. Micro-credentials are offered by commercial entities, private providers and professional bodies, traditional education and training providers, community organisations and other types of organisations. While many micro-credentials represent the outcomes of more traditional learning experiences, others verify demonstration of achievements acquired elsewhere, such as in the workplace, through volunteering, or through personal interest learning. Micro-credentials are often promoted as an efficient way to upskill workers across the lifespan.

The proposed definition (Oliver, 2021) states that a micro-credential:

- is a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do;

- includes assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider;

- has stand-alone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning; and

- meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.

9.5 Improving lifelong learning and employability in the European Union: towards a common approach to Micro-credentials

The European Union (EU) is working to enhance lifelong learning. In this context the European Commission adopted in December 2021 two proposals: a) on micro-credentials; on b) on individual learning accounts. These proposals were announced in the Skills Agenda and in the European Education Area Communication of 2020. They will help tackle challenges related with upskilling and reskilling of the population, by opening up more opportunities for people to find learning offers, and employment opportunities. EU member states set a target of 60% of adults taking part in training by 2030.

For more information and access to the policy proposals (Council Recommendations) visit the website, view the infographic, and read the Brochure.

Micro-credentials

Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes following a small learning experience (e.g. a short course or training). They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills, and competences they need for their personal and professional development.

A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural, or labour market needs. Read the Brochure.

The European approach to micro-credentials is a key flagship to achieve a European Education Area by 2025. They can be part of the learning offer included in individual learning accounts. This proposal of a Council Recommendation seeks to make micro-credentials work across institutions, businesses, sectors, and borders.

- The European approach to micro-credentials aims at providing a clear definition and European standards, allow for the learning outcomes of these small experiences to be easily recognised and

understood by employers, learners and education and training institutions, as well as guiding principles to consider when designing or issuing high-quality micro-credentials.

- Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable.

- They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials.

- They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

<u>Principles to be considered</u>

When designing and issuing micro-credentials some principles are recommended. They highlight the key characteristics of the European approach to micro-credentials. They are universal and may be applied in any area or sector.

1. Quality
   Micro-credentials are subject to internal and external QA by the system producing them (e.g., the education, training, or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). QA processes must be fit-for-purpose, be clearly documented, accessible, and meet the needs of learners and stakeholders.

2. Transparency
   Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable, and understandable with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.

3. Relevance
   Micro-credentials should be designed as distinct, targeted learning achievements, and learning opportunities leading to them are updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs

4. Valid assessment
   Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards

5. Learning pathways:
   Micro-credentials are designed to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to stack, validate, and recognise micro-credentials from across different systems.

6. Recognition
   Recognition has a clear signalling value of learning outcomes and paves the way for a wider offer of such small learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU. Micro-credentials are recognised for academic or employment purposes, based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad, when dealing with micro-credentials issued by formal education providers

7. Portability
   Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g Europass), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. The infrastructure for storing data is based on open standards and data models. This ensures interoperability and seamless exchange of data and allows for smooth checks of data authenticity.

8. Learner-centred
   Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in the internal and external quality assurance processes and their feedback is taken into account as part of the continuous improvement of the micro-credential.

9. Authentic
Micro-credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder (learner), the legal identity of the issuer, and the date and location of issuance of the micro-credential.

10. Information and guidance
Information and advice on micro-credentials should be incorporated in lifelong learning guidance services and should reach the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, supporting education, training, and career choices.

Suggested critical information elements that any micro-credential should provide:

- Mandatory elements: learner identification, title of the micro-credential, country of the issuer, awarding body, date of issuing, learning outcomes, notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes, level of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential, if applicable; type of assessment; form of participation in the learning activity; type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential.

The proposal also introduces recommendations on micro-credentials in education and training and in labour markets policies. This should enable people to learn new or additional skills in a tailored way, inclusive for all.

10 EQF: A case study with measured results

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has almost 14 years of experience, and reached several substantial achievements, such as large and sustained adhesion to the goals and implementation methods by a community of 38 countries.

The EQF Recommendation invites the involved states to reference their national qualifications frameworks or systems to the EQF, in order to establish a clear and transparent relationship between their national qualification levels and the eight EQF levels. Member States are recommended to review and update, when relevant, the referencing of the levels of the national qualifications frameworks or systems to the levels of the EQF.

Each country wanting to relate its national qualifications levels to the EQF has to prepare a detailed referencing report that follows the ten EQF referencing criteria agreed in Annex III to the revised EQF Recommendation. National referencing reports are presented to the EQF Advisory Group which endorses them if they meet the referencing criteria.

Once national frameworks are referenced to the EQF all newly issued qualifications (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements), and/or qualifications databases should in principle contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF and NQF level.

Table 6: Main outcomes of EQF implementation (as of February 2022)

Feature	EQF
Region / community	European Union and other countries with specific status of cooperation
	38 countries: 27 EU Member States and 11 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey).
Establishment and legal basis	Council Communication: 2008
	Council Recommendation revised in 2017, repealing the Council Recommendation of 2008

Referencing criteria and procedures	10 criteria and procedures
RQF scope and levels	● Comprehensive; Inclusive all sub-sectors ● 8 levels ● Descriptors: knowledge, skills, responsibility, and autonomy
Countries that referenced / aligned NQFs to RQF	36 countries referenced and these reports are published. 5 countries have updated referencing reports in the period 2019-Feb 2022 (The Netherlands, Latvia, Ireland, France and Italy)

Source: ACQF, 2021c.

The main achievements of the EQF for transparency of qualifications and mutual trust between NQFs, as of February 2022 can be summarized as follows:

- EQF acted as a catalyst to develop NQFs. While in 2008 only three EQF countries had NQFs, 37 out of 38 involved countries have since adopted and are implementing NQFs.
- The large majority of EQF countries have developed and launched digital qualifications databases, accessible online.
- 36 (out of 38) involved countries have completed the process of referencing to EQF, and five countries have presented a renewed updated referencing report.
- 33 (out of 38) countries are using EQF levels on their qualifications documents (certificates, diplomas, supplements) and 23 are using EQF levels on their national qualifications databases.
- Other transparency tools of the EQF include the portal of referencing reports (in which 31 reports are published), and the digital tool to compare NQFs (in which 29 NQFs are included).
- More recent developments include the connection of national qualifications databases and registers with the EQF (Europass) Qualifications Database Register. A growing number of countries are linking their databases through this mechanism.

Besides, the EQF implementation process has been based on substantial analytical research in all major thematic and policy areas of interest and has promoted and supported peer learning activities between all involved countries. This robust technical and analytical basis is supported by the EU budget, and by EU Agencies, especially Cedefop and ETF. Development of NQFs and national qualifications databases was supported by various EU programmes and funding.

It is worth mentioning that the EQF is non-binding. Countries participate to enhance transparency, mutual trust and ease of recognition. The EQF does not supersede NQFs, nor does it intend to standardise the conceptual-technical design of NQFs and systems.

This model has gained roots and experience in the context of the EU and other countries involved in EQF implementation. Lessons for the African experience can be drawn. But African strategic goals, contextual factors, potentialities, and challenges will determine the scope, paths, and forms of cooperation for the aspired transparency and zone of trusted qualifications for the continent.

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