

DEVELOPING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL
QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF)



GUIDELINE **10**

**Qualifications and national qualifications
frameworks – a systemic view**

This technical report on qualifications and NQFs (or NQs) is elaborated in 2022 in the context of the project AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability/Skills Initiative for Africa, Technical Cooperation – Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework.

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Table of contents

1	Introduction to Guideline 10	8
1.1	PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDELINE	9
1.2	GUIDELINE STRUCTURE	9
1.3	TARGET USERS	9
1.4	OBJECTIVES	9
1.5	LINKS BETWEEN THIS GUIDELINE AND OTHER ACQF GUIDELINES	10
2	Qualifications systems	11
2.1	WHAT IS A QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM?	11
2.2	WHAT IS AN NQF?	13
2.3	WHAT IS QUALITY ASSURANCE?	13
2.3.1	<i>Quality assurance at an international or regional level</i>	13
2.3.2	<i>Quality assurance at a national level</i>	14
2.3.3	<i>Quality assurance at provider level</i>	15
2.3.4	<i>Continuous improvement approach</i>	15
2.4	VARIATIONS IN QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS	16
2.5	SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO NQFS	16
2.6	ROLE OF NQFS	18
2.7	OVERVIEW OF NQFS	20
2.8	KEY FEATURES OF AN NQF	21
2.8.1	<i>Purpose or objectives and scope</i>	21
2.8.2	<i>Levels descriptors and domains</i>	23
2.8.3	<i>Volume of learning measure</i>	25
2.8.4	<i>Qualification type descriptors</i>	27
2.9	PHASES OF AN NQF	29
2.9.1	<i>Phase 1: Designing and developing an NQF</i>	30
	Planning the development of the NQF	30
	Technical drafting stage	31
	Conducting research and consultations	31
	Drafting of the NQF structures	32
	1. Purpose and scope	32
	2. Level descriptors	33
	3. Volume of learning measure	37
	4. Qualification type descriptors	37
2.9.2	<i>Phase 2: Implementation of an NQF</i>	38
2.9.3	<i>Phase 3: Monitoring implementation and review of an NQF</i>	38

2.10	LINKAGES WITH OTHER NATIONAL STRATEGIES.....	41
3.5.1	<i>National initiatives</i>	41
3.5.2	<i>Registers/databases</i>	42
3.5.3	<i>Micro-credentials</i>	43
3.5.4	<i>Recognition of foreign qualifications</i>	44
3.5.5	<i>Quality assurance linkages</i>	45
2.11	GOVERNANCE OF NQFS.....	46
3.6.1	<i>Considerations underpinning governance arrangements</i>	46
3.6.2	<i>Nature and purpose of the NQF</i>	46
3.6.3	<i>Characteristics of the qualifications system</i>	47
3.6.4	<i>Degree and scope of desired stakeholder engagement</i>	47
3.6.5	<i>Governance models</i>	48
3.6.6	<i>Role of the NQF body</i>	48
3.6.7	<i>Legal basis</i>	49
3.6.8	<i>Funding</i>	50
3.6.9	<i>Examples of AU Member State governance models</i>	50
2.12	COMMUNICATION.....	51
3	Qualifications	53
3.1	WHAT ARE QUALIFICATIONS?.....	53
3.2	TYPES OF QUALIFICATIONS.....	54
3.3	QUALITY ASSURING THE FORMULATION AND APPROVAL OF QUALIFICATIONS.....	55
4.3.1	<i>Approaches to quality assurance</i>	55
4.3.2	<i>Process for formulation and developing qualifications</i>	58
5.3.3	<i>Examples of AU Member States</i>	59
5.3.4	<i>Determining the level and qualification type</i>	61
5.3.5	<i>Approval of qualifications</i>	62
5.3.6	<i>Review and renewal of qualifications</i>	63
3.4	QUALITY ASSURING THE PROVISION OF QUALIFICATIONS.....	63
5	Recognition of prior learning	64
5.1	DEFINING RECOGNITION OF FORMAL, NONFORMAL, OR INFORMAL LEARNING.....	65
5.2	IMPLEMENTING RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AT SYSTEM LEVEL.....	66
5.2.1	<i>Purpose and benefits of recognition of prior learning</i>	66
5.2.2	<i>Considerations for implementation</i>	66
	Barriers.....	66
	Enablers.....	67
	Recognition of prior learning as an assessment of an individual.....	67

5.2.3	<i>Systems level implementation</i>	69
5.3	VARIATIONS IN MODELS AND APPROACHES TO RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING.....	70
5.4	FINAL COMMENTS IN RELATION TO CREDIT TRANSFER	71
6	Conclusion and key messages	71
7	Glossary	73
8	Sources	76
	ACQF THEMATIC BRIEFS	76
	ACQF RESEARCH AND ANALYSES	76
	ACQF GUIDELINES	77
	ACQF TRAINING MODULES	77
	INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE: BY THEMATIC GROUPINGS	78

List of tables

Table 1: Functions and rationales of national and regional qualifications frameworks	19
Table 2: Overview of QFs in Africa	20
Table 3: NQFs in Africa by stages of development	20
Table 4: Summary of selected QFs in Africa	23
Table 5: Volume of learning measure	26
Table 6: Summary of fields in text-based qualification type descriptors	28
Table 7: Underpinning principles	34
Table 8: UNESCO Asia Pacific Guidelines sample: Principle 4 QA of TVET qualifications practice is based on clear and transparent quality standards	41
Table 9: Conceptual distinction between tight and loose frameworks	46
Table 10: Legislative basis for introducing NQFs	50
Table 11: Summary of NQF governance models.....	51
Table 12: Approach to consistency of qualifications.....	57
Table 13: Measuring strategies to minimize barriers to assessment.....	70
Table 14: Common traits for effective RPL systems.....	71

List of figures

Figure 1: Links between <i>Guideline 10: Qualifications and NQFs (or NQS): A systemic view</i> and that of the other nine ACQF guidelines	10
Figure 2: Relationship of the NQF with QA: Example 1.....	12
Figure 3: Relationship of the NQF with QA: Example 2.....	12
Figure 4: Quality assurance guidelines of the SADCQF	14
Figure 5: PDCA cycle.....	15
Figure 6: NQF as a key component of national qualifications system)	17
Figure 7: Relating the current and the future NQF in Ghana	22
Figure 8: Zimbabwe NQF descriptors.....	24
Figure 9: Nested approach to naming qualifications (Lesotho NQF)	25
Figure 10: Rwanda qualification type summary	28
Figure 12: EQAVET Framework sample indicators.....	40
Figure 13: Quality assurance of qualification formulation and approval processes.....	56
Figure 14: Flow chart for qualifications development – Mozambique	60
Figure 15: Justifying location on the NQF - Australia	61
Figure 16: Quality assurance of provision of programmes leading to a qualification.....	64
Figure 17: RPL phases.....	68

List of acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
AUMS	AU Member States
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
EAQFHE	East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
QA	Quality Assurance
QF	Qualifications Framework
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1 Introduction to Guideline 10

With a median age of 19.7 in 2020 Africa's population is the youngest in the world. In 2020, Africa's population under 35 represents almost a billion people (540.8 million 0–14 year olds and 454.5 million 15–34 year olds), amounting to 22.7% of the world's total youth population, the second largest after Asia's (58.0%). Africa's young demographic could provide a powerful opportunity for development and beyond. But despite the growth in GDP of the last decade, African countries struggle to create decent jobs and to equip young people with the skills required to service their economies and societies. This lack of economic opportunity is often combined with political disenfranchisement thus creating a potential cause of instability¹.

The accomplishment of the potentialities of the African demographic dividend in the post-Covid-19 economic recovery will also depend on the development of the right mix of skills of the population and the quality and comparability of qualifications of all levels and sectors of education and training systems across countries. Learning must be lifelong and life-wide, to enable transitions to new and to changing jobs in high productivity sectors, adaptation to new skills requirements in the green and digital economies, and to support inclusion in decent jobs and in the formal economy of small artisans and self-employed, and of the population with limited formal schooling but with practical professional and life experience, especially women and young people.

This guideline is launched at a time of broad political agreement among African policy-makers and stakeholders on the need for, and usefulness of, national qualifications frameworks (NQF) supporting good quality lifelong learning and employability, and of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) to connect and boost mutual trust between NQFs, and enhance comparability, transparency and portability of qualifications across the continent.

The conceptual-technical design of the ACQF is a meta-framework that describes a hierarchy of levels of learning complexity based on learning outcomes and, by its very nature, encourages a learning outcomes orientation in its community of countries.

Qualifications described in terms of learning outcomes will strengthen transparency of learning and trust in qualifications levels of member countries. The increased transparency will benefit the country stakeholders as well as those outside the country who are interested in understanding the qualification systems of a given country. The referencing process utilised in the ACQF will promote the strengthening of learning outcomes approaches across the continent.

This guideline is one of 10 ACQF guidelines. The ACQF guidelines give tangible substance to Output 3 of the ACQF project, namely the ACQF policy and technical document. The guidelines are tools to support the practical application and sustainability of the principles, objectives and milestones defined in the ACQF document. The benefits of the ACQF guidelines include:

- Helping, informing and supporting countries at early thinking or early implementation stage of NQF or national qualifications systems (NQS) development, which require a knowledge base and an orientation to well-presented concepts and applications
- User-friendly, contextualised knowledge on foundation themes
- Guidance as to how the given themes and policies apply in the context of the ACQF

¹ Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Africa's Youth (2021): Action needed how to support the continent's greatest asset, <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2020-08/international-youth-day-research-brief.pdf>

- Support to the ACQF implementers with essential thematic information and clear indications on the application.

1.1 Purpose of this guideline

The purpose of this guideline is to deepen, clarify, and provide technical orientation for national implementing bodies and stakeholders, especially the lead institutions managing the NQF/NQS. This guideline integrates and complements the knowledge elaborated in the other ACQF Guidelines. It provides the systemic view of NQFs/ACQF.

1.2 Guideline structure

ACQF guidelines are designed as a combination of a trio of documents: (1) a synthesis guideline (annexed to ACQF Policy Document), (2) a technical guideline (this document) and (3) a training module (for learning and capacity building activities):

- Technical in-depth guideline: This document forms the core of the trio of documents. It will present as a short handbook; for clarification and technical support. This will be used by implementers, practitioners, and other groups.
- Synthesis version: This version is a shorted version for policy purposes. It will be used primarily by policy institutions, and other groups, and has a key purpose to provide policy orientation.
- Training module: This version will form part of the knowledge base and used for the ACQF Training programme and ACQF e-learning platform (Learning Management System).

As an ACQF instrument, this guideline:

- Works in synergy with, and complements, other ACQF guidelines
- Refers to the relevant existing (or planned) African Union (AU) policies, instruments and recommendations
- Contributes to an AU area of education and qualifications, based on converging elements and recommendations that eventually contribute to continental integration and mutual understanding while respecting the diversity of the national and regional context.

1.3 Target users

The main target users of this guideline are:

- Members or stakeholders of steering groups/implementation groups for the ACQF
- National Referencing Committees/National Coordination Points and policy advisers involved in education and training
- Policy advisors and implementers of NQFs and NQSs
- Individuals and institutions actively involved in formulating and designing qualifications.

1.4 Objectives

This guideline aims to provide an overview of:

- NQFs as a policy instrument in the context of a qualifications systems
- The essential themes and issues concerning national qualifications frameworks
- The linkages with quality assurance arrangements and other policy initiatives such as recognition of prior learning and lifelong learning.

The guideline also aims to provide technical and methodological recommendations in relation to the development, approval and review of qualifications.

1.5 Links between this guideline and other ACQF guidelines

The ten ACQF guidelines have a key intention to contribute technical and methodological support to countries participating in the ACQF process.

Guideline 10 links with the other nine ACQF guidelines. All the guidelines have some links to each other whether explicit or implicit (See Figure 1). For example:

- Guideline 10 has an explicit link to:
 - Learning outcomes (Guideline 1) as learning outcomes form the basis of qualifications
 - Validation of learning (Guideline 4) in the context of NQFs/NQSS aspirations for promoting lifelong learning
 - Quality assurance (Guideline 5) in the context of qualification formulation, development and approval
 - Registration of qualifications (Guideline 6) and with inclusion of innovation and technology in qualifications (Guideline 9)
 - Monitoring and evaluation in the context of NQFs/NQSS (Guideline 7).
- This guideline also has linkages with:
 - ACQF levels and level descriptors (Guideline 2)
 - Referencing criteria (Guideline 3).

Finally, as buy-in from, and communication with, stakeholders is also critical to the implementation of an NQF/NQS and for promoting the relationship and benefits of linking with the ACQF, Guideline 8 is important for transparency and building trust across the continent.

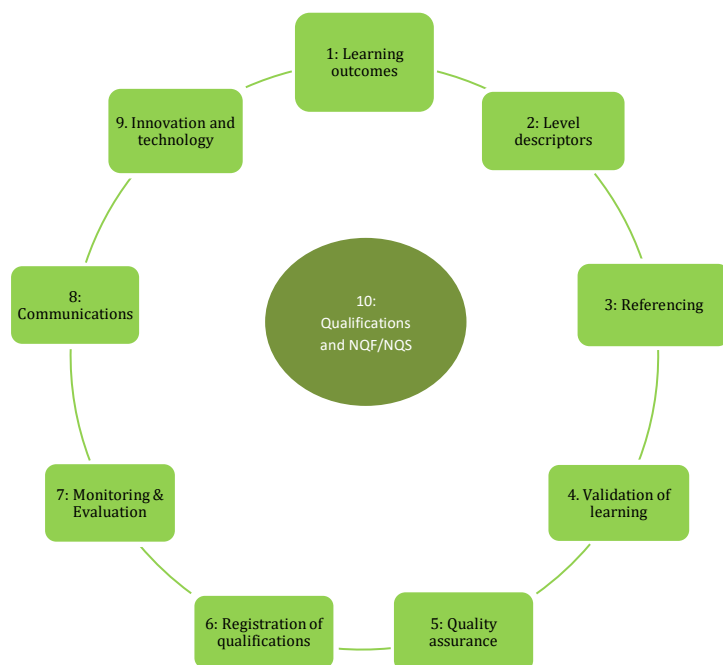


Figure 1: Links between Guideline 10: Qualifications and NQFs (or NQS): A systemic view and that of the other nine ACQF guidelines

2 Qualifications systems

Topics addressed in this chapter:

This chapter provides key definitions and an overview of qualifications systems, NQFs and quality assurance. The systemic approach to understanding NQFs is to consider their linkages to quality assurance arrangements within a qualifications system. In addition, quality assurance arrangements are discussed as to how they may be applied at regional, national and provider level.

Main sources used in this chapter:

- Council of the European Union 2017. *Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.*
- OECD 2006. *Qualification system: Bridges to lifelong learning.* Authors: Coles, M. and Werquin, P. OECD: Paris.
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland. 2017. *National Qualifications Frameworks: Reflections and Trajectories.* Author: Coles, M.
- Tuck R. 2007. *An introductory guide to national qualifications frameworks: conceptual and practical issues for policy makers.* Geneva: International Labour Office (ILO)
- UNESCO. 2017b. *Guidelines for the quality assurance of TVET qualifications in the Asia-Pacific Region.* Authors: Bateman, A and Coles, M.

2.1 What is a qualifications system?

Within a country's broader education and training system there is a 'national qualifications system'.

A national qualifications system includes all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.

Source: OECD 2006 p. 22

Qualifications frameworks may be explicit (as mentioned in the definition above) but may also be implicit within the qualifications system². A national qualifications system may be composed of several subsystems, e.g., higher education or vocational education and training, and may also include several sub-qualifications frameworks.

Within the definition noted above, most of the activities listed within the qualifications system can be grouped into two main categories:

1. Quality assurance activities
2. Qualifications framework.

² Implicit qualifications frameworks within a qualifications system exist where there is no qualifications framework policy instrument. Within such a qualifications system, qualifications are generally understood and accepted by stakeholders through precedence.

However, the relationship between quality assurance (QA) and a qualifications framework is often viewed differently across countries.

Some countries consider the national qualifications framework as incorporating the quality assurance arrangements (as illustrated in Figure 2).

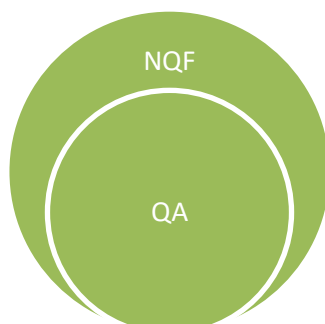


Figure 2: Relationship of the NQF with QA: Example 1

Source: Bateman and Dyson 2018

Other countries consider a qualifications framework simply as a classification device with little reference to the quality assurance of these qualifications. In this instance, it is possible to view the national qualifications framework as independent of the quality assurance arrangements and the governance of these arrangements, and that the NQF can support the quality assurance arrangements but is not necessarily central to it. Such a view is exemplified in Figure 3 below.

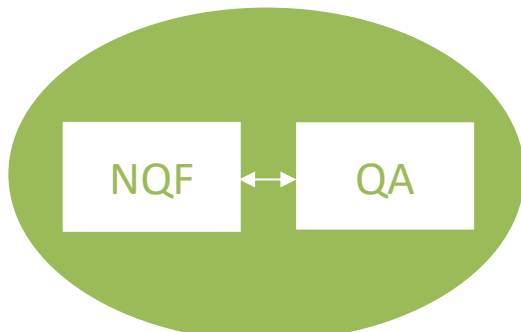


Figure 3: Relationship of the NQF with QA: Example 2

This Guideline approaches the discussion of an NQF and quality assurance arrangements as two separate (but linked) components within a qualifications system, as per Figure 3. This approach is consistent with both the OECD definition of a qualifications system and with the definition of an NQF (as noted below).

Implementing a qualifications system that views the NQF as separate from (but linked to) quality assurance arrangements allows for greater flexibility in the qualifications system. For example, a country may have a unifying NQF addressing both TVET and Higher Education sectors, but allows for two separate quality assurance bodies and two separate approaches to quality assurance to be applied in the two sectors. The management of the NQF in this example, could be a shared responsibility of both quality assurance bodies.

2.2 What is an NQF?

Qualifications frameworks are a construct that aim to describe (for policy makers, implementers and users, both nationally and internationally) the types of qualifications issued within a country.

A national qualifications framework (NQF) is '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'.

Source: EQF Recommendation 2017

National qualifications frameworks function at a country level but may vary in scope. For example, some may be sectorally based, such as a vocational education and training framework (such as Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal) or a higher education framework (such as Tanzania), or may be a unifying framework (such as Botswana, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Kenya) that addresses all (or key) education and training sectors and pathways. Chapter 3 provides further details as to the scope of NQFs in Africa.

2.3 What is quality assurance?

Quality assurance within the context of a qualifications system aims to build trust in, and transparency of, qualifications. Guideline 5 of this ACQF series provides more detailed information in regards to quality assurance.

Quality assurance includes the processes and procedures for ensuring that qualifications, assessment and programme delivery meet certain standards.

Source: Tuck 2007

Quality assurance can be implemented at various levels including through international or regional initiatives, at national, responsible quality assurance body, awarding body level or provider level.

2.3.1 Quality assurance at an international or regional level

At an international or regional level there are:

- **Agreed quality frameworks** (for example, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET), the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area set principles and standards for internal and external quality assurance.

Within the African continent, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) defined 16 quality assurance principles (annex to the policy document of the SADC Qualifications Framework). These 16 principles (outlined in Figure 4) are used in SADCQF alignment process.



Figure 4: Quality assurance guidelines of the SADCQF
 Source: SADCQF. Building Trust for Better Movement 2019.

The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA)³ addresses internal quality assurance for higher education institutions, and external quality assurance and internal quality assurance for quality assurance agencies (or bodies). Minimum standards and guidelines have been developed for each. Guideline 5 provides further information in relation to the ASG-QA.

- **Registers that list quality assurance agencies** that comply with quality standards (e.g., European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)), or registers of providers and qualifications that meet these quality assurance agency (or body) requirements (e.g., Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards – which includes both a register of quality assured agencies and their assured qualifications, as well as regionally agreed qualifications/standards).

Within the African continent, **CAMES** is the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education, an intergovernmental agency supporting development of quality assurance and recognition in all French-speaking countries in Africa. CAMES has a register of higher education programmes accredited by CAMES, published in the [Repertoire on the website](#).⁴

2.3.2 Quality assurance at a national level

Quality assurance is deployed in various ways at a national level, but generally strategies focus on:

- 1 The **qualification design** through approval processes of qualification specifications (including a specified suite of achievement, educational and/or competency standards, and completion rules)
- 2 The **provision of the qualification**, through approval processes of providers against requirements (such as standards related to infrastructure and facilities, financial probity and sustainability, staff qualifications and experience, governance and management systems, delivery systems, and student support systems)
- 3 The **monitoring and review of provider provision, process and outcomes**, including student learning and employment outcomes, and student and user satisfaction levels

³ ASG-QA. <https://haqaa2.obsglob.org/african-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-higher-education-asg-qa/>

⁴ CAMES promotes harmonisation of quality assurance in higher education and to this end developed in the period 2018–2021 a significant package of guides, standards and references accessible here. These publications can be downloaded and used by practitioners, higher education institutions, and quality assurance bodies.

- 4 The control, supervision or monitoring of **assessment outcomes, certification and graduation procedures**
- 5 **System wide evaluations** of quality, including evaluations by external bodies and reviews of stakeholder engagement and implementation of related initiatives
- 6 The **provision of public information including registers/databases** of qualifications that meet the requirements of the NQF, registers of approved providers of NQF qualifications, on the performance of providers such as programme and component completions, student and employer satisfaction, system wider evaluations (Bateman et al 2012).

Of the above list:

- Item 1 is the main focus of Section 4.3 in this Guideline as this is where the strongest link between quality assuring the formulation and development of qualifications and that of the NQF can be established
- Items 2, 3 and 4 are addressed in Section 4.4 in this Guideline and relate to the quality assurance of provision of qualifications
- Item 6 is considered in Section 3.7 in this Guideline from the perspective of using information and data gained from registers for monitoring the implementation of an NQF. For further information on registers and databases, refer to Guideline 6 in this ACF series.

2.3.3 Quality assurance at provider level

At **provider level** there could be considered two complementary forces; that is, any **regulatory obligations** required by the quality assurance body and **the internal evaluation of levels of engagement and satisfaction of stakeholders** (e.g., industry or professional bodies) and students/graduates. Providers implement an internal quality management system that not only addresses inputs (such as purchasing equipment, ensuring fit-for-purpose facilities, and the development of assessment tasks) but also outputs and outcomes (often focussing on access/participation/completion rates, employment rates of graduates, and satisfaction levels of stakeholders/employers/students).

2.3.4 Continuous improvement approach

As best practice, a quality management system (at national or provider level) or framework should be premised on a continuous improvement approach, which is commonly known as the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle (refer to

Figure 5). A continuous improvement cycle is summarised as:

- Plan – establish the objectives of the system and its processes, as well as the resources needed to deliver results
- Do – implement what is planned
- Check – monitor and measure processes and the resulting product/service and report the results
- Act – take actions to improve performance as necessary.

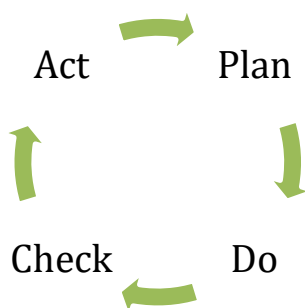


Figure 5: PDCA cycle

At a **regional level**, the EQAVET Framework⁵ organises its quality criteria (and indicative descriptors at system and provider level) according to a continuous improvement approach, e.g., planning, implementation, evaluation and review).

For more details on quality assurance in the context of NQFs/ACQF, refer to [ACQF Training Module 5](#) (ACQF 2022h).

2.4 Variations in qualifications systems

Within a country's qualifications system, the locus of control varies against each of the quality assurance foci in Section 2.3. For example: the role of approving qualifications may rest with a centralised quality assurance or qualifications body, a professional association or body, or a provider (such as a self-accrediting university), and may vary within the country on a sectoral or qualification specific basis.

The interplay of the NQF with the country specific quality assurance arrangements provides each country with a unique qualifications system.

2.5 Systemic approach to NQFs

The systemic approach to NQFs favoured by this Guideline for the countries of the African Union is based on evidence (Cedefop, ETF, UNESCO. 2017, 2019; ACQF 2021a), and action-oriented analysis.⁶ The ACQF Mapping study (2021g) provides analysis and examples from African experiences.

ACQF peer learning webinars in 2020–2021 supported systematic knowledge-sharing about NQFs at different stages of development and implementation, with a total of 33 country and regional experiences (NQFs, RQFs, quality assurance, qualifications management information systems, recognition of prior learning and recognition of qualifications) presented on the basis of evidence by the competent authorities and bodies. A detailed information resource covering all cases is accessible at [ACQF website](#).

- NQFs do not work in isolation, they must be articulated with the eco-system of education, training and lifelong learning and contribute to system and wider national development goals.
- NQFs must be fit-for-purpose and contextualised, and take account of past, present and future. NQFs too are changing to stay relevant and responsive in the context of a new panorama of qualifications and the transformation of learning, certification and work.
- 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 operationalisation, 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. Policy learning is not the same as policy borrowing or copying, and is part of the continuous improvement process of a system such as the NQF.

⁵ Annex II (EU VET Recommendation of 2020): [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202(01)&from=EN)

⁶ ETF 2017



Figure 6: NQF as a key component of national qualifications system

Source: Adapted from ACQF 2022a

National Qualifications Frameworks

Topics addressed in this chapter:

This chapter provides an in-depth commentary on the role of NQFs, key features of an NQF, the phases of an NQF including the steps involved in developing an NQF, governance of an NQF and the associated strategies of an NQF.

Main sources used in this chapter:

- ACQF 2021g. *Towards the African Continental Qualifications Framework – Mapping report*. AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability Programme – SIFA Technical Cooperation. Authors: J. Keevy, A. Bateman, E. Castel-Branco, L. Mavimbela, J. Adotevi, L. Sutherland, R. Matlala, U. Kyari and T. Sibiya
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2.6 Role of NQFs

A qualifications framework 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’ (Tuck 2007, p. v).

National qualifications frameworks have varying purposes, depending on the needs of the country and the level of implementation of their qualifications system. National qualifications frameworks are communication devices, used to aid the transparency and trust of individual qualifications, and to support economic priorities (e.g., meet labour market needs) or social priorities (e.g., lifelong learning). There are said to be three main ways that qualifications frameworks support these priorities, through:

1. The classification of qualifications according to type and/or level for communication to a range of users
2. Setting out quality measures or benchmarks for qualifications to be admitted onto the qualifications framework
3. Acting as a bridge to international users of domestic and international holders of qualifications.⁷

National qualifications frameworks function differently to regional qualifications frameworks. The table below outlines the differences between national and regional qualifications frameworks.

⁷ QQI 2017

Table 1: Functions and rationales of national and regional qualifications frameworks

Qualifications Frameworks		
Area of comparison	National	Regional
Main function...	To act as a benchmark for the level of learning recognised in the national qualifications system	To act as a translation device to enable comparison of levels of qualifications across member countries
Developed by...	National governments, in many cases through national agencies set up for this purpose	Countries in a region acting jointly, mostly facilitated by a regional body or regional association
Sensitive to...	Local, national and regional priorities (e.g., levels of literacy and labour market needs)	Collective priorities across member countries (e.g., enabling mobility of learners and workers across borders)
Currency/value depends on...	The extent of regulatory compliance required; the level of buy-in from key role-players (such as industry, learning institutions and professional associations); the perceived or real value to the broad population	The level of trust between member countries; the transparency of national quality assurance systems; mutually agreed regional priorities
Quality is guaranteed by...	Adherence to nationally agreed quality assurance systems, exemplified in the practices of national bodies and learning institutions	The common application of the referencing criteria and guidelines, as well as the robustness and transparency of the national referencing process, and national quality assurance systems
Levels are defined by reference to...	National benchmarks which may be embedded in different learning contexts, e.g., school education, work or higher education	General levels of learning complexity across all contexts that is applicable to all countries

Source: Adapted from Coles et al 2014

Qualifications can have three functions: communicative, reforming, and regulatory. All qualifications frameworks are **communicative devices**. However, qualifications frameworks may reflect or make clearer what is already in place, or, act as a **reforming** framework to improve the qualifications system and the relevance and quality of qualifications. Qualifications frameworks are sometimes referred to as tight or loose frameworks (Tuck 2007), but in general this classification generally relates to how the NQF is implemented within the country, for example, how it interacts with the quality assurance arrangements and the degree of **regulation** implemented.

The ACQF mapping study Synthesis Report (ACQF 2021h) found that NQFs in Africa 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
- 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.

2.7 Overview of NQFs

Qualifications frameworks are the product of, and operate within, complex and everchanging qualifications systems. Qualifications frameworks are influenced by the domestic historical and current context in which they are designed, and are also influenced by regional and international developments. Within the domestic sphere, they are influenced by changing domestic expectations and accountability often expressed in changes to regulations.

The current status of frameworks across Africa is summarized below.

Table 2: Overview of QFs in Africa

QFs	Number	Comments
NQF 10 levels	16	13 in SADC, 1 Kenya, 1 Rwanda, 1 The Gambia,
NQF 8 levels	6	in West, East, North Africa
NQF 7 levels	1	Tunisia
Sector QF 6 levels	1	Nigeria (NSQF - TVET)
Sector QF 5 levels	1	Senegal (TVET)

Source: ACQF 2021g, ACQF 2021i

The ACQF mapping study (2021g) and the ACQF feasibility report (2021i) have provided updated information on 41 countries, and classified them in 5 stages of NQF development and implementation. In short, 19 countries do not have an NQF (i.e., are in an early stage of thinking or in design and consultation) and 22 countries have NQFs (i.e., approved, or implementation started, advanced or reviewed). This categorization is fluid, as countries continue to develop and consolidate their NQFs and move to higher categories as indicated in the table below.

Table 3: NQFs in Africa by stages of development

Stage of NQF development and implementation	Countries
NQF development to be started	Chad, Republic of Congo, São Tomé e Príncipe
NQF in early thinking	Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Union of Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Togo
NQF in development and consultation	Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Somalia. Malawi is developing the comprehensive NQF.

Stage of NQF development and implementation	Countries
NQF legal act approved, implementation started*	Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe Egypt approved the legal amendments in 2021
NQF in advanced implementation and reviewed	Cape Verde, Mauritius, South Africa Some countries have moved to this category, given their recent developments, e.g., Botswana, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles and Zambia. Rwanda has adopted a new NQF in 2021.

Source: Adjusted from ACQF 2022a. Note: Shaded countries have sectoral QFs: TVET or HE.

Some countries have sectoral (not comprehensive and integrated) qualifications frameworks, e.g., Ghana (8 levels – technical-vocational), Mozambique (HE and TVET) Nigeria ([National Skills Qualification Framework](#), 6 levels), Senegal (HE and TVET). But there is a trend towards developing comprehensive/integrated NQFs (cases in this situation include Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria).

2.8 Key features of an NQF

NQFs reflect the national qualifications system in which they operate within. Qualifications framework generally includes its objectives or purposes, level descriptors, a volume of learning measure, and qualification type descriptors.

3.3.1 Purpose or objectives and scope

Tuck (2007) considers that the first step in developing a qualifications framework is to clearly articulate its purpose and objectives, and argues that there are two main reasons for developing an NQF: ‘promoting lifelong learning; and quality assurance and recognition’.

Within Africa, various qualifications frameworks, like Europe and beyond, have varying purposes or objectives and scope. It is evident that common themes related to purpose or objectives of NQFs, include promoting:

- Access, pathways and progression
- Transparency
- Harmonisation
- Recognition both locally and internationally
- Quality and meeting the needs of the country.

As mentioned previously, the ACQF mapping study (2021g) and the ACQF feasibility report (2021i) indicates that out of the 41 countries, 22 countries have approved NQFs, some of which are sectoral, but the majority have a comprehensive scope.

National qualifications frameworks function at a country level and vary in their scope. Comprehensive national qualifications frameworks by their nature are unifying frameworks.

Nigeria

The National Skills Qualifications Framework has six levels and includes only technical-vocational qualifications, spanning from Pre-vocational and NVC1 and Trade test (level 1) to Post-Graduate (level 6). The country has started the process towards an integrated comprehensive qualifications framework.

Source: ACQF 2020. Mapping Study Nigeria. Author: Ezeahurukwe J. <https://acqf.africa/resources/mapping-study/nigeria-country-report>

Cape Verde

Cape Verde has a comprehensive NQF of eight levels, inclusive of all qualifications from Diploma of Basic obligatory education (level 1) to Doctorate degree (level 8), of vocational and general nature.

Source: ACQF 2021. Mapping Study Cape Verde – update 2021. Author: Castel-Branco E. <https://acqf.africa/resources/mapping-study/cape-verde-country-report-update>

Kenya

Kenya implements a 10-level NQF, which comprises qualifications spanning from Primary certificate (general) and Basic skills / Skills for Life (level 1) to Doctorate Degree (level 10).

Source: Inventory – Snapshot Kenya. <https://acqf.africa/resources/nqf-inventory/countries/kenya>

Ghana

The current Ghana NQF in implementation has eight levels, but comprises only qualifications of technical-vocational nature, not academic qualifications. The country intends to develop an integrated qualifications framework, encompassing TVET and academic qualifications.

Figure 7: Relating the current and the future NQF in Ghana

NQF Level	Proposed NQF for General/ Academic Qualifications	NTVET QF		NTVET QF Levels	Level of Education	
10	Doctorate Degree	Doctor of Technology		8	TERTIARY LEVEL	
9	Master's Degree	Master of Technology		7		
8	Post-graduate Diploma/ Certificate	Bachelor of Technology		6		
7	Bachelor's degree					
6	Tertiary Diploma	GCE A Level	ABCE	Higher National Diploma	5	PRE-TERTIARY
5	Ordinary National Diploma			National Certificate II	4	
4	Senior High School Certificate	GCE O'Level	GBCE	National Certificate I	3	
3				National Proficiency II	2	BASIC
2	Junior High School Certificate			National Proficiency I	1	
1						

Source: Amoako-Kissi, M. Presentation at 5th ACQF Peer Learning Webinar, 10/09/2020.

<https://acqf.africa/capacity-development-programme/webinars/acqf-5th-peer-learning-webinar/session-3-ghana-nqf-5th-plw-en.pdf/@@display-file/file/session-3-ghana-nqf-5th-plw-en.pdf.pdf>

3.3.2 Levels descriptors and domains

A consistent feature of NQFs is the use of level descriptors. Within an NQF, level descriptors are statements that describe the complexity of learning of qualifications (or qualification types) within the national qualifications system. Level descriptors are important for locating or placing a particular qualification within the qualifications system. Ideally, they should promote and be written in learning outcome format.

Level descriptors are defined using agreed domains and generally incorporate three or more domains.

The table below provides a summary of African country qualifications frameworks in terms of their scope, number of levels and the domains used in the level descriptors.

Table 4: Summary of selected QFs in Africa

Country	Scope	Number of levels	Domains in level descriptors
Botswana	Comprehensive	10	Knowledge, Skills, Competence
Cape Verde	Comprehensive	8	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude (Responsibility and Autonomy)
Mozambique	1) HE 2) TVET 3) Comprehensive, integrated	3 5 10	HE (QUANCES): 3 levels Domains of learning – level descriptors: Knowledge, Skills, Competence TVET (QNQP): 5 levels Domains: Knowledge, Skills, degree of autonomy and attitudes NQF: 10 levels Domains: Knowledge, Skills, Autonomy and Responsibility
Namibia	Comprehensive	10	Domains not segregated, include: knowledge, skills, supervision/autonomy
Rwanda	NF comprehensive	10	- Knowledge & Understanding; - Applied Knowledge, Understanding and Practice; - Generic Cognitive Skills; - Communication, ICT and numeracy skills; - Autonomy, responsibility and working with others
Seychelles	Comprehensive	10	Degree of complexity; Reasoning & problem solving; Knowledge; Autonomy and Responsibility

Source: ACQF 2022n.

The information in the table above is recognised as only a point in time, as qualifications systems and frameworks continue to evolve and change overtime.

Across these frameworks, the **level descriptors** are usually described by two or more domains. Table 4 indicates that generally *knowledge* and *skills* are the two main domains along with *responsibility and autonomy*, and the *context* in which the knowledge and skills are deployed. There are examples of generic competence (such as *communication, ICT, numeracy*) and *adaptability and problem solving*.

There are variations across the various NQFs with some defining the domains and others not defining them. In addition, some NQFs do not separate the domains into a table format, and although there may be

inherent logic to the level descriptors, to use this format can make it difficult for users to discern the variation of levels of learning complexity.

The clarity and logic of level descriptors are important for not only locating qualifications on the NQF but also for comparing qualifications and qualification types of other NQFs or for referencing the NQF level descriptors to regional qualifications frameworks level descriptors.

In addition, in some countries the levels descriptors are drafted as levels of learning complexity with the qualification types aligned to level descriptors through a table/map, or through a text-based descriptor (e.g., New Zealand, Namibia, Botswana), whereas other countries write specific levels of learning complexity for each qualification type (e.g., Ethiopia, Zimbabwe).

Figure 8: Zimbabwe NQF descriptors

ZNQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPE	DESCRIPTORS	TYPE OF OCCUPATION
10	PhD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cutting edge research and creation of new knowledge in the development of the study <input type="checkbox"/> Advance new techniques, ideas or approaches <input type="checkbox"/> Autonomous in research conducted 	Doctor /Researcher

Source: Zimbabwe National Qualifications Framework 2018

The second approach blends the levels of learning complexity with qualification types and may be in response to a limited number of qualification types or a confusion with 'level' and 'type'. Attaching the qualification type within the level descriptor may not enable points of difference to be clarified especially if there are multiple qualification types entered at a level. A point of difference may not be an issue at the higher levels of an NQF (such as those focused on higher education) but may be an issue at lower levels of the NQF where there is an overlap of sector provision and a greater variance in qualification types. The first approach (be it a table/map or text-based qualification type descriptors) allows greater flexibility for allocating multiple qualification types at the same level of learning complexity, and also allows for the qualification type descriptor to outline points of difference between qualification types at the same level, e.g., in terms of volume of learning and purpose.

Lesotho's approach to naming qualifications (Figure xx) shows the link made between type and level of qualification.

Table 3: Qualification titles & nomenclature

Full Title	Shortened Title
LQF Level 7 Bachelor of Commerce in Auditing	BCom Auditing
LQF Level 5 Certificate of Engineering in Water Management	CertEng in Water Mgt
LQF Level 5 Advanced Level Certificate in Mathematics	A Level Maths
LQF Level 3 Basic Vocational Training Certificate	BVTC
LQF Level 1 Basic Adult Education Certificate	BAEC

These titles are arrived at through the conventional nested approach presented below:

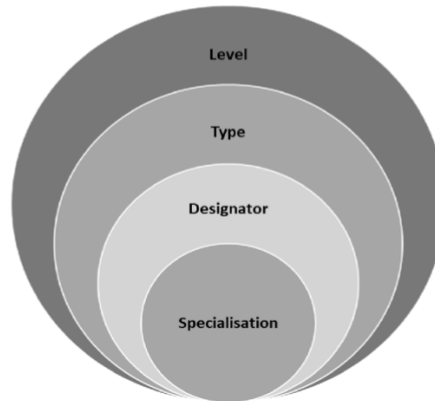


Figure 2. Naming qualifications

Figure 9: Nested approach to naming qualifications (Lesotho NQF)

Source: https://www.che.ac.ls/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/LQF-Final_Cabinet-Approved-Signed-1.pdf

3.3.3 Volume of learning measure

Most NQFs include a volume of learning measure or include a volume measure in supplementary documentation. Volume of learning is a generic term to describe the amount of learning and assessment to successfully complete the qualification. Volume of learning measures focus on the amount of learning effort. Volume of learning measures are usually described in terms of duration (such as years) or in terms of hours or a credit point equivalent. The volume measure is usually used and linked to qualification type descriptors and therefore is a way of providing consistency of formulation of qualifications. If a credit value is used then the volume measure may also be used to function within a credit transfer and accumulation system.

A volume of learning is an input measure. A volume of learning measure is usually based on a number of factors:

- An average student that does not have any knowledge and skills in the field of study, with NQFs often using the term 'typical' rather than 'average' learner with no underpinning knowledge and skills in the field of study.
- Amount of structured time (direct supervision and directed unsupervised including assessment). It may or may not include non-structured time that the learner may undertake on their own behalf. Including unstructured or undirected time in a volume of learning measure is a reflection of the individual learner input rather than the programme design and assessment to meet the requirements of the qualification type or qualification.

Countries will need to reflect on the inclusion of such aspects into the NQF definition.

Below is a summary of credit values in selected NQFs in Africa.

Table 5: Volume of learning measure

NQF	Volume measure
Botswana	<p>Credit means the amount of learning recognised for qualifications and unit standards, measured in terms of notional hours.</p> <p>Source: Botswana Qualifications Authority (National Credit and Qualifications Framework) Regulations 2016</p>
Cape Verde	<p>HE: 25–30 notional hours of workload. 1 curricular year = 60 credits (aligned with ECTS)</p> <p>All forms of academic work</p>
Mozambique	<p>HE: 25–30 notional hours of workload. 1 curricular year = 60 credits (aligned with ECTS)</p> <p>TVET: 10 notional hours</p> <p>All forms of learning activities</p>
Namibia	<p>Both qualifications and unit standards are measured in terms of credit, with one credit equal to 10 hours of notional learning time inclusive of directed and self-directed learning and assessment.</p> <p>Source: Regulations Setting-Up the National Qualifications Framework for Namibia 2006</p>
Rwanda	<p>A credit is equated to learning outcomes achievable in 10 notional learning hours. One credit is equated to 10 hours of notional student learning. The minimum number of credits in one academic year of study leads is 120 and this amounts to 1200 notional learning hours. Notional learning hours include direct contact time with teachers or trainers ('directed learning'), time spent in studying, doing assignments, and undertaking practical tasks ('self-directed') as well as time spent in assessment. The number of credits is worked out on the basis of the amount of time that an 'average' learner at a specified study level might be expected to take to achieve the expected learning outcomes.</p> <p>Source Rwanda Qualifications Framework 2021</p>
Seychelles	<p>The minimum number of credits for a qualification shall be 120. A credit equals ten notional hours. Notional hours refer to direct contact with teachers and trainers and non-contact time which is time spent on independent study, working on assignments and on other forms of assessment.</p> <p>Source: Regulations Setting-Up the National Qualifications Framework for the Republic of Seychelles 2008</p>
South Africa	<p>“Credits” means the amount of learning contained in a qualification or part-qualification whereby one (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.</p> <p>“Notional hours of learning” means the agreed estimate of the learning time that it would take an average learner to meet the defined outcomes, it includes consideration of contact time, research, completion of assignments, time spent in structured learning in the workplace, individual learning, group work, projects and others. Ten (10) notional hours equate to one (1) credit.</p> <p>Source: Policy for credit accumulation and transfer within the National Qualifications Framework 2021</p>
Zimbabwe	<p>1 credit = 10 notional hours</p>

Credit points can be used in two separate ways, which are:

1. For broad qualification comparisons such that the expectations for the amount of time that would need to be devoted to the learning for the award of a designated qualification type would

be broadly equivalent or comparable. This is the approach taken by the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

2. For credit systems such that a component of learning such as a unit, subject or module would normally involve the same amount of learning as the unit for which credit is being sought.⁸

The first approach is a quality assurance issue and the responsibility of the quality assurance bodies and approaches (e.g., qualifications approval processes), and the second approach is one strategy to facilitate credit transfer and articulation.

Using a credit point value aids in the consistency of 'size' of a qualification, and may assist in the determination of qualification types (as per the New Zealand Qualifications Framework). However, countries may find that this approach too limiting for the scope of their qualification types and may choose not to do so, and may use a duration measure (e.g., Australia)⁹. It is a balancing act between consistency and flexibility when constructing qualifications.

Of the countries with a credit points system, many are countries that aim to participate in a national or regional credit transfer system, for example, European countries that are a party to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). This higher education credit system measures and compares learning achievements and helps students transfer credits from one institution to another. This system is complex and also requires a strong level of commitment to apply credit to each component of a qualification, along with assigning a level of difficulty. A similar system exists for VET, European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). These systems complement other strategies to facilitate recognition such as the European Qualifications Framework and the Europass.

3.3.4 Qualification type descriptors

Qualification type descriptors outline the types of qualifications (such as Bachelor, Diploma, Certificate) that will be issued within the qualifications system. 'Qualification type descriptors are usually described using two main metrics (that is, level of complexity, volume of learning measure) and additional fields of interest (such as entry requirements, purpose, pathways, relationship to other qualifications, examination details [especially for PhD]).'¹⁰

Qualification type descriptors may be fully included within NQF documentation (such as Namibia, Botswana, Australia and New Zealand), but in other NQFs the qualification types and their descriptors may be included in additional documents such as policy or regulations, quite often sector specific (such as Philippines and Indonesia). In Europe, for example, the Bologna Process provides guidance outlining three cycles of higher-education qualifications.¹¹

Across the African NQFs there are examples of qualification type descriptors being outlined in primary NQF documentation. NQFs approach qualification type descriptor in a range of various ways.

Some NQFs do not provide text-based qualification type descriptors but provide a table summarising key aspects of the qualification type, e.g., level and volume measure, such as that for Rwanda. Refer to Figure below as an example.

⁸ Keating et al 2008.

⁹ Note that at the time of writing, the AQF is under review including this aspect of the qualification types.

¹⁰ ETF 2021





¹¹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/levels/higher-education/inclusion-connectivity/bologna-process-european-higher-education-area>

REQF Levels	Qualification Types			Nr. of Credits	
10	PhD			360	
9	Masters / Postgraduates/Medical Fellowship		M. Tech	180	180
8	Bachelors		B. Tech	480	480
7	Advanced Diploma		Advanced Diploma	360	360
6	Diploma		Diploma	240	240
5	Advanced Certificate of Secondary Education	General of Professional Certificate of Secondary Education	TVET Certificate V	*3510	156
4			TVET Certificate IV		156
3			TVET Certificate III		156
2	Ordinary Level Certificate of Education		TVET Certificate II	*3510	156
1	Primary School Leaving Certificate		TVET Certificate I	*1560	40
	Adult Education Certificate			*972	

Figure 10: Rwanda qualification type summary

Source: Rwanda Qualifications Framework 2021 (Ministerial Order No 003/2021/MINEDUC of 20/10/2021 Determining Rwanda Qualifications Framework). Annex, pg 42

Legend:

-  -12 years basic education and adult education
-  - TVET basic education
-  - TVET higher education
-  - General higher education

Some NQFs include a text-based summary. The table below provides a sample of the headings in text-based qualification type descriptors.

Table 6: Summary of fields in text-based qualification type descriptors

Country	Descriptor fields
Botswana	Specification (level, total number of credits, minimum number of credits) Fields (Designators) Subfields and domains (Qualifiers) Example Purpose and characteristics Admission requirements Progression
Namibia	Characteristics and purpose Level of certification Size of qualification

The *Regulations Setting-Up the National Qualifications Framework for Namibia* (2006) includes 10 level descriptors and definitions of qualification types. The annex notes that there are three broad types of

qualifications: degrees, diplomas and certificates, and provides broad descriptors. It includes, for example, the following descriptor for a certificate.

The award of a certificate generally follows the attainment of a meaningful and coherent cluster of outcomes of learning associated with one or more areas of learning. The volume of attainment recognised by a Certificate is generally less than that required for the award of a diploma.

Certificates may be an integral component of a degree and/or diploma and/or may be a stand alone qualification.

Certificates may be awarded at more than one level of the NQF between Levels 1 and 8 inclusive.

Distinguishing between Certificates at different awarding levels may be achieved by the inclusion in the Level in the title.

In addition, the Regulation states that certificates can be awarded at levels 1 to 8, and a minimum of 40 NQF credits of which a minimum of 40 must be at or above the level of certification.

Source: Regulations Setting-Up the National Qualifications Framework for Namibia (2006)

New Zealand approaches the qualification type descriptors differently according to the level of the qualification type. For example:

- Certificate and Diploma qualification type descriptors use the following headings: Purpose, Outcomes, Credit requirements (for certificates and diplomas)
- Bachelor, Graduate and Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas, Bachelor Honours, Masters, Doctoral qualification type descriptors use the following headings: Purpose, Entry, Outcomes, Credit requirements, relationship with other qualifications.

The Lesotho NQF takes a slightly different approach whereby the map of level descriptors contains a definition characterizing each level. For example, the generic statement at level 10 notes 'The purpose of a Doctorate is to generate new knowledge that other experts in the field agree to be novel, innovative and that has societal benefits in the field of application and beyond. An award qualifies an individual to apply a substantial body of knowledge to research, investigate and develop new knowledge in one or more fields (for transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programmes) of investigation or professional practice. Minimum total credits = 360. Minimum at LQF 10 = 360. No early exit allowed. Typically, a Doctoral Degree is 3–4 years in duration.'¹²

2.9 Phases of an NQF

Over 150 countries in the world have NQFs and are at different stages of development and operationalisation. Countries engage differently with the NQF development process and many do it with support of international organisations and partners.¹³

NQFs are not static constructs, but evolve and change over time. Various research has attempted to categorise the stages of development and implementation. For example:

Cedefop (2020) outlined 6 stages of NQFs development and implementation:

1. Explorative stage includes initial discussions and consideration of NQFs and international practice
2. Design stage includes negotiating and drafting the structural and technical features of the NQF
3. Adoption stage includes the formal adoption of the NQF

¹² Lesotho NQF - ACQF Inventory. <https://acqf.africa/resources/nqf-inventory/countries/lesotho>

¹³ Cedefop, ETF, UNESCO 2017; Cedefop, ETF, UNESCO 2019

4. Activating stage is the preparatory operational stage, characterised by the consolidation of governance and the concrete building up of administrative and technical capacity and expertise
5. Operational stage involves full implementation
6. Review stage involves periodic review and leads to adaptations to the NQF.

The ACQF mapping report (ACQF 2021g) outlined 5 key stages:

1. Not in place
2. Early steps
3. In development and consultation
4. Approved and started implementation
5. Operational for some time and reviewed.

For the purposes of this Guideline, the ‘lifecycle’ of an NQF is categorised into three distinct phases for ease of discussion and explanation of the steps and enablers of movement towards actual implementation:

1. Design and development phase
2. Implementation phase
3. Monitoring and review phase.

These three phases are explained below.

3.4.1 Phase 1: Designing and developing an NQF

This phase includes:

1. Conceptualisation and design of the NQF during which countries analyse and define the rationale and main objectives of the future NQF, including “why, what for, what, how, with whom, when”.
2. Consultation and testing stage, during which the future NQF proposal is part of a public consultation process
3. Official establishment/adoption stage whereby the NQF is formally documented and agreed to through a decree/law or a formal agreement between stakeholders.

When planning, designing and agreeing on an NQF the process requires:

- Leadership, coordination and clarity on the objectives to be achieved
- Dialogue, including 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.

Planning the development of the NQF

Key steps:

1. Define the rationale for the NQF: which issues, problems and objectives and links to relevant national/regional strategies and policies
2. Stakeholder engagement:
 - 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 stakeholder groups about the NQF process, share main concepts and objectives
3. Prepare and plan for 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 and from NQFs in countries of the region/beyond

Source: ACQF 2022a

The planning stage will include outlining ‘why, what for, what, how, with whom, when’. It will include consideration of:

- Preliminary determination of the objectives of the NQF (‘why and what for’)
- The overall approach to the development of the NQF (‘how’), including determining the stakeholders to be involved and how they will be involved (‘with whom’), the establishment of a working or planning committee (or group) to manage the development of the NQF.
- Outlining a plan for development, specifically timelines and roles and responsibilities of the relevant parties
- How the NQF will be tested and trialed
- The potential governance arrangements of the NQF
- The potential linkages to national initiatives and structures, and quality assurance.

Technical drafting stage

Key steps:

4. Draft the NQF:
 - a. Define the scope of the NQF and the main components of the policy and technical documents to be elaborated.
 - b. Draft the structures
 - c. Conduct the technical activities, collect feedback and comments, monitor the process
5. Prepare and plan for the consultation and adoption process:
 - a. Conduct public consultation on the drafts of NQF policy and technical documents
 - b. Plan the steps related to 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

Source: ACQF 2022a

The technical drafting of the NQF is an iterative process, involving a cycle of research, drafting technical proposals, and consultations.

Conducting research and consultations

It is important for NQF developers to undertake research of their country’s qualifications system, identify and map the number of implicit (or explicit) levels of the NQF (or system) and the potential domains (establishing and understanding domain definitions). The research would also include identifying the various qualification structures, such as the number and variety of qualification types and the hierarchy of these qualification types within the current qualifications system.

Research will also include reviewing and learning from other countries and their NQFs as well as considering regional qualifications frameworks that the NQF wishes to align to or be a part of.

However, designing an NQF implies more than just developing and agreeing on a set of structural and technical features. Setting up an NQF is about ‘creating a platform for dialogue involving as broad a group of stakeholders as possible. The breadth and depth of these (new) dialogues is an important first indicator of the importance attributed to the NQF in different countries. High level of involvement (including disagreement and controversy) signals that the framework is taken seriously and will probably influence

existing structures, practices and interests; a lack of dialogue, involvement and ownership may indicate a potentially limited future impact of the framework.¹⁴

Drafting of the NQF structures

This section of the Technical Guideline draws heavily on recent work undertaken by the ETF report (2021) on drafting level descriptors for regional qualifications frameworks and can be applied to national qualifications frameworks.

The development of the NQF structures generally involve a stepped process, including:

1. Articulation of the purpose/objectives and scope
2. Drafting of the level descriptors, including determining the format of the descriptors, the number of levels, the domains and the definitions for the domains
3. Determining the volume of learning and how it will be used in the NQF, such as linked to quality assurance arrangements or credit transfer processes
4. Drafting qualification descriptors.

1. Purpose and scope

Initial discussions in the early stages of NQF development invariably involve the defining the purpose/objectives and scope of the proposed NQF.

It is important in the design of the NQF that the purpose/objectives and scope are clear and logically aligned. For example, if the purpose/objectives are focussed on meeting labour needs and international recognition of qualifications for labour mobility, it is unclear as to why an NQF would then include general education outcomes (e.g., kindergarten or primary school levels of the education and training system) in its structure.

The importance of the drafting the purpose or objectives and the scope in the NQF should not be ignored in the design process as it is these factors that influence the development of the level descriptors (including the determination of levels and domains) and the link to other national initiatives and to quality assurance arrangements within the qualifications system.

The primary purpose of an NQF is to serve the purposes of the country, and should reflect the needs of the country's qualification system, or be a catalyst for change of the system. However, NQFs function within a regional and international context, and with the emergence of RQFs the influence of the RQF cannot be ignored – this is especially the case in relation to the profile of level descriptors.

Although RQFs, such as the EQF and the AQRf, state clearly that they aim to be a neutral influence and therefore not impinge of national sovereignty, it is evident that countries developing NQFs post the development of a RQF tend to reflect the number of levels of learning complexity and the domains. For example, in the remit of the EQF countries developed 8 level NQFs, and several countries designed their NQF and their domains differently from the EQF (e.g., Germany and Belgium-Flanders). The influence of the AQRf can also be seen in the NQFs developed in ASEAN member states, whereby countries developing NQFs beyond the endorsement of the RQF developed 8 level NQFs with similar domains, e.g., Thailand and Vietnam. There is very little literature exploring whether the NQFs that have been strongly influenced by the RQF also support the internal needs of the country's qualifications system. However, it should be that the needs of the country's qualifications system should dominate any decision of the number and construction (domains or sub-domains) of the NQF's levels of learning complexity.

Source: ETF 2021, p. 24

¹⁴ Cedefop 2010

More recently there has been a predominance of 8 level frameworks worldwide, potentially influenced by the two regional frameworks mentioned above (i.e., EQF and AQR). In some instances there are examples of 8 level NQFs that have attempted to align their level descriptors with that of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011) levels.¹⁵ ISCED 2011 is stated to provide a 'framework for organising education programmes and qualifications by applying uniform and internationally agreed definitions to facilitate comparisons of education systems across countries.'¹⁶ ISCED 2011 has a broader scope than a qualifications system and is applied to the whole education and training system. There is no compulsion at country level to include all levels of the education and training system in the NQF, however countries may see benefits in doing so.

2. Level descriptors

As previously mentioned in Section 3.3, within an NQF, **level descriptors are statements that describe the complexity of learning** within the national qualifications system. Level descriptors are the essential elements in an NQF, and much emphasis is placed on them as they communicate to stakeholders and the international community the levels of learning complexity of the qualifications within the country.

Level descriptors are often criticised for being too broad and generic, but they are 'not an exact science' and they 'only provide guidance with regard to levels' of learning complexity.¹⁷

Ideally, level descriptors should **promote and be written in learning outcome format**. It is important that the level descriptors are fit-for-purpose and cognizant of the needs of the national qualifications system in which it is to function. That means the number of levels and the domains within the descriptors must either meet the current situation (reflect what is) or meet the aspirations of the qualifications system.

Guideline 1 and ACQF Thematic Brief 3.1 provide further advice and examples in relation to learning outcomes.

The drafting of the level descriptors is a complex process and it takes a significant proportion of the development time. The following section addresses some key considerations when drafting the level descriptors:

1. Format of level descriptors
2. Underpinning principles for drafting level descriptors
3. Determining the domains for describing the level descriptors and agreeing on definitions for the domains
4. Conceptual basis of level descriptors
5. Horizontal and vertical logic of level descriptors

Format of level descriptors

A key purpose of level descriptors in an NQF is to indicate the location of a qualification type and in turn specific qualifications approved onto the NQF. As previously mentioned in Section 3.3, level descriptors can be developed as:

1. Levels of learning complexity to which qualification types are ascribed a level through a table/map or text-based descriptor which outline points of difference between qualification types at the same level, e.g., in terms of volume of learning and purpose
2. As blended levels of learning complexity and qualification types which minimizes the opportunity to define points of difference of qualification types at the same level of complexity.

¹⁵ There are 8 levels from primary to doctoral level, with an additional level '0' for early childhood.

¹⁶ <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/international-standard-classification-education-isced>, accessed January 2022

¹⁷ Keevy and Chakroun 2015, p. 50

Countries developing NQFs will need to consider these two approaches as to how descriptors of levels of learning complexity are utilized within the NQF, and determine the approach that best suit their needs.

A critical question for developers is how many levels to include in the NQF, and on what domains will these level descriptors be based. The following factors apply:

- If the NQF aims to reflect the qualifications system, then the hierarchy (in terms of complexity) of existing qualification types will influence the number of levels of learning complexity required to accommodate the hierarchy. If the aim of the NQF is to transform the qualifications system (specifically in terms of qualification types) then the number of levels of learning complexity will be influenced by the hierarchy of proposed qualification types.
- Developers will also research international examples and be influenced by any RQFs that they wish to associate with. Some regional qualifications frameworks aim to be a neutral influence on NQFs (e.g., EQF and AQR) but countries that wish to align with the RQF will be tempted to replicate the number of levels for ease of referencing. Other RQFs exert a stronger influence on the NQFs, either for reasons of sharing common qualifications or pursuing regional consistency, such as the SADCQF which invites NQFs to 'align' to the structure of the RQF.

ACQF Thematic Brief 4.1 provides an overview of various RQFs.

Underpinning principles for drafting level descriptors

There is very little written about the underpinning principles for drafting level descriptors. However, it is these principles that will guide the drafter/s of the level descriptors as to how to approach the development of each level descriptor. These principles should be agreed to prior to drafting.

Two regional frameworks utilized drafting principles in the development of two RQFs (i.e. European Qualifications Framework and Pacific Qualifications Framework), which are summarized below.

Table 7: Underpinning principles

Pacific Qualifications Framework	European Qualifications Framework
<p>The level descriptors were based on the principles that they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are neutral, that is, they do not identify the learning or the workplace context • Are developmental in that each successive level implies a higher level of complexity of learning • Does not exclude specific learner groups through the use of language or implied contexts • Are content free • Are not sector specific. 	<p>The descriptors were to be written in such a way so that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All forms of learning outcomes are covered, irrespective of the learning context or institutional context • An adequate distinction is made between the descriptors of lower and higher levels • Repetition is avoided, i.e., each level should build on the lower levels and encompass all the previous levels • Only positive statements are made • Jargon is avoided • Clear, specific statements are made (e.g., no terms such as 'appropriate', 'narrow' or 'good', and no references such as 'narrower' or 'broader'), keeping them as simple and general as possible.

Source: ETF 2021 [original sources Bateman 2011, Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer 2007/2008].

Other researchers offered similar sentiments. For example, early research (OECD 2005) indicated that descriptors should be:

- Independent of each other
- Stated in positive terms

- Concrete and definite in nature and avoid the use of words such as *narrow* and *good*, or cross references such as *narrower*, *broader* or *appropriate*
- Jargon free and transparent for the non-expert reader
- As brief as possible to facilitate clarity of the concept of the level.

With the development of the AQRF, the following principles were considered in its regional design and coherence:

- Components of transparency
- Learning outcomes orientation
- Future orientation
- Generic in scope
- Developmental and cumulative aspects
- Conceptual and technical clarity (ACQF Guideline 2, 2022).

Such principles could equally be applied to drafting NQF level descriptors. However, countries developing NQFs could expect that the level descriptors will hold more detail than in a regional qualifications framework through additional domains or taxonomies within domains. This is because the NQF is focused on the country's need and not on regional coherence and therefore need to be able to describe more accurately the level of complexity of the qualifications issued within the country.

Determining the domains for describing the level descriptors and agreeing on definitions for the domains

Determining the domains to be used to describe the level descriptors will be based on research on current qualifications within the system, international analysis, and relationship with any regional qualifications frameworks. Common domains utilised within NQFs are knowledge, skills, application (often described as responsibility and autonomy), the context in which the knowledge and skills are deployed, as well generic competence (such as communication, ICT, numeracy, adaptability and problem solving).

The consultation process may also reveal how different attributes that may be fostered through inclusion in the NQF. For example, green, digital and social skills are important in the continental Agenda 2063 and CESA-2025, and the NQF could support these aspects of the transformation of learning by including these attributes in the domains. Within Europe and Africa, there are some examples of domains that go beyond (or extend) the more commonly used domains, including:

- Mauritius – learning demand and processes
- Lesotho – areas of knowledge, nature of skills, agency and context (personal and professional attributes of graduates)
- Bulgaria – learning competence, e.g., 'recognizing the need for expanding and updating one's own professional qualifications'
- Hungary – attitude, e.g., 'strives for continuous self education'
- Poland – social competence, e.g., 'be a member of various types of communities, function in various social roles and assume the basic obligations ensuing from this'
- Serbia – attitude, e.g., 'demonstrates entrepreneurial spirit'.

Through repeated drafts, trial and error, and negotiation with stakeholders the finalization of the level descriptors will ensue.

It is important that drafters of the NQF level descriptors, prior to drafting, develop and agree on the definitions of each domain or sub-domain being developed. This is because clarity in definition assists in the 'build' and logic of the indicators for each domain at each level and also provides a focus for reviewing the descriptors. Countries developing NQFs should use the consultation process to determine what domains are important to the country, and therefore to determine what domains should be included or excluded as well as to define these domains (and sub-domains) for clarity in the drafting process.

Guideline 2 provides further advice on level descriptors.

Conceptual basis of level descriptors

There is very little written about the conceptual basis of level descriptors.

In the development of the EQF, significant research was undertaken, and the knowledge and skills domains were agreed partly due to existing taxonomies of learning based on revised Bloom on taxonomies of learning (Anderson et al., 2001). For the Competence domain, it was more difficult to develop and additional research was undertaken of various taxonomies.

The focus for the developers of the level descriptors is generally on ensuring that the level descriptors are technically sound. However, as drafting the EQF level descriptors included extensive consultation with experts and policy makers, they were finalised based on consensus, compromise and acceptance rather than arriving at a perfect solution. A pragmatic approach was taken noting that when developing the EQF it did not have to be perfect, it just needed to serve its purpose.¹⁸

The Training Module 10 provides further explanation and discussion in relation the conceptual basis of level descriptors.

Horizontal and vertical logic of level descriptors

Level descriptors are developed on two dimensions, that is:

1. 'Vertical dimension which specifies the level of learning complexity. Within a NQF these levels describe the learning complexity of qualifications (or qualification types). These levels are often referred to as *levels of learning progression*, but this implies a theoretical or conceptual basis that may not be present. Referring to these levels as *levels of learning progression* ignores the initial purpose of these levels, which is linking the NQF levels of learning complexity to qualifications (or qualification types) within the national qualifications system.
2. Horizontal dimension which specifies the domains of learning. Within an NQF, the domains generally reflect that which is important to the nation and which are to be reflected in the qualifications. Domains are almost universally described as knowledge and skills, accompanied by the more contentious domains such as application, competence, autonomy and responsibility. These domains and determining the inclusion of 'what is reasonable' without over complicating the framework is where most of the discussion occurs'.¹⁹

Level descriptors in an NQF need to:

- Capture the domains and sub-domains (horizontal dimension), and there should be a general degree of comparability of complexity across the domains
- Be hierarchical in nature, from lower to higher levels (vertical dimension) with sufficient detail to enable differentiation from one level to the next. It stands to reason, that as more levels are required, the more difficult the degree of differentiation can be achieved.²⁰

Ideally there should be a progression of each of the domains over the levels as such a progression enables the differentiation between levels of learning complexity. However, many frameworks do not necessarily demonstrate a clear 'build' of levels of complexity across all levels of a taxonomy in a particular domain or sub-domain, with some only being 'built' over a lesser number of levels than that of the framework. There is little research to determine which is the best approach; however, countries in the development stage of the level descriptors should confirm that stakeholders see logic and benefits of taxonomies not spanning the full number of levels of the framework.

¹⁸ Cedefop 2013, Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer 2007

¹⁹ ETF 2021, p. 26

²⁰ ETF 2021

When interpreting level descriptors (other than those written especially for a specific qualification type, (e.g., Zimbabwe) it is generally assumed that the learning outcomes in each domain are cumulative by level. In other words, one level assumes that the knowledge, skills and other domains at one level include those at the lower levels. In addition, on the horizontal perspective, the domains should be read together to give a true indication and understanding of the level.

3. Volume of learning measure

As mentioned previously, most NQFs include what is often termed a volume measure to assist in the description of a qualification. Volume of learning measures relate to learner effort, and may be described in terms of duration (e.g., years) or in terms of hours or a credit point equivalent. NQFs that do include a volume measure often include a volume measure when defining qualification types in supplementary documentation.

As an input measure, volume of learning is generally defined in terms of an 'average learner' and 'amount of structured time'. Careful consideration needs to be given to defining 'structured time' as it is this definition that will inform the determination of the amount of learning and which varies considerably from NQF to NQF.

Many countries in the development of a credit point system will ask what should be the credit point, e.g., 1 credit point = 10 notional hours. There is no right answer to this question. Some countries often equate a year of study as being approximately 1200 hours and work back from that, whereas other countries may apply a different hourly figure for a year of study. Some countries apply different credit value for different modes of learning, e.g., face-to-face (lecture), laboratory work.

Regardless developers will need to:

- Detail the volume measure (be it a duration measure or credit point value)
- More importantly, define what is included in the volume of learning measure, which needs to be clear and unambiguous
- Explain how the volume measure is used; this also needs to be clear to users, nationally and internationally.

Countries will be influenced by local, regional and international initiatives of which they wish to be a party.

4. Qualification type descriptors

Qualification type descriptors outline the types of qualifications that will be issued within the qualifications system and bring together two main metrics (that is level of complexity, volume of learning measure). As previously mentioned, variations occur across NQFs, including:

- Qualification type descriptors may be included in the primary instrument (such as Australia, New Zealand, Namibia, Botswana) or included in separate policy documents.
- Qualification descriptors may be in table/map format (such as Rwanda) or as text-based descriptors (such as New Zealand, Namibia, Botswana).

Text-based descriptors offer the greater flexibility as additional fields of interest (such as entry requirements, purpose, pathways, relationship to other qualifications, examination details [especially for PhD]) can be included. Such text-based descriptors strengthen the understanding of each qualification type and provide further information to support referencing activities to an RQF or for facilitating recognition of foreign qualifications.

NQF developers will need to consider the best format and approach for their country's needs and focus on ensuring that approach is consistent with the purpose of the NQF and also maximises its linkages to other national strategies.

3.4.2 Phase 2: Implementation of an NQF

Key steps:

6. Prepare for operationalization 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.

Source: ACQF 2022a

The implementation phase of an NQF is concentrated on operationalising the framework, focussing on:

- Consolidating governance and associated laws
- Establishing and practically applying the linkages to associated structures and the quality assurance arrangements, and moving to full practical implementation
- Consolidating administrative and technical capability and expertise.

A plan for implementation of the NQF should be established in the latter stages of the design phase and confirmed by the relevant parties prior to the implementation phase. This plan should articulate the timelines for implementation, funding arrangements, and stepped process to addressing each identified aspect that needs to be established, such as timelines for:

- Capacity development activities
- Transition arrangements from current situation within the qualifications to the new processes
- Establishing registers/databases
- Implementing linked national initiatives and strategies, such as validation of nonformal learning.

The implementation plan should document the linkages and the design of the qualifications system as the coherence of the qualifications system is critical to the success of the implementation of the NQF, along with strengthening the understanding and credibility of the NQF with stakeholders.

Although the implementation phase will result in full scale applied practices of the NQF and implementation and compliance with the quality assurance arrangements in the qualifications system, full implementation will take time and not all linkages and associated strategies can or will be implemented at the same time.

Further advice and key questions to be posed within this phase are included in Training Module 10 (ACQF 2022m).

Monitoring of the implementation of the NQF is discussed below.

3.4.3 Phase 3: Monitoring implementation and review of an NQF

Whilst the review phase is often undertaken after a period of years after implementation, many countries undertake continuous monitoring of NQF implementation. Information gained through monitoring activities may be used at the periodic reviews, or may be used to 'tweak' the NQF or its associated initiatives over time.

The body responsible for the NQF and its implementation would indeed be the body either undertaking or commissioning a review. In some instances, these bodies will commission an independent review team.

Monitoring the implementation of an NQF could take many forms including extensive consultation of stakeholders and focus groups. However, if the quality assurance bodies (which may include the body responsible for the NQF) collect data from providers, students and employers it is possible to use this data for monitoring purposes.

Quality assurance bodies or relevant ministries can require providers to collect data, according to a national data standard. Data standards outline the definitions, fields and potential responses that are to be

collected by the provider and passed to a central depository, or indeed are collected at national level. These data standards are generally linked to the student data management system.

There are multiple examples of **data standards within education and training systems**, that may be unified or specific to sectors. Australia for example includes:

- TVET: Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard ([AVETMISS](#)) ensures the consistency and accuracy of vocational education and training information, and includes VET Provider Collection, Apprentice and Trainee Collection and VET in Schools Collection, and VET Funding Data Collection. Learner data is required to be maintained at provider level according to AVETMISS, aggregated data is sent periodically to a central site for analysis and to inform future system strategies, e.g., plans and funding.
- Higher education: Structured student data (i.e. enrolments, load and completions) and academic staff data (i.e. full-time, fractional full-time and casual data) is reported through the Department's Higher Education Information Management System ([HEIMS](#)), and graduate surveys using the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching ([QILT](#)).

In South Africa, The NQF and the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) provides the following information:

- *Qualifications and part qualifications (including unit standards) registered on the NQF, their purpose statements, exit level outcomes and assessment criteria, and the NQF sub-framework allocated to each qualification and part qualification*
- *The twelve organising fields and the subfields of the NQF*
- *Recognised professional bodies and their Professional Designations that are registered on the NQF*
- *Quality assuring bodies, including Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and Quality Councils (QCs), and the qualifications and part qualifications for which accreditation has been granted*
- *Accredited providers*
- *Registered assessors*
- *The records of learners who achieve qualifications or part qualifications registered on the NQF and their achievements.*

For learner records:

Each education and training provider sends its learner achievement data to the quality assuring body that has accredited the provider to offer that particular qualification. These datasets are sent in the format specified by each quality assuring body, and providers are encouraged to obtain these specifications from their quality assuring bodies.

The quality assuring bodies submit their datasets to the NLRD (in the format specified by SAQA) for batch-loading onto the NLRD.

Source: <https://www.saga.org.za/nqf-and-national-learners-records-database-nlrd>

At a **regional level**, there are examples of suggested data collection options for participating countries. Using data collection sets allow countries to monitor related NQF initiatives (as mentioned in Section 3.5), for example, what is the rate of recognition of prior learning or credit transfer within the qualifications system.

The EQAVET Framework²¹ can be used to support the evaluation and quality improvement at national or regional VET systems level and/or at VET provider level. The indicative descriptors are quality criteria supported by indicators (system and provider level) structured along the quality cycle (Planning-Implementation-Evaluation-Review). These indicators can be applied to both initial and continuing VET and are applicable to all learning environments (such as school-based provision, work-based learning including apprenticeships schemes).

A sample of indicators is included in the Figure below.

Indicators supporting quality objectives for VET policies

Number 3		
Participation rate in VET programmes: Number of participants in VET programmes (¹), according to the type of programme and the individual criteria (²)	Input/Process/Output indicator	Obtain basic information at VET- system and VET-provider levels on the attractiveness of VET Target support to increase access to VET, including for disadvantaged groups
Number 4		
Completion rate in VET programmes: Number of persons having successfully completed/abandoned VET programmes, according to the type of programme and the individual criteria	Process/Output/ Outcome indicator	Obtain basic information on educational achievements and the quality of training processes Calculate drop-out rates compared to participation rate Support successful completion as one of the main objectives for quality in VET Support adapted training provision, including for disadvantaged groups

Figure 11: EQAVET Framework sample indicators

Source: Council of the European Union. 2020

A more recent example of frameworks to monitor implementation of NQFs or quality assurance systems is that proposed by UNESCO for the Asia Pacific TVET sector (UNESCO 2017b). These guidelines outline a framework to evaluate TVET systems (but could be applied to the higher education sector). Principles 4–6 would apply in relation to NQFs and qualifications as they are focussed on qualification formulation and industry engagement:

- Principle 4 – QA of TVET qualification practice is based on clear and transparent quality standards
- Principle 5 – QA of TVET qualifications practice addresses conception and formation of qualifications, assessment, validation and certification processes
- Principle 6 – Key stakeholder groups are involved in key aspects of QA practice (e.g., conception and formation of TVET qualifications, assessment, validation and certification).

A sample is provided below for *Principle 4 QA of TVET qualifications practice is based on clear and transparent quality standards*. There are both qualitative and quantitative indicators. The table below outlines the potential sources of information as evidence of implementation of the principle.

²¹ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202(01)&from=EN)

Table 8: UNESCO Asia Pacific Guidelines sample: Principle 4 QA of TVET qualifications practice is based on clear and transparent quality standards

Indicators	
Qualitative	Quantitative
<p><i>Implementation is demonstrated by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality standards are documented, communicated and made public. • Quality standards are applied to QA of TVET qualifications practice. • Quality standards are applied to evaluation processes. • Quality standards are reviewed and refined in response to evaluation. • Quality standards enable comparisons to be made between qualifications systems, both within the country and externally. • Level of transparency and stakeholder awareness of quality assurance objectives and standards in relation to TVET qualifications. 	<p><i>Evidence of effectiveness of quality standards and their application is measured by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of assessment providers (e.g., education institutions, TVET providers, assessment centres, certifying/awarding bodies) that meet quality standards • Proportion of TVET qualifications that meet accreditation quality standards • Proportion of TVET qualifications that have been re-evaluated against quality standards • Proportion of assessment providers that have been re-evaluated against quality standards.

Source: UNESCO 2017b

Guideline 5 provides more details in regards to EQAVET and Asia-Pacific TVET quality assurance approaches.

Further advice and key questions posed within this phase are included in Training Module 10 (ACQF, 2022m).

2.10 Linkages with other national strategies

NQF can be a catalyst for change and as such the articulation of the purposes of the NQF is extremely important. NQFs are often linked and mentioned in relation to other national strategies in the domain of education and training, such as:

- National initiatives and reforms, e.g., lifelong learning, facilitation of learning pathways, credit accumulation and transfer, recognition of prior learning
- Recognition of foreign qualifications or recognition agreements
- Quality assurance, e.g., of qualifications (utilising qualification quality standards, policies, guidelines), and of providers and their programmes leading to a qualification (utilising quality standards, policies, guidelines). Quality is essential for building trust and confidence in qualifications and the knowledge, skills and competence they represent. Quality must be maintained, and constantly enhanced.

NQF developers will need to consider how the NQF can facilitate and support identified national strategies, and how the NQF will link to quality assurance to strengthen and support the strategies.

3.5.1 National initiatives

Probably the most notable impact of national initiatives is **implementing learning outcomes** at qualification level. Learning outcomes specify what a learner knows, understands and can do, and their inclusion in an NQF moves the focus away from inputs (e.g., years of schooling in the education and training system) to outcomes and drives qualification system reform in many countries. Learning outcomes appear at different levels and the detail varies. For example, at qualifications framework level there are general statements for comparing qualifications and distinguishing levels, whereas learning outcomes at

qualification level will occur at qualification outcome level, and at component level (e.g., subjects, standards) informing teaching and assessment.

NQFs provide a significant role in committing the qualifications system to **promoting lifelong learning** and the provision of pathways for learners. The NQF can provide statements that there is a commitment but how this is facilitated is not as clear. NQF developers need to consider how the level descriptors and qualification type descriptors facilitate clarity in determining linkages between qualifications and across sectors, making pathways clearer. The aim is not to develop a qualification type that leads to ‘dead ends’ for learners which will in turn weaken the commitment to lifelong learning. Qualification type titles specifying a particular sector may provide a profile for the sector, but may be seen as ‘second class’ qualifications and not provide for linkages to other sectors or restrict access to more privileged formal learning sectors. NQFs and the body overseeing the implementation of the NQF needs to build trust in qualifications to ensure pathways are facilitated.

A commitment to learning outcomes rather than learning inputs moves the emphasis from formal learning to learning in all its forms. A learning outcome approach facilitates a modular construction of a qualification, allows learners to accumulate units over time, and allows learners to exit and enter programmes leading to a qualification.

The value of **recognition of all learning, be it formal, nonformal or informal learning** is a critical focus of any NQF based on learning outcomes. Learning outcomes at all levels of the system (framework, qualification and components²²) assist in the clarifying the expected outcomes and allows for those with knowledge and skills gained through non-formal modes to access recognition processes. Learning outcomes at qualification and component level can:

- Assist those who have formally completed a component or qualification to seek credit transfer options in a target qualification or component.
- Assist those who seek formal recognition of their knowledge and skills gained through nonformal or informal means.

As an aspect of access and equity, recognition should be available at component level. If awarding bodies look for ‘equivalence’ or ‘best fit’ when recognising learning for credit purposes across sectors, recognising credit transfer will be problematic – hence awarding bodies may need to accept certain tolerances when recognising for access into a qualification or for credit purposes. Recognition is discussed further in Section 5 of this Guideline.

Finally, an NQF as the primary policy instrument should provide clear statements in regards to key initiatives, e.g., validation of nonformal and informal learning, and therefore require cascading documentation, such as policies and quality standards, to drive implementation.

3.5.2 Registers/databases

A **critical tool for providing transparency and confidence in the qualifications system** is that of registers/databases. The provision of public information includes:

- Registers of qualifications that meet the requirements of the NQF
- Registers of approved providers of NQF qualifications which could include information about their compliance to specified requirements (e.g., quality standards, quality criteria) as well as the performance of these providers (such as programme and component completions and student and employer satisfaction).

Registers of qualifications are important instruments for transparency across the panorama of qualifications of different countries. The quality, completeness and accessibility to this information is

²² Components of a qualification may be units of competency, modules, courses or subjects.

fundamental for the end-users (learners, training providers, employers, and workers). Registers of qualifications also offer a view on the actual status of implementation of NQFs.

Many countries have developed registers/databases/catalogues of qualifications, which are accessible online, open for the wider public, searchable, and offer comprehensive and detailed information on the individual qualifications (full and part-qualifications). There is also a growing use of new technologies to manage and visualise information on qualifications, to create interoperability between registers of different countries, or to operationalise multi-country databases of qualifications supporting comparability and transparency in a regional block (or regional qualifications framework). The Europass in the EU hosts the large database of qualifications to which EQF countries connect their national databases.

This new generation digital and online registers of qualifications play an important role in strategic management of human resource development, taking account of the national economic and employment context and priorities for relevant skills and jobs policies. Well systematised information on existing qualifications by levels, sectors of economic activity, fields of education and regions is vital for any country's management of labour market and skills mismatches, and better policies and measures to meet demand and supply dynamics.

Qualifications registers can be a regulatory tool as well as a marketing tool. For example, a register may only list qualifications that meet the requirements of the NQF, and be linked to a register that only lists those providers that have met specified requirements (e.g., quality standards, quality criteria) and the qualifications they are approved to provide educational and training services. Not being on the public list means that stakeholders, including potential learners, know that the provider and its programmes leading to a qualification are not quality assured and therefore there may be a potential risk applied to this provider. In some countries, not meeting specified requirements and not being on the register results in reduced or no funding or support from government.

Guideline 6 and Training Module 10 (ACQF 2022m) provides further information on registers/databases of qualifications.

3.5.3 Micro-credentials

In recent years there has been increasing interest in micro-credentials and **shorter recognised programmes as an alternative, or an addition to qualifications**, within a qualifications system.

Micro-credentials can be defined as 'typically focused on a specific set of learning outcomes in a narrow field of learning and achieved over a shorter period of time'.²³

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

- Referring to learning over a limited time period and/or in a specific area
- May form part of or adding 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 EU is developing a common approach on micro-credentials, which uses the following definition²⁴:

²³ UNESCO 2021

²⁴ European Commission 2021a

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.

Micro-credentials are promoted as a way of supporting lifelong learning, of offering more flexible and modular learning opportunities and pathways, and as an efficient way to upskill or reskill workers. Micro-credentials are increasingly important where the higher education or TVET qualifications systems only offer full programmes leading to a qualification and there is limited opportunity for entry for partial completion for specific purposes.

Micro-credentials are a relatively new theme in the scope of the debate, research and policies of NQFs, and many questions and issues are yet to be clarified. The good news is that this debate has become global, and countries and regional communities (and regional qualifications frameworks) have engaged in dialogue about a common language and views on what defines micro-credentials. The most salient initiatives in this direction that reached some results in 2021–2022 include:

- UNESCO: UNESCO, 2021. Defining micro-credentials: Opportunities and challenges in shaping the education landscape. <https://en.unesco.org/news/defining-micro-credentials-opportunities-and-challenges-shaping-educational-landscape>
- European Union: European Commission – European approach to micro-credentials. All resources and policies at <https://education.ec.europa.eu/levels/higher-education/european-approach-to-micro-credentials>
- Australia: National Micro-Credentials Framework. Australian Government – Department of Education, Skills, and Employment. 2021. National Micro-Credentials Framework. <https://www.dese.gov.au/download/13591/national-microcredentials-framework/26500/document/pdf>

The tension for including micro-credentials in a qualifications system is multi-faceted:

- It is not a full qualification and qualification approval processes may be limited to only full qualifications
- Qualifications tend to offer a coherent outcome, often related to a workforce or professional role
- Whether they are quality assured by the responsible body or not.

Countries are exploring and adopting ways to include micro-credentials in the NQF and NQF Register. Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications has adopted the category *Special Purpose Awards*, which supports inclusion of micro-credentials. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority has introduced a micro-credential system as part of New Zealand's regulated education and training system, and the specific [register](#) includes 235 micro-credentials (as of 27/04/2022).

For more information on the current international debate and research on the role, types and features of micro-credentials, refer to [ACQF Training Module 10](#) (ACQF, 2022m).

3.5.4 Recognition of foreign qualifications

Countries formulating processes for recognition of foreign qualifications should also consider that they are not just a receiving country but also a sending country. Countries need to trust the quality assurance and

qualifications emanating from another country, but in turn they need promote trust of local qualifications in receiving countries. As such recognition agencies will need to:

- Develop processes and procedures for assessing foreign qualifications
- Provide information for international recognition agencies assessing local qualifications.

The provision of information should be readily accessible, and should include:

- Details of NQFs, including level descriptors and qualification types
- Details and links to national registers of approved providers and approved qualifications that meet the NQF
- Details of key quality assurance bodies and quality assurance processes that engender trust in the design of qualifications as meeting the NQF and in the providers having the capacity to provide programmes leading to these qualifications.

The NQF has a key role to play providing clear information to local and international stakeholders as to qualifications issued within a country, as well as the quality assurance arrangements to engender trust of these qualifications.

3.5.5 Quality assurance linkages

How the NQF links to quality assurance arrangements is discussed in detail in Section 4 of this Guideline.

By their very nature, NQFs have a distinct quality assurance aspect to them; however, it is the strength of its link to quality assurance strategies which promotes a robust qualifications system in which stakeholders nationally and internationally can trust.

Quality assurance is primarily focussed on:

1. Formulation, development and approval of qualifications
2. Provision of these qualifications by providers.

How countries establish the link between the qualifications designed to meet the NQF requirements and the provision by providers of programmes leading to these qualifications is critical to the integrity of the qualifications system.

NQFs can:

- Provide a platform for strengthening cooperation and commitment by stakeholders, such as industry, enterprises, professional bodies community and civil society. Cooperation and commitment could include involvement in the formulation and development of assessment, or indeed the assessment of learning outcomes.
- Facilitate the approach to modular construction of qualifications, e.g., components²⁵ of qualifications, promoting flexibility of construction
- Link to registers to make the NQF and the qualifications that meet the requirements of the NQF
- Provide for components, which form the basis of assessment, at modular level
- Be a focus to provide access and equity of its citizens into the qualifications system by allowing for recognition of nonformal and informal learning, and credit transfer.

Of the above list, item one is the main focus of Section 4.3 as this is where the strongest link between quality assuring the formulation and development of qualifications and that of the NQF can be established.

²⁵ Components of a qualification may be units of competency, modules, courses or subjects.

2.11 Governance of NQFs

3.6.1 Considerations underpinning governance arrangements

Any discussion related to the governance arrangements of a responsible body to manage and maintain the NQF needs to take into consideration a range of factors, including:

- Nature and purpose of the NQF
- Characteristics of the qualifications system, including the quality assurance arrangements in place or desired
- Degree and scope of desired stakeholder engagement.

3.6.2 Nature and purpose of the NQF

Countries develop qualifications frameworks for a range of purposes, which may be implicit or explicit. Purposes are often documented in preliminary papers and may have underlying economic, social and ethical motivations. The underpinning purpose of the NQF can affect the governance arrangements of the responsible body within a country.

NQFs can vary in terms of whether they are tight or loose frameworks, noting that NQFs which are tight are generally based on legislation or regulation with which accreditation of qualifications are to comply. As such, there are often common rules and procedures for the development and approval of qualifications for all education and training sectors. Loose frameworks, on the other hand, tend to be based on general principles and are more guidance rather than requirements to comply with.²⁶ The notion of loose or tight frameworks is more related to how the quality assurance arrangements are implemented as opposed to the NQF policy instrument.

The following table summarises the conceptual distinction between the two approaches to an NQF and the relation to the quality assurance arrangements.

Table 9: Conceptual distinction between tight and loose frameworks

Tight	Loose
Prescriptive about qualifications design and quality assurance Regulatory purpose Aim to achieve wider social goals Tend to apply common rules and procedures across all qualifications.	Based on general principles Communicating and enabling role Regulate to some extent Accept differences in approach where thought necessary.

Source: Tuck 2007, p. 22.

Tuck (2007) indicates that tight frameworks are more appropriate for a regulatory environment and loose frameworks more appropriate when the framework has more a communicative focus. Tuck's classification does not imply that there are only two types of NQFs, as there is a continuum of approaches. However, the two approaches highlight the need to consider the degree of central control to be exerted in regards to implementation, and therefore affects the role of the responsible body/ies.

²⁶ Tuck 2007

3.6.3 Characteristics of the qualifications system

Qualifications have been categorized into tracked, linked or unified systems.²⁷ In a tracked system the vocational education and training sector and higher education sector are separate and distinct. In a linked system there are different tracks, but emphasis is on their similarities and equivalences. In a unified system all provision is within the one system. Generally speaking, most of the countries have tracked systems with linkages being promoted to allow for flexibility of access and progression – therefore promoting lifelong learning.

Countries typically divide the quality assurance functions across different types of responsible bodies, such as:

- Accreditation agencies
- Provider registration and monitoring agencies
- Qualifications agencies and awarding bodies
- Licensing agencies and professional bodies
- Self-accrediting and/or awarding providers
- External quality agencies such as those responsible for the ISO standards.²⁸

The number and type of agencies and the balance of their responsibilities, as well as the processes that are used to undertake their functions are varied across countries.

These responsible bodies and their role in the NQF body membership may need to be considered.

3.6.4 Degree and scope of desired stakeholder engagement

How the various players within a qualifications system have ‘a voice’ in the management and maintenance of the NQF is important in ensuring that all sectors have a sense of ‘ownership’ of the framework.

International research (Young 2005, Allais 2021) indicates that extending membership of a NQF responsible body to a range of stakeholders has intrinsic benefits for democratizing decision making and clearly acknowledging that the NQF ‘belongs to all citizens’. However, getting the balance right between various government departments and agencies, experts and stakeholders (e.g., users, community organizations, trade unions, employers) is important to ensure self interests do not dominate and conflicts arise.

Depending on the design of the qualifications system, stakeholder engagement can include:

- Various key ministries, for example, education and labour ministries plus other line ministries
- Quality assurance bodies
- Industry groups or representatives
- Civil society
- Community associations
- Trade unions
- Professional associations
- Provider groups
- Student groups
- Sector qualifications councils/committees.

Research has shown that in order to be successful, qualification-system reforms require that all stakeholders are mobilised and involved, and that they are aware of the objectives and take ownership of the necessary changes (UNESCO 2015). However, there is very little synthesised published information in

²⁷ Tuck 2007

²⁸ Bateman et al 2012

regards to the membership of NQF responsible bodies. Sources are limited to websites and legal instruments. However, generally membership of governing entities within the responsible body includes representatives of the sectors and stakeholders of the qualifications system, and often includes an expert in the area of qualifications frameworks or quality assurance.

Training module (ACQF 2022m) provides further information and examples of governance arrangements and stakeholder engagement.

3.6.5 Governance models

In many countries, such as in Africa and in Europe, there has been a tendency to create a new single authority to implement and management qualifications frameworks. However, across the ASEAN member states the model of one body responsible for the NQF and for the quality assurance arrangements (of multiple sectors) is not a model that is widely implemented. In most instances, there are often multiple players responsible for the management of the NQF and of the various sectoral quality assurance arrangements.²⁹

Responsible bodies vary in operations, size and capacity.³⁰ In essence the variance is due to the aspects previously mentioned (nature, scope and purpose of the NQF; characteristics of the qualifications system, including the quality assurance arrangements; and, degree and scope of desired stakeholder engagement) as well as the social and political characteristics of the country. Generally, the variances were the result of whether or not the responsible body has a quality assurance role within the qualifications system. Some countries establish multiple bodies to manage the quality assurance of various sub-sectors; however, each country may establish only one single responsible body to manage and implement its national qualifications framework.

Mukhwana (ACQF 2021f) referring to the NQF governance model of Kenya, indicates, that ‘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’ (p. 1). Mukhwana (ACQF 2021f) indicates that there are three reasons for a separate national authority tasked with the implementation of the NQF:

1. The NQF involves multiple stakeholders and a government may not want to be directly involved
2. An NQF will be more successful if it involves the multiple social partners and providers, and not seen as driven by the government
3. NQF management is operational and not necessarily the focus for the government.

3.6.6 Role of the NQF body

Research into European Union countries notes that the remit of new qualifications bodies can be generalized into various functions, including, amongst others:

- Provide policy advice as to the implementation of NQFs and the qualifications system
- Ensure links with other national and international qualifications frameworks
- Cooperate with similar bodies in other countries
- Carry dissemination activities, such as conferences, research, consultancy and publication activities

²⁹ Bateman and Dyson 2018

³⁰ Allais 2010, QQI 2017

- Arrange for recognition of skills and qualifications for student and labour mobility.³¹

More recent research in the Africa and beyond (ACQF 2022n, SADCQF 2022, Castel-Branco 2021) extends these various functions to include:

- Development and management of standards related to qualifications
- Development and dissemination of methodologies and guidelines related to qualifications and the NQF, including development and location of qualifications on the NQF
- Managing the information management system of NQF and digital online registers/databases of qualifications
- Facilitate international linkages, including referencing the NQF to RQFs and comparability exercises with other NQFs
- Supporting/steering the RPL system/strategies
- Supporting/steering credit transfer arrangements, e.g., credit accumulation and transfer system
- Communicating the NQF.

Promoting the qualifications framework and being a focal point for national and international relationships is acknowledged as a key function of a NQF responsible body. NQFs also include supporting policies related to implementation and communication of the framework, for example, agreed definitions, certification requirements, rules for design and construction of certification documentation (including the use of a NQF logo), pathways opportunities (such as recognition of prior learning), and international referencing processes.

For effective implementation of an NQF across sectors it is accepted that success depends on the level of trust between the sectors. Building communities of trust between the sectors relies on accurate and transparent information in relation to the quality assurance arrangements deployed for providers and for approval of qualifications. The role of the responsible body for managing the NQF could be instrumental in communicating the NQF, approved NQF qualifications, quality assurance arrangements, providing for linkages between sectors and encouraging flexible pathways. In addition, quality assurance can also relate to monitoring the practices and performance of the relevant quality assurance bodies.

3.6.7 Legal basis

The European research³² indicates that countries use legal instruments to define changes in the qualifications system, such as:

- Coordinating the responsible bodies working in the qualifications field by outlining the various advisory groups, steering groups and executive groups
- Setting up a new qualifications responsible body
- Setting out relationships with other national entities.

Prior to drafting the legal instrument, the following steps are recommended:

1. Defining the management of all or part of the new qualifications system, including the remit of relevant bodies (such as qualifications bodies, employment sector councils or certification bodies)
2. Reviewing existing legislation to identify whether the existing legislation is capable of amendment or if new provisions are required

³¹ Castejon et al 2011

³² Castejon et al 2011

3. Drafting the legal instrument for consultation with stakeholders to resolve issues
4. Testing the legislation and costings determined.³³

Research into the European Union countries groups the legal approaches into four categories.

Table 10: Legislative basis for introducing NQFs

Flexible legislation	Non specific legislation	Preparatory legislation	No legislative
Legal arrangements are sufficiently flexible to enable the development of an NQF without stipulating legal mention of an NQF.	Specific mention of NQFs, outlining at various levels of detail, the expected functions and operations	Legislation to prepare for an NQF	Lobbying outside of government for introduction of NQF through draft law No legislative base.

Source: Castejon et al 2011

This European research also indicates that in most European countries the ministry responsible for education and the ministry responsible for labour are the dominant players. A major variance across the European countries is how much of the functions attributed to a responsible body are devolved to delegated bodies or other agencies.

An interesting consideration when creating new laws is that the balance of influence and responsibility of the various parties will change as it is more than likely that the new law will introduce an increased level of stakeholder involvement in decision making.

The ACQF website and the *ACQF Thematic brief No 11* (ACQF 2021f) provide further information in regards to the African country contexts.

6.6.8 Funding

There is very little synthesized published information in regards to funding. However, key funding sources are generally linked to the reporting structures, national education and training funds, and fees received for certification or recognition services. The European research suggests that funding tended to come from the state budget.

6.6.9 Examples of AU Member State governance models

A recent technical overview by Castel-Branco (2021) provides insight into a range of models for governance of African members states and other countries. Castel-Branco (2021) explains that within Africa the most advanced NQFs tend to be supervised by certification agencies and also by quality assurance and specialised committees. Overall, the trend is stated to be towards national agencies rather than sectoral agencies. In the case of sectoral agencies responsible for quality assurance in their sector, the role in relation to the NQF is more of implementation. Castel-Branco 2021 indicates that there is a risk of multiple players with overlapping mandates, occurring in countries with limited resources.

A summary of governance models provided as part of the ACQF governance options is provided below.

³³ Castejon et al 2011

Table 11: Summary of NQF governance models

Type of NQF institutions	Countries
<p>1. NQF Authorities</p> <p>Legal entities of public law with managerial and financial independence. Established by legal acts to develop and implement the NQF; wide scope of functions and areas of work; registration and database of qualifications; multiple sources of financing (public budget, service fees, projects)</p>	<p>Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Zambia</p>
<p>2. Coordination Units NQF</p> <p>Independent legal entities, NQF focused scope of work, registration and database of qualifications. Established by legal acts. Inter-stakeholder coordination functions</p>	<p>Cape Verde</p>
<p>3. NQF management as one of the functions of existing agencies and councils</p> <p>Legal entities with managerial and financial independence: Higher education councils; quality assurance and accreditation agencies (tertiary and higher education); TVET authorities</p>	<p>Egypt, eSwatini, The Gambia, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda</p>
<p>4. NQF coordination as part of the functions of ministerial departments, or other government instances (such as technical coordination units; national alignment committees)</p> <p>Ministerial departments/structures tasked with coordination and development of NQFs. Most frequent ministries: labour and TVET; education; higher education. Technical coordination units accountable to Presidency of the country.</p>	<p>Angola, Cameroon, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, Zimbabwe</p>
<p>5. Inter-ministerial, inter-stakeholder councils focused on NQF development and consultation, initial implementation stages</p> <p>Councils, commissions, working groups – often of temporary nature – until stable NQF governance setting is put in place</p>	<p>Morocco (National Permanent Commission working with the coordinating Ministry);</p>
<p>6. Business organisations</p> <p>Employers’, business associations, federations</p>	<p>Democratic Republic of the Congo (in construction; currently scarce information available)</p>

Source: ACQF 2022n

2.12 Communication

As mentioned in Section 3.6 a key role of the responsible body managing the NQF is the communication and promotion of the NQF to stakeholders and to building international relationships. The body responsible for the NQF may deploy a range of communication strategies to communicate to their stakeholders. In most instances the NQF responsible body is the key source of information. Considerations include:

- Who are the key national stakeholders (e.g., learners, employers and providers)
- How NQF and QA information may be used internationally for recognition of international qualifications and student and labour mobility.

For international purposes, consideration also needs to be given to multiple language access, as the further the scope of the information the better it is for the country's citizens.

Strategies include:

- Clear and easily accessible website
- Simple and clear brochures on the NQF for multiple audiences
- Stakeholder meetings and information sessions
- Membership of the governing body of the NQF.

Guideline 8 provides further information in regards to communication of the NQF.

3 Qualifications

Topics addressed in this chapter:

This chapter looks at qualifications in more detail, including how qualifications are formulated, developed and approved. It addresses a little explained step which is how qualifications are located on the NQF as meeting the qualification type. The chapter looks at various approaches to quality assuring the formulation, development and approval processes of qualifications, as well as the quality assurance of provider provision of qualifications.

Main sources used in this chapter:

- Cedefop 2021. *Review and renewal of qualifications: towards methodologies for analysing and comparing learning outcomes*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper; No 82
- Fretwell, D.H., Lewis, M.V. and Deij, A. 2001. *A Framework for defining and assessing occupational and training standards in developing countries*. Information series No. 386. World Bank: Washington DC.
- ILO 2016. *Update guidelines for development of Regional Model Competency Standards*. International Labour Organization. ILO: Bangkok.
- Tuning Project <https://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/tuning-methodology.html>

3.1 What are qualifications?

Defining a qualification is the essence of an NQF. Generally speaking, qualifications can be viewed in two different ways that are complementary:

- Means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards (EQF 2017)

OR

- A planned combination of learning outcomes with a defined purpose or purposes, including defined, applied and demonstrated competence and a basis for further learning and which has been assessed in terms of exit level outcomes, registered on the NQF and certified and awarded by a recognised body (SAQA 2017)

The definition of an NQF is closely linked to, and dependent on, the definition of a qualification. The EQF definition limits the scope of an NQF to 'those learning outcomes which have been assessed and approved by a competent institution according to given standards. While this narrows down the scope of frameworks, it can be seen as a way to focus and concentrate' the structure of an NQF (EU 2010, p. 10).

The second definition (SAQA 2017) makes a clear distinction in relation to a qualification; that it is a 'planned combination of learning outcomes with a defined purpose or purposes' (SAQA 2017). Therefore, a qualification is a specification of learning outcomes that is approved by an accrediting body as meeting the requirements of the NQF. This is divorced from and separate to a programme, developed by a provider to meet the outcomes of the qualification. A programme can be defined as:

A coherent set or sequence of educational activities designed and organised to achieve pre-determined learning objectives or accomplish a specific set of educational tasks over a sustained period. Within an education programme, educational activities may also be grouped into sub-components variously described in national contexts as 'courses', 'modules', 'units' and/or

‘subjects’. A programme may have major components not normally characterised as courses, units or modules – for example, play-based activities, periods of work experience, research projects and the preparation of dissertations. (Source <http://uis.unesco.org/>)

Qualifications system differ in their approach to ‘qualifications’ and ‘programme’ approval processes, for example:

1. Two-step process: Qualification approval is the acknowledgement that the qualification specification meets the requirements of the NQF and is listed on the register. Programme approval is distinct from and follows qualification approval. It may be applied to national qualifications or provider qualifications.
2. One-step process: Qualification approval is linked to, and not distinct from, programme approval – and usually occurs at provider level

The difference between qualification approval and programme approval is that qualification approval is linked to the approval of the qualification specifications against the NQF; whereas programme approval is linked to the provider’s capacity to develop and resource a programme that leads to a NQF qualification.

Section 4.3 expands on the notion of qualification approval, and Section 4.4 provides a brief overview of programme approval.

Within countries, quality assurance agencies will have registers which will include a list of NQF qualifications and of providers that have met quality assurance requirements and eligibility to provide specific NQF qualifications. In some countries, the public face of these registers is integrated. The importance of making these registers (or integrated register) publicly accessible cannot be denied for confidence in the qualifications system and for recognition of citizen’s qualifications in the international arena.

3.2 Types of qualifications

Making the distinction between *qualifications* and *programmes* allows the qualifications system greater flexibility as a qualification is not restricted to one provider. This model of one qualification and multiple providers/awarding bodies (and therefore multiple programmes) is often seen in TVET qualifications systems with what is often termed ‘national qualifications’.

National qualifications are generally focussed on qualifications for which there is a national need and for which consultation with stakeholders is undertaken in the formulation and development process. Having national qualifications, avoids duplication of qualifications with the same occupational outcome, and is often related to licensing or professional association outcomes. This model can be seen in TVET sectors across the Asia Pacific (including Australia, Cambodia, Fiji and Philippines) and other countries (e.g., United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Cape Verde, Mozambique) whereby common competency standards³⁴ are developed and which may (or may not) be packaged into qualifications. The process for approval may vary from that of an accrediting body approval, e.g., in Australia the skills ministers ‘endorse’ these qualifications (as opposed to the quality assurance/accrediting body in TVET who approve provider qualifications). A key benefit of national qualifications is that they facilitate credit transfer as the unit outcomes met in one provider/awarding body can be credited at another provider/awarding body; this is especially relevant to those learners who move from one provider to another mid-programme.

Provider qualifications are those developed by awarding bodies/providers and for which approval from the quality assurance body is required for the qualification to be recognised as meeting NQF requirements.

³⁴ Including other interpretations such as competencies, units of competency

Quality assurance body approval may not be required if self-accrediting status is conferred on these providers by legislation or policy. Self-accrediting providers are generally required to meet additional requirements set by the quality assurance/accrediting body.

Additional qualifications conferred by vendor organisations, e.g., CISCO, pose a challenge within a qualifications system, given that the definition of qualifications limits qualification to approved NQF qualifications and approved providers. A large number of multinational organisations define and manage their own programmes against their own industry standards. How vendor qualifications link formally or informally to the NQF and are recognised will depend on the qualifications system in the relevant country. UNESCO (2015b) indicate that in Scotland and Ireland the Microsoft Organisation has shown how its qualifications match the requirements of the NQFs and some qualifications have been accommodated in the frameworks. In the Australian TVET sector, many multinational organisations have in the past developed qualifications that are approved at a national level (some of which were not publicly accessible), or for some vendor organisations (such as CISCO and Microsoft) extensive mapping to national approved qualifications has been undertaken, and the vendors are heavily consulted within the development or review of national qualifications.

3.3 Quality assuring the formulation and approval of qualifications

Qualifications systems have inherently included quality assurance strategies, but have not always included an explicit NQF. With the introduction of NQFs, policy makers need to consider how the NQF fits within the qualifications system, and to reconsider or reformulate how quality assurance applies to qualifications that will be listed as meeting the requirements of the NQF.

4.3.1 Approaches to quality assurance

Some countries use legislation (i.e., law) to define the parameters of the quality assurance system, and then use a series of cascading documents to further the level of detail of the quality assurance systems, for example:

- Regulations, which are easier to update than the law but still relatively difficult to update or change
- Rules or quality standards, which may or may not be legislated
- Policy, which is developed by the quality assurance responsible body
- Procedures, guidelines, forms and templates, which are developed by the quality assurance responsible body.

Policy makers and responsible bodies should consider the hierarchy of documents when documenting their quality assurance system. Consideration needs to be given to minimising the level of detail in the law or regulations as some countries have difficulty in making changes or updating. Figure 12 outlines key documents in a sample of countries that place requirements on the design of qualifications.



Figure 12: Quality assurance of qualification formulation and approval processes

NQFs can bring consistency between qualifications by outlining the types of standards that are used, e.g., units of competency, and the quality assurance that is applied. NQFs (or associated documentation) can set rules for how the qualifications will be constructed, for example, include a competency standard, an assessment standard, an education standard, and a qualification standard (qualification completion rule).

To enhance consistency of qualifications across providers, some countries (e.g., Malaysia, Poland) develop field of study/work (or industry sector) frameworks (that align with levels or qualification types of the NQF) from which providers develop qualifications or programmes. Malaysia, for example, outlines the body of knowledge for a specific field of study for each qualification type³⁵. Poland specifies sectoral qualifications frameworks for TVET qualifications³⁶.

To ensure that specific qualifications align with professional or licensing requirements, some countries require that qualifications meet relevant professional or licensing standards, and that the qualification is endorsed by the relevant association prior to submission to the quality assurance body or the quality assurance body uses experts from the relevant association in the approval decision. For example, in some countries, professional bodies develop standards to which qualifications must adhere in the coverage of learning outcomes. For example, in Australia for nursing qualifications the association responsible for

³⁵ <https://www2.mqa.gov.my/qad/v2/types3new.cfm>

³⁶ <https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en/about-iqs/polska-rama-kwalifikacji-2>

nursing and midwifery has developed professional standards³⁷. As such, quality assurance bodies require the professional association approval of the qualification design prior to submission to the responsible body for approval/re-approval.³⁸

Quality assurance bodies aim to define the requirements for submission of the qualification specifications. To also ensure consistency of documentation, such bodies aim to manage the format in which qualification specifications are submitted. Control of qualification specifications format may be through quality standards, forms or templates. Common themes to be addressed include:

- Title and purpose of the qualification
- Level and number of number of credits (or other volume measure that is relevant to the NQF)
- Outcomes, e.g., qualification outcome statement, licensing or professional association outcomes
- Requirement for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and credit transfer
- Structure and completion rules (e.g., core, electives)
- Delivery methods and assessment methods (and process to quality assure assessor judgements)
- Resources required
- Evaluation or review processes
- List of components (e.g., modules, units of competency)
- Component specifications (for all those listed).

The table below provides an overview of approaches.

Table 12: Approach to consistency of qualifications

Country	Approach
Botswana	Manual for the development, validation and registration of qualifications template provided
Kenya	Regulation, Clause 6 and Form KNQA/L/002
Lesotho	Manual specifies the format of the qualification specification, https://acqf.africa/resources/nqf-inventory/countries/lesotho
Namibia	Regulation includes a coverage checklist
Seychelles	Regulations outline the structure of qualification specification and the unit standard format Quality Assurance Manual outlines at least 15 criteria that address the programme design in the approval (validation) process.
Australia TVET (provider qualifications)	Quality standards (in law), submission template, https://www.asqa.gov.au/course-accreditation/apply/stage-3-course-design-submission
New Zealand	Rules (in law)

³⁷ <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Statements/Professional-standards.aspx>

³⁸ Self-accrediting higher education institutions require this professional body approval as well.

As previously mentioned in Section 4.1, responsible bodies will have registers which will include a list of NQF qualifications and of providers that have met quality assurance requirements and eligibility to provide specific NQF qualifications. Some registers will list:

- Only TVET national qualifications, e.g., Mozambique
- All TVET qualifications and all units of competency, e.g., Australia TVET³⁹
- Qualifications and some that are not qualifications, e.g., France, Australia TVET. For France, there are two registers (professional certificates and competence blocks). For Australia TVET, non-NQF qualifications are titled 'Course in...' and must meet all other quality standards required by NQF qualifications other than meeting the specifications of a qualification type on the NQF
- Lists micro-credentials on a separate register, e.g., New Zealand.

4.3.2 Process for formulation and developing qualifications

Quality assurance of the formulation and development of qualifications vary differently across countries, and will depend heavily on the country's definition of a 'qualification' and its understanding as to how they are constructed, e.g., modular or unit-based, how learning outcomes are specified, e.g., competency based.

As previously mentioned, quality assurance responsible bodies define the requirements of the qualification specifications for submission for approval by the responsible body. Some countries focus on the output (the specification) whereas other countries also place parameters around the development process, e.g., Australia, New Zealand. For Australia, TVET specific requirements related to provider qualifications require stakeholder engagement and endorsement prior to submission to the quality assurance body, and templates are provided to assist in documenting the process for development of provider qualifications⁴⁰. New Zealand stipulates the requirements for stakeholder engagement in the development process. Some countries allocate the responsibility for developing national qualifications to other entities, such as Australian TVET and the Mauritius Qualifications Authority which require specifically commissioned industry councils to develop TVET qualifications.

There is limited information within the literature as to a generic process for the development of qualifications. However, the Tuning Project⁴¹ provides the following advice for higher education qualifications, which outlines the process for qualification specification formulation and development (steps 1–6) and the translation of that information into provider programmes (steps 7–8):

1. Has the social need for the programme on a regional/national/European level been identified? Has this been done on the basis of a consultation of stakeholders – employers, professionals and professional bodies?
2. Is the programme of sufficient interest from the academic point of view? Have common reference points been identified?
3. Definition of a qualification profile
4. Description of the objectives of the programme as well as the learning outcomes (in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities) that have to be met

³⁹ Australia TVET endorses national qualifications and all units of competency held within. Units of competency have the same endorsement level/status as qualifications.

⁴⁰ <https://www.asqa.gov.au/course-accreditation/apply/stage-2-course-development>

⁴¹ <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/tuning-methodology.html>

5. Identification of the generic and subject-related competences which should be obtained in the programme
6. Translation into the curriculum – content (topics to be covered) and structure (modules and credits)
7. Translation into educational units and activities to achieve the defined learning outcomes.
8. Deciding the approaches to teaching and learning (types of methods, techniques and formats), as well as the methods of assessment.
9. Development of an evaluation system intended to enhance its quality constantly.⁴²

Within the TVET sector, two resources provide guidance in identifying and developing competency standards (ILO 2016; Fretwell, Lewis and Diej 2001). Both of these references clearly distinguish the development of competencies and the link to qualifications.

5.3.3 Examples of AU Member States

Botswana, provides a manual for the development of qualifications (Botswana Qualifications Authority 2021)⁴³. Two stages (Stage 1 and Stage 3) noted in the Manual are relevant to the formulation and development of qualifications. This pre-approval stage includes:

- 1 Identify need
- 2 Stakeholder consultation
- 3 Identify relevant standards
- 4 Identify gaps in qualification provision
- 5 Identify qualification development team
- 6 Establish stakeholder support
- 7 Outline qualification profile
- 8 Seek approval to develop.

Once approval to proceed is obtained the development stage is undertaken and includes:

- 1 Develop qualification structure
- 2 Consider design requirements
- 3 Analyse needs – functional analysis
- 4 Establish qualification structure
- 5 Develop units
 - 5.1 Learning outcomes
 - 5.2 Assessment criteria
 - 5.3 Content advice
 - 5.4 Learning approach advice
 - 5.5 Assessment advice
- 6 Internal verification or review to check the proposal.

For Cape Verde, the process for development of professional qualifications is defined in the Manual of Procedures of the UC-SNQ⁴⁴. This includes:

- 1 Characteristics of the professional family

⁴² <https://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/tuning-methodology.html>

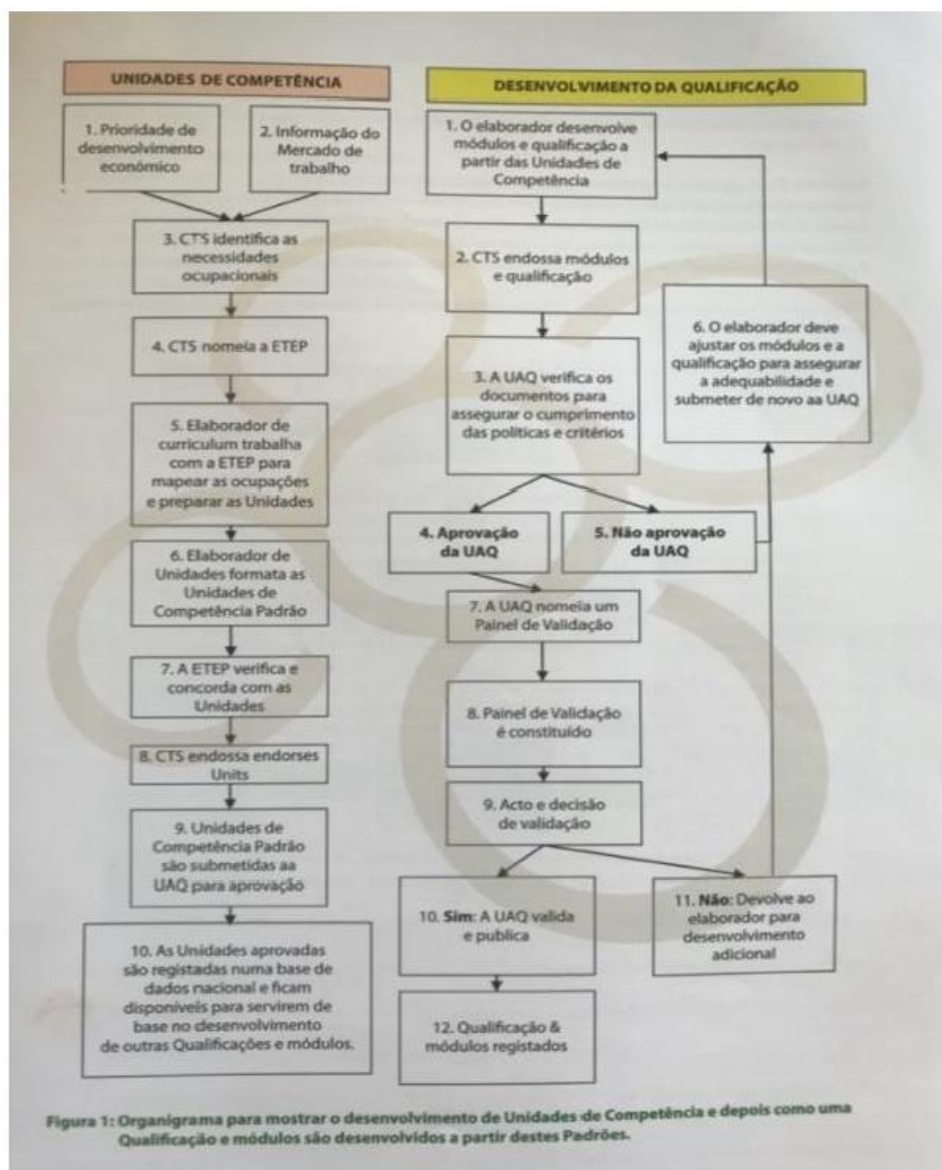
⁴³ <https://online.bqa.org/bw/docs/pub/2cb0eb56e2621cf616bcb3a3e779593f/default/?&>

⁴⁴ <https://acqf.africa/resources/mapping-study/cape-verde-country-report>. UC-SNQ, National Qualifications System (SNQ), Procedures Guide Methodology for Elaboration of Professional Qualifications. Unpublished.

- 2 Establishment and organisation of the sector council (COS) and the technical sectoral committee (CTS)
- 3 Elaboration of the professional profile (functional map, units of competence, performance criteria, general competence of the qualification)
- 4 Design of the training plan (training modules)
- 5 Validation of the training programme and the professional qualification.

Mozambique has recommended a qualification development process in the professional education sector which is included below.

Figure 13: Flow chart for qualifications development – Mozambique



Source: ACQF Mapping Study Country Report Working Paper – Mozambique 2020⁴⁵

⁴⁵ <https://acqf.africa/resources/mapping-study/mozambique-national-report>

5.3.4 Determining the level and qualification type

As previously mentioned, Cedefop (2018, p. 9) states that the purpose of level descriptors in an NQF is ‘to indicate the location of a particular qualification’. Locating a qualification on the NQF is an important step in the development and approval process of a qualification. Qualifications should have a coherent outcome and meet the requirements of the NQF, including the level and qualification type descriptor. Depending on the NQF and quality assurance arrangements, the process for locating the qualification on the NQF will vary.

Approval processes require an evaluation as to whether the qualification specifications submitted meets an NQF qualification type descriptor (noting that the qualification type descriptor includes two metrics – level of complexity on the NQF and volume of learning).

Quality assurance bodies in the requirements for submission often require the qualification developers to justify the determination of the qualification type (and its level). For example, in Australia TVET provider qualifications the following is required.

Figure 14: Justifying location on the NQF - Australia

4. Course outcomes	
4.1 Qualification level	<i>Standard 10.5 for VET Accredited Courses</i> <i>Describe how the intended course outcomes are consistent with the AQF level in the context of the proposed level for the course.</i>

Source: Australian Government 2021

Broadly speaking there are two approaches to locating a qualification on the NQF depending on whether the qualification includes a credit volume measure or not. These two approaches are outlined below; noting that they are not mutually exclusive and are on a continuum. An NQF and its quality assurance arrangements may use a mix of both approaches, or may emphasise one approach more than the other.

Regardless of the approach, no assumption is made that all components⁴⁶ of a qualification will be at the same level of learning complexity, and there may be a mix of components above and below the qualification outcome NQF level.

1. Best fit approach

Approval processes require an evaluation as to whether the qualification outcome (as a whole) meets the NQF level and qualification type descriptor.

In doing so, the concept of best fit is applied.

‘The concept of ‘best-fit’ is not a new one...its distinguishing feature is the acceptance that perfect fit is probably not possible and some judgement or approximation is necessary to make a link and solve a problem.’ (EU 2011a, p. 32)

When matching a qualification to the NQF level descriptors and qualification type descriptor, *‘the concept of ‘best-fit’ requires a common judgement from a range of stakeholders so that there can be confidence in the outcome of the approximation. It is therefore useful to consider ‘best-fit’ as a decision that is based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders.’* In addition, an important characteristic of using ‘best fit’ is that *‘of flexibility and tolerance in interpretation.’ (EU 2011a, p. 32)*

⁴⁶ Components of a qualification may be units of competency, modules, courses or subjects.

2. Credit based approach

Some NQFs allocate credit value within the qualification type descriptor a formula for determining the level and qualification type.

To be able determine an overall credit value, qualification developers will need to allocate a level and credit value to each component and finally to the whole qualification. This is often termed a rating activity. Developers may use an expert panel in this process to promote an accepted outcome with stakeholders.

If there are no electives the rating process is relatively straight forward; however, if electives or specialisation streams are included, that the lowest possible mix of components inform the determination of the qualification to the NQF qualification type.

Once the rating of the components is completed the qualification developers can ascertain how the qualification meets a NQF qualification type. However, it is not just a 'numbers game', as the qualification should have a coherent outcome and be consistent with other aspects of the NQF qualification type descriptor.

The review process while rating may lead to adjustments being made to components that will in turn affect level of complexity of the component.

Other factors which may affect the location of a qualification on the NQF, include:

- Domestic factors, including labour understandings, social and historical traditions
- International factors, including comparison with international benchmarks (e.g., occupational standards such as engineering agreements) or references (e.g., NQFs, RQFs).

Within the AU countries, Lesotho in the Lesotho Qualifications Framework (LQF) Procedures Manual⁴⁷ outlines the methodology for levelling and determining the volume (credit value) of the proposed qualification specification. Lesotho's approach is further explained in Training Module 10 (ACQF 2022m).

A clear understanding as to how qualifications are located on an NQF is an important aspect of the referencing process to a RQF. Confidence in this process will engender confidence in any links that are made between the NQF level descriptors to RQF level descriptors in the referencing process. Refer to Guideline 3 for further information regarding referencing NQFs to RQFs.

5.3.5 Approval of qualifications

Within the approval process the quality assurance responsible body is required to make the decision as to whether the qualification specification meets the quality assurance requirements and the requirements of the NQF. As part of this process, they may rely on:

- Ensuring that sufficient and appropriate stakeholders have been involved across the stages of development
- Subject matter experts internal or on an external panel to evaluate the draft qualification specification

Regardless, appropriate governance arrangements need to be in place to ensure that the decisions made are clear and justifiable. In regards to self-accrediting institutions similar structures also need to be in place.

⁴⁷ <https://acqf.africa/resources/nqf-inventory/countries/lesotho>

Responsible bodies may rely on checklist and forms to document the evaluation and decision. Checklists similar to that included in Namibia regulations have been used by other quality assuring bodies to provide a record of review of the submission.

5.3.6 Review and renewal of qualifications

To ensure that qualifications continue to meet the needs that were intended, there needs to be a review process of the qualification specifications. Countries will have different processes for the review of existing approved qualifications on the NQF register. Generally speaking, approval of a qualification specification is for a specific period of time in which it needs to be re-approved as meeting the identified needs and updated as required. Cedefop (2021) provides an overview of the review and renewal of TVET qualifications, including the engagement of labour market stakeholders and using their feedback 'to better shape the specific profile of qualifications and so provide important information for qualifications authorities and for providers offering these qualifications' (p. 7). It refers to the feedback loop, and looks at what data are available to complete the feedback loop or how such data can be collected.

Various authorities within African countries have stipulated approval periods or review and renewal of qualifications, for example:

- Botswana (Botswana Qualifications Authority 2021) notes that the period of approval is for 5 years, and that an application to renew a qualification must be submitted 6 months before expiry. Applications are to provide specific information and any changes to the design or outcomes.
- Seychelles (Seychelles Quality Assurance Manual 2011) indicates that qualifications are approved (validated) for between 3–5 years.

3.4 Quality assuring the provision of qualifications

Quality assuring the provision of qualifications is critical to engendering trust in the qualification outcomes of those listed on the NQF. Most quality assurance bodies tend to base provider requirements on legislation (laws or regulations), quality standards, rules or policy. Provider requirements generally focus on the following common themes:

- Governance (institutional and academic)
- Financial sustainability and probity
- Data management and certification processes
- Internal quality assurance and continuous improvement
- Learner support
- Programme delivery capability.

Programme delivery capability generally focusses on the providers' ability to:

- Design a programme specific to the qualification outcomes and mode of delivery, e.g., face-to-face, online, blended
- Have in place facilities and equipment required for the programme
- Have in place educational/training materials and assessment tools required for the programme
- Have sufficient number and profile of educators with vocational/professional qualifications and experience, including pedagogical qualifications and experience.

The following figure provides an overview to various approaches to quality assuring qualifications as well as the provision of qualifications at provider level.

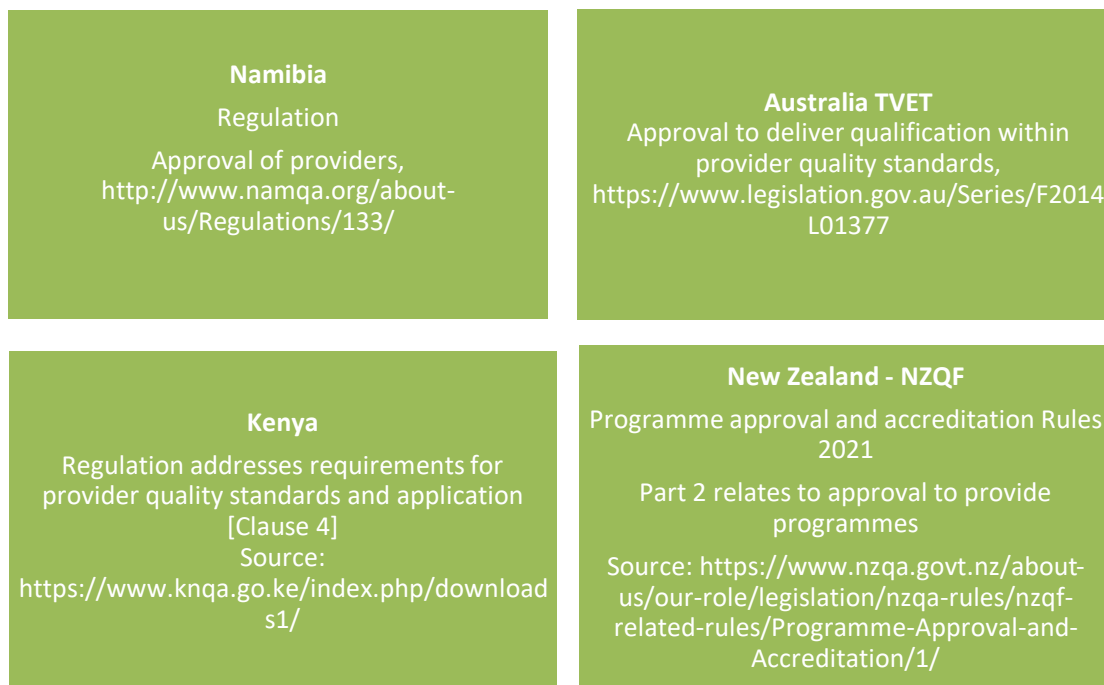


Figure 15: Quality assurance of provision of programmes leading to a qualification

5 Recognition of prior learning

Topics addressed in this chapter:

This chapter explores the recognition of formal, nonformal and informal learning within a qualifications system, with the focus being on recognising nonformal and informal learning.

Main sources used in this chapter:

- ACQF 2022o. *Recognition of prior learning gives us wings*. Author: Castel-Branco, E.
- Bateman, A. and Knight, B. 2003. *Giving credit: A review of RPL and credit transfer in the vocational education and training sector; 1995 to 2001*. NCVER: Adelaide.
- Werquin, P. 2010. *Recognising non-formal and informal learning: Outcome, policies and practices*. OECD.
- Werquin, P. 2021. 'Recognition of prior learning in France: Where have the RPL-ready applicants gone?' *European Journal of Education, Research, Development and Policy* Vol. 56, No 3. Sept 2021.
- Cedefop 2015. *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 104.
- UNESCO. 2017b. *Guidelines for the quality assurance of TVET qualifications in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Authors: Bateman, A and Coles, M

5.1 Defining recognition of formal, nonformal, or informal learning

Defining recognition of prior learning can be problematic as across countries there are a range of definitions, interpretation and application. The following UNEVOC⁴⁸ discussion adds some light onto the definition:

'The term RPL has been used in two slightly different ways in recent times. Discussion influenced by the OECD and the project of Lifelong Learning tends to restrict RPL to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning – with the result that the recognition of formal learning is called credit transfer. More traditional educational discussion uses RPL to include credit transfer and sometimes creates different terms for the narrower sense.'

This Guideline therefore uses the following definitions to distinguish between RPL and credit transfer; **both of which are recognition processes of various forms of prior learning.**

Credit means confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g., credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes.

Source: Council of the European Union (2017)

Credit transfer means the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit in one context to have it valued and recognised in another context.

Source: Council of the European Union (2017)

Validation of non-formal and informal learning: means the process of confirmation by a competent authority that an individual has acquired learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

- identification through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual,
- documentation to make visible the individual's experiences,
- a formal assessment of those experiences, and
- certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Also known as recognition of prior learning (RPL), is the confirmation by a competent authority that the learning outcomes, that an individual has acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings, has been measured against a relevant standard.

Source: ACQF 2021a with adaptation from Council of the European Union (2017)

The simplest way to view the distinction between RPL and credit transfer, is that RPL assesses an individual's competence or capability (gained in non-formal and informal settings) against a standard; whereas credit transfer is a process that provides an individual with credit based on identified equivalence of content and learning outcomes between one or more components in two qualifications (i.e., the qualification already achieved and the target qualification).

For the purpose of this Guideline the term recognition of prior learning is used, which is in line with the Council of the European Union (2017) of validation of nonformal and informal learning.

⁴⁸ Accessed 2022, <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/recognition+of+prior+learning&context=>

5.2 Implementing recognition of prior learning at system level

5.2.1 Purpose and benefits of recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is not just limited to formal outcomes within a qualifications system but has application for those who seek recognition in the workplace or for other purposes. RPL regardless of purpose, has a distinct emphasis on the individual and their needs.

RPL has a strong social justice element and is encouraged at qualifications system level to improve access and equity for all citizens and has a clear link to the commitment to lifelong learning. RPL is often seen as a second chance to obtain a qualification and potentially to experience learning in a formal context. For individuals, RPL can provide access into learning programmes as well as an avenue for credit in a programme.

Benefits of RPL can be organised against five main groups:

- Individuals: motivation to return to learning, recognising work/life experience and therefore minimising redundant learning requirements, faster progression through programmes, increased pathways opportunities, saving time saves money, assist in self-evaluation to plan learning pathways and careers, improve chances of a better job and/or becoming more job mobile, outcome may be a full award of a qualification
- Providers: maximises places and allows for additional learners to complete programmes, diversifies learner profile, improves the link between the world of work and of training/education, lower dropout rates
- Employers: effective links to human resource management, speedier education and training of staff, acknowledgement staff knowledge and skills and progression opportunities, improves the link between the world of work and of training/education, improved productivity with increased awareness of worker capability, meeting regulatory requirements, improved recruitment techniques, acknowledges fast changing professions
- Unions and social partners: opportunity for their members to claim associated benefits, means of offering alternatives, useful in wage negotiations
- Government: development of human capital and more competitive economy, transform traditional learning pathways.

5.2.2 Considerations for implementation

When implementing RPL within a qualifications system there are a range of considerations including the following.

Barriers

The literature indicates that in many cases the take up of RPL is low and the dropout rate is high. There are a range of barriers to effective implementation of RPL across the qualifications system, including:

- Lack of information and guidance to applicants
- Lack of professionalisation of staff
- Increased workload of assessors with flow on resourcing and costing to the provider
- Time consuming
- Attitude or level of understanding across providers and employers
- Inadequate publicity and promotion
- Perceived lack of equivalence of RPL outcome
- Lack of transparency of the qualifications system and lack of clarity regarding funding.

Enablers

The international literature poses a range of enablers to facilitate the uptake of RPL including:

- Removal of obvious barriers, including support of candidates through the process
- Focus on the needs of the candidate and including self-assessment in the process
- Promote professionalisation of assessors to be able to undertake RPL assessments
- Promoting recognition and its benefits to individuals and employers
- Requiring common quality assurance arrangements
- Standardising the content of qualifications (learning outcomes)
- Parity of esteem or value of RPL assessment outcomes
- Secure an integrated system of assessment including assessment of non-formal and informal learning
- Recognise individual components and make no time limit to achieve a full qualification.⁴⁹

When considering reforms, additional enablers could include:

- Choosing suitable terms and using them consistently in all communication
- Establish a consistent official policy position
- Strengthen the process (information, counselling and guidance)
- Ensure that the various stakeholders and policy makers are involved
- Use the NQF as a catalyst for change
- Strengthen communication with employers who will in turn motivate workers
- Link RPL to lifelong learning initiatives
- Continue to encourage higher education providers to implement RPL
- Encourage strategies within disadvantaged groups, minorities and migrants
- Strengthen assessment capability of assessors
- Standardise the assessment process for all forms of learning
- Certification documents should avoid any specific indication that achievement was obtained through RPL
- Attentiveness to labour market needs
- Developing data collection and research activity
- Identifying costs and benefits of RPL.⁵⁰

Recognition of prior learning as an assessment of an individual

RPL is both a process and an assessment.

As a process, it can be viewed as different steps or phases, with assessment and certification being the end point. The steps or phases prior to these latter stages are about informing and supporting the candidate through the process and the organisation of existing evidence. The recent ACQF report outlining 10 African RPL cases (ACQF 2022o) summarises the process in the following diagram.

⁴⁹ Bateman and Knight 2003, Werquin 2010, Werquin 2021

⁵⁰ Werquin 2010

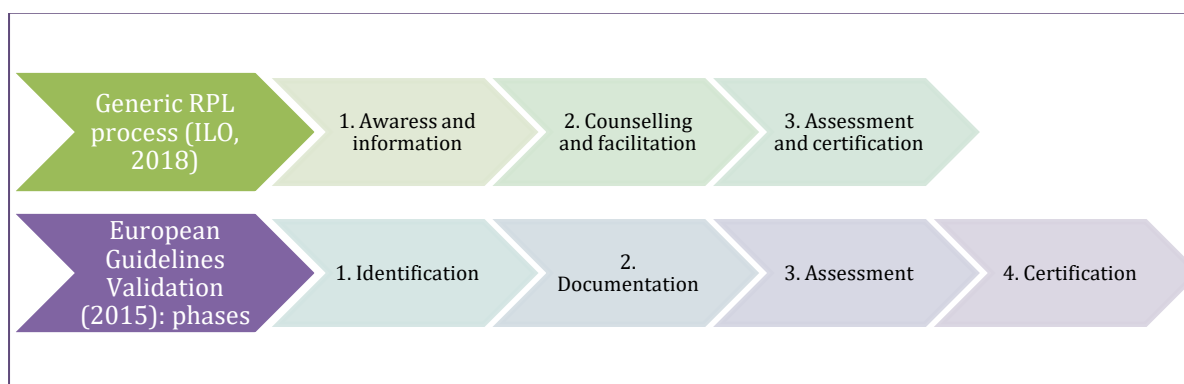


Figure 16: RPL phases

Source: ACQF 2022o (adapted from ILO 2018 and Cedefop 2015)

The literature has demonstrated that if RPL is to gain parity of esteem with, and confidence in, assessments following formal learning, then the quality and rigour of assessment should be the same. In most quality assurance systems, there are quality standards documented that apply to assessment. An assessment process must be valid, reliable and transparent, noting that:

- Valid in that the assessments relate to the achievement standards, and demonstrate that indeed the individual can carry out the tasks and activities
- Reliable in that assessment processes are standardised and yield the same results
- Transparent in that the procedure for assessment and the outcomes can be examined at any point in time.⁵¹

Similar sentiments are demonstrated in the Australian TVET standards for providers⁵² that requires assessment (including RPL) be conducted according to the Principles of Assessment (valid, reliable, fair and flexible) and Rules of Evidence (validity, sufficiency, authenticity, currency).

Assessors within a formal setting are required to develop assessment tasks and rubrics (an assessment tool) that align with the component learning outcomes/specifications (the standard), for the learners to be able to demonstrate achievement of the standard. Within an RPL setting, the candidate will more than likely have already generated the evidence. Evidence could include:

- Formal reports from previous employers
- Records of previously completed training
- Products that have been made or developed by the student/trainee, e.g., business plan, portfolio
- Interviews/questioning with the student/trainee
- Direct observation of the student/trainee demonstrating a task and/or operating in an existing workplace
- Third party reports.

In most instances, as the evidence is already available, it is the evaluation of the evidence that forms the major part of the assessment. However, additional assessment tasks may need to be set to assist in the generation of evidence that may not be available due to workplace restrictions or indeed in situations often related to refugees.

⁵¹ Werquin 2010

⁵² <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/F2014L01377>

The challenge for assessors is the development of an assessment tool to assist in the assessment judgement and to facilitate maintenance of appropriate records. Developing an assessment tool requires careful consideration. If the assessment includes set tasks to complete then the assessment tool will look very similar to that of learners completing a programme of learning. However, if it is based on existing evidence then the assessor needs to consider the potential evidence and what is required or expected to be demonstrated in that evidence in line with the component learning outcomes/specifications.

5.2.3 Systems level implementation

NQFs have an important part to play in establishing the country's interpretation and application of both RPL and credit transfer.

NQFs are the primary policy instrument for which all other key qualifications system documents will refer to. To strengthen the link with the NQF, QA arrangements (of both qualifications and providers) should drive any statements made in the NQF. Various AU Members States have used the NQF to make a clear statement about RPL, including The Gambia and Rwanda.

Some countries, expand on their NQF commitment to access and equity through various means including reference to RPL in:

- Law including regulations, e.g., France, Kenya, Mozambique, Seychelles
- Policy or guidelines, e.g., Kenya, Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa, Zambia
- Quality standards, e.g., Australia TVET provider quality standards.

Countries need to plan how RPL can be facilitated through:

- Policies or laws: what is the best approach that is context specific to the country, is a cascade of documents required?
- Communication strategies: what suite of communication strategies will be deployed, e.g., brochures, flyers, provider information sessions to applicants, employer engagement?
- Funding arrangements: who will be responsible for funding RPL (if at all), will providers receive funding or will applicants be funded?
- Data collection: how will data be collected to monitor implementation?

The recent ACQF report outlining 10 African RPL cases (ACQF 2022o) summarises some key learnings in relation to systemic implementation of RPL. Noting that RPL arrangements interface with education, employment and social policies, and that the effectiveness and meaningfulness of RPL cannot be achieved in isolation from these policies and systems. It was noted that the building blocks for an effective RPL system (ILO 2018) and the conditions for developing and implementing validation of nonformal and informal learning (Cedefop 2015) share some common traits, such as the role and place of stakeholders (goals, benefits, users), institutional framework and quality assurance. This ACQF report (ACQF 2022o) also noted that most importantly, RPL policies and mechanisms benefit if linked with the principles of the NQFs, e.g., the learning outcomes concept.

In relation to data collection, the UNESCO Guidelines (UNESCO 2017b) includes a principle in relation to monitoring barriers to assessment; *Principle 8: Barriers to assessment, including non-formal and informal learning, are minimized*. Monitoring strategies to minimize barriers to assessment includes data to inform effectiveness and could be utilised by quality assurance bodies or policy makers to inform further strategies.

Table 13: Measuring strategies to minimize barriers to assessment

Indicators	
Qualitative	Quantitative
<p><i>Implementation is demonstrated by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are informed by research into barriers to assessment. • Barriers to assessment, including for non-formal learning, are documented, and preventative strategies or schemes have been proposed. • Schemes and communication of the schemes are implemented. • Document guidelines for assessors, related to undertaking recognition of prior learning. 	<p><i>Evidence of effectiveness of implemented strategies is measured by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of schemes to reduce barriers to assessment of non-formal and informal learning. • Proportion of TVET qualifications offering recognition of prior learning or agreed credit. • Proportion of successful applications for recognition of prior learning or credit. • Proportion of participants that achieved all or part of a TVET qualification through the recognition of prior learning, e.g., assessment of non-formal or informal learning. • Proportion of TVET qualifications that include formal credit arrangements with other relevant qualifications within TVET or in other sectors. • Non-formal and work-based participation rates.

Source: UNESCO 2017b

5.3 Variations in models and approaches to recognition of prior learning

There are an array of approaches and models of RPL across countries. Some countries do not limit who can seek recognition (e.g., Seychelles, South Africa, Australia) whereas others limit who can seek recognition (e.g., Mozambique, Cape Verde, France). Some countries build separate processes and structures for the recognition where as others have merged the processes within the assessment processes of all learners (regardless of how the learning was gained).

How a country builds its process for the RPL may be dependent on the maturity of the qualifications system but may be more importantly influenced by the stage of implementation of RPL processes. If countries are newly implementing recognition processes, then they will more than likely build a robust system with multiple checkpoints and support mechanisms with specially trained RPL assessors or panels. Those countries with more mature recognition systems and with strong stakeholder acceptance of judgements made by assessors may develop a less overt separate assessment system and blend the quality assurance arrangements with assessment within a formal setting.

The ACQF website includes a report, 'Recognition of prior learning gives us wings' (<https://acqf.africa/resources/recognition-of-prior-learning/recognition-of-prior-learning-gives-us-wings>) as to how RPL is implemented in 10 African countries. This report emphasises that RPL systems are linked to education and training, skills and employment. To be effective and meaningful, RPL cannot be achieved in isolation from these policies and systems.

The building blocks for construction of effective RPL systems (ILO, 2018) and the conditions for developing and implementing validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015) share some common traits, notably the role and place of stakeholders (goals, benefits, users), institutional framework and quality assurance. Most importantly, RPL policies and mechanisms benefit if linked with the principles of the NQFs, e.g., the learning outcomes concept.

Considerations for an effective system has been identified as building blocks for construction of effective RPL systems (ILO, 2018) and the conditions for developing and implementing validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015). Within these two guidelines there are some common traits, notably the role and place of stakeholders (goals, benefits, users), institutional framework and quality assurance. Most importantly, RPL policies and mechanisms benefit if linked with the principles of the NQFs, e.g., the learning outcomes concept and commitment to lifelong learning.

Table 14: Common traits for effective RPL systems

Building blocks for RPL	Conditions for RPL
ILO (2018)	European Guidelines for Validation (2015)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regulatory framework - Institutional framework - Stakeholder ownership and commitment - Quality assurance - Financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information, guidance and counselling - Stakeholders' coordination - Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks - Standards and learning outcomes - Quality assurance - Professional competences of validation professionals/practitioners

Source: ACQF 2022o (adapted from ILO 2018 and Cedefop 2015)

5.4 Final comments in relation to credit transfer

As previously mentioned, credit transfer is a process that provides an individual with credit based on identified equivalence of content and learning outcomes between one or more components in two qualifications. An NQF has an important part to play in establishing the country's interpretation and application of credit transfer and is indeed the primary policy document which all other key qualifications system documents will refer.

Credit transfer is implemented differently within countries and may be driven by laws, quality standards or policy. Some countries utilise credit transfer without implementing across the qualifications system a credit transfer and accumulation system, examples being Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Pacific Islands nations. In some instances, countries place restrictions on credit transfer in relation to their qualification types, e.g., Malaysia, and indeed in Australia higher education providers can place limits on credit transfer. In other countries, there is a national credit transfer and accumulation system, e.g., South Africa, or, as is the case for higher education providers in Europe, they are party to the regional European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Guideline 4 of this ACQF series provides further information in regards to validation of nonformal and informal learning and to credit transfer, including credit transfer, and, credit accumulation and transfer systems.

6 Conclusion and key messages

When developing NQFs countries need to be cognisant of building an NQF that is applicable to the context and needs of the qualifications system. In doing so the countries need to ensure that the NQF and the associated quality assurance arrangements provide sufficient flexibility to adapt and change in response to changes and needs of the country within a global environment.

The following key messages apply to NQF developers and policy makers:

- Although a country may aim to build a comprehensive NQF, this may not always eventuate. However, building a NQF does not need to be viewed as a one stage process and can be implemented over stages

- Allow sufficient flexibility within the model of the NQF to allow for sectoral differences and in a way that is appropriate to the national context and priorities
- Take an approach of developing a community of trust, accepting and acknowledging sectoral differences
- Make decisive decisions in developing the NQF, and focus on staged implementation of quality assurance arrangements (which may be sectorally managed)
- Linked NQF quality assurance arrangements should be fit-for-purpose for each sector
- NQFs should meet the needs and aspirations of the country, and accept that they will be influenced by existing structures and traditions and international connexions and arrangements
- Accept that NQFs are social constructs and that they are not 'perfect' technical devices
- Learning outcomes approach will take time to implement and some flexibility is required to ensure that all sectors accept the notion of learning outcomes implemented in a way that is suitable to the context
- The aim of the NQF and its associated quality assurance arrangements is to build trust and confidence in the outcomes of a qualification and significant communication and collaboration with stakeholders is required.

7 Glossary

African Continental Qualifications Framework: The ACQF is a policy initiative of the African Union and its development process is underway (2019-2022). The current vision for the ACQF is: to enhance comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications from all sub-sectors and levels of education and training; facilitate recognition of diplomas and certificates; work in cooperation and complementarity with national and regional qualifications frameworks; promote cooperation and alignment between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa and worldwide.
Source: ACQF 2021a

Basic education: Education and training that takes place in primary and secondary schools, as well as in adult education and training centres. Also known as general education.
Source: ACQF 2021a, adapted from SAQA NQFPedia 2017

Competence: The proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development.
Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on European Qualifications Framework. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

Credit means confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g., credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes.

Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on European Qualifications Framework. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

Credit systems means transparency tool for facilitating the recognition of credit(s). These systems can comprise, inter alia, equivalences, exemptions, units/modules that can be accumulated and transferred, the autonomy of providers who can individualise pathways, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on European Qualifications Framework. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

Credit transfer means the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit in one context to have it valued and recognised in another context.

Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on European Qualifications Framework. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

Domain means a category of learning. It can be structured into sub-domains.
Source: ACQF Guideline 2.

Formal learning: Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

Source: Cedefop 2014

General education (primary and secondary education): See basic education.

Higher education:

All programmes of study, or sets of courses of study, training, or training for research at the post-secondary level which are recognized by the relevant authorities of a State Party as belonging to its higher education system.

Source: Addis Convention, UNESCO 2014

Tertiary education that is of a higher academic level than secondary education, usually requiring a minimum level of admission and successful completion of secondary education.

Source: ACQF 2021a

Informal learning: Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning in most cases is unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.

Source: Cedefop 2014

Learning outcomes: Statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

Source: Council of the European Union 2017

Level: One of the series of levels of learning achievement according to which an NQF or RQF is organised. Levels are typically arranged in ascending order, from lowest to highest, depending on the number of levels in the NQF or RQF.

Source: ACQF Guideline 3.

Level descriptor: A statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes that are appropriate to a qualification at that level.

Source: Adjusted from SAQA NQFPedia 2017

Lifelong learning: All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, knowhow, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

Source: Cedefop 2014

National Qualifications Framework: 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.

Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on European Qualifications Framework. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

National Qualifications System: This includes all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, QA processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.

Source: OECD 2006

Non-formal learning: Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.

Source: Cedefop 2014

Qualification: Means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.

Source: Council of the European Union 2017

Means a planned combination of learning outcomes which has a defined purpose or purposes, intended to provide qualifying learners with applied competence and a basis for further learning and which has been assessed in terms of exit level outcomes, registered on the NQF and certified and awarded by a recognised body.

Source: SAQA NQFPedia 2017

Qualifications Frameworks: Systems for classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality assured qualifications.

Source: Addis Convention, UNESCO 2014

Quality assurance: Processes and procedures for ensuring that qualifications, assessment and programme delivery meet certain standards.

Source: Tuck 2007

Recognition of foreign qualifications: A formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of a party of the value of a foreign education qualification or a validated training.

Source: Addis Convention, UNESCO 2014

Referencing: A methodology used to compare national qualifications frameworks/ qualifications levels with an overarching framework. Through a structured referencing process, a national multi-stakeholder body of experts references (defines and establishes the relationship/ link) the NQF/ NQS levels and the levels and quality assurance of a Regional Qualifications Framework. Source: ACQF Guideline 3.

Regional Qualifications Framework: 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.

Source: ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework 2015

Stakeholder: A person or organisation with an interest or concern in something. In vocational education and training, stakeholders include government, providers of training, industry, clients and the community.

Source: TESDA Philippines,

<https://www.tesda.gov.ph/uploads/File/RelatedTvetInfo/The%20TVET%20Glossary%20of%20Terms,%204th%20Edition.pdf>

Sub-domain means a sub-category of any of domain of learning.

Source: ACQF Guideline 3.

Technical vocational education and training (TVET): TVET, as a part of lifelong learning, can take place at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels and includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development, which may lead to qualifications. TVET also includes a wide range of skills development opportunities attuned to national and local contexts. Learning to learn, the development of literacy and numeracy skills, transversal skills and citizenship skills are integral components of TVET.

Source: AQCF 2021a, original source UNESCO 2015

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234137>

Validation of non-formal and informal learning: means the process of confirmation by a competent authority that an individual has acquired learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

- identification through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual,
- documentation to make visible the individual's experiences,
- a formal assessment of those experiences, and
- certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Also known as recognition of prior learning (RPL), is the confirmation by a competent authority that the learning outcomes, that an individual has acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings, has been measured against a relevant standard.

Source: AQCF 2021a, adapted from EQF Recommendation 2017

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