

GUIDANCE NOTE 6

Promoting national qualifications frameworks

Topic overview

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common European reference framework, linking countries' qualifications systems/frameworks. It covers qualifications at all levels and in all sub-systems of education and training — general and adult education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. Its main role is to **make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems**. The EQF's main components are a set of eight reference levels described in terms of learning outcomes (a combination of knowledge, skills and/or competences) and mechanisms and principles for voluntary cooperation. The eight levels cover the entire span of qualifications from those recognising basic knowledge, skills and competences to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional VET.

By 2015, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) had been introduced in all 39 European countries cooperating in the EQF⁽¹⁾. However, the **development of NQFs is not limited to Europe**. According to the 2015 *Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks*, more than 150 countries and territories are currently involved in the development and implementation of NQFs (UIL, ETF and Cedefop, 2015). Raffe (2009) places NQF development on a continuum stretching from communication to transformational frameworks (see Figure GN6.1).

However, rather than categorise NQFs as either communication or transformation (or reform) frameworks, it is evident that NQFs can **combine communication**

SUMMARY OF KEY ASPECTS

- The NQF is a social partner-driven policy instrument for the education and training system to improve the quality and transparency of nationally recognised learning outcomes-based qualifications.
- The NVQF is a sub-framework of broader NQF development, supporting lifelong learning and the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning. There is no universal definition or model for NVQFs; each is country specific.
- The multi-stakeholder dialogue needed to develop an NQF is in itself a positive result, as it can contribute to improving communication, trust and shared responsibility for education, training and employability among different actors.
- The social partner should take a leading role in NQF development. However, this may not be realistic in many countries, where the private sector lacks coordination and representation structures.
- Competence- (or learning outcome-) based training is a teaching/learning method which both ensures performance at work and enables definition of VET qualifications.

and transformation functions and roles in different ways, reflecting the particular national situation and context. This flexibility, which grows more apparent as NQFs mature and become operational, creates the opportunity for more targeted strategies in which NQFs are used as reform tools in particular areas and as communication tools in other areas and sectors.

⁽¹⁾ EU member states, candidate countries, Liechtenstein and Norway.

FIGURE GN6.1 Continuum of NQF development frameworks

COMMUNICATION	TRANSFORMATION
Starts from existing education and training system	Starts from a vision of future education and training system
Incremental change	Reform and transformation
Tool for change	Driver of change
Bottom up	Top down
Voluntary	Statutory/regulatory
Providers have central role	Providers included among stakeholders
Loose	Tight

Source: Raffe, 2009.

This targeted strategy requires **NQFs to be firmly embedded in the national political and institutional setting**. In cases where NQFs are taken forward as isolated initiatives outside regulatory systems and their day-to-day operation, their ability to make a difference is seriously reduced. In some countries, NQFs have become important agents of change and have taken on communication and reforming roles — e.g. concerning the shift to learning outcomes.

These various roles and processes are illustrated in Table GN6.1.

NQF development involves important questions about the **most effective way to establish VET standards**, frame the curriculum and assessment procedure, and recognise the knowledge and skills that learners have already acquired in the workplace and community through prior learning. International reviews of NQF reforms differ in their assessment of their relevance and successes.

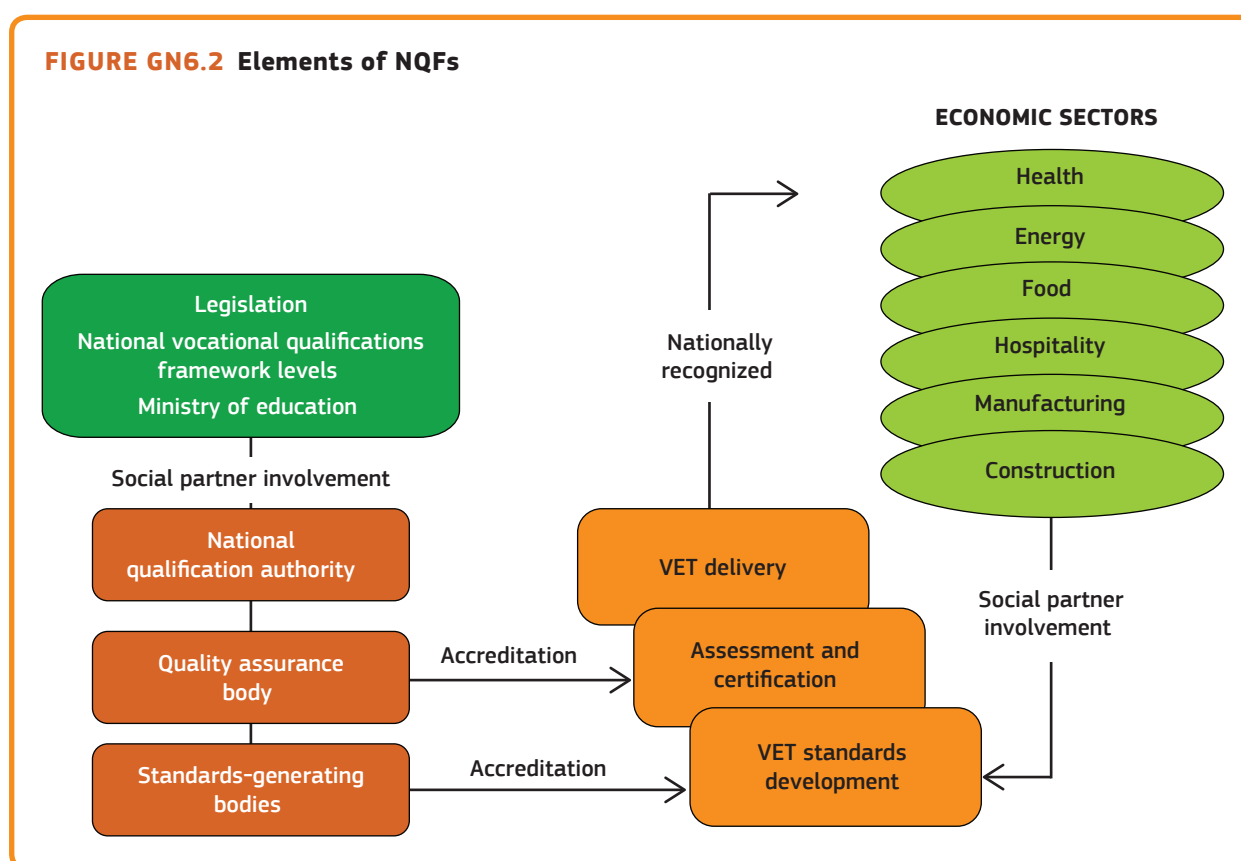
International experience in designing and implementing NQFs suggests the need to ensure that the NQF system developed is fit for both purpose and context. Fitness of purpose is ensured by constructing the NQF on the basis of a **careful analysis of the needs and aspirations of the societies** in question, and in ways that encourage ownership by national stakeholders.

Although there is no single international model, most NQFs share some broad common elements, as shown in Figure GN6.2. They are based on **identification of learning outcomes** in all economic sectors that define levels and often types of qualifications, registered at a respective national qualification authority. The levels are distinguished in an approximate way through criteria such as knowledge, skills, aptitudes, attitudes and competences. Different qualifications and types of qualification are attached to these

TABLE GN6.1 NQF communication role and processes vis-à-vis formal recognition of qualifications

STARTS FROM PRESENT EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM	NQFs can support existing arrangements for recognition at the international, national and institutional levels by providing transparency and improved documentation on qualifications
INCREMENTAL CHANGE	NQFs can facilitate recognition on a longer-term basis by strengthening mutual trust and thus removing obstacles to recognition; this can only happen on an incremental basis and over time
TOOL FOR CHANGE	NQFs stand out as one tool among several supporting and facilitating recognition
BOTTOM UP	As important decisions on recognition will be taken at local institution level, NQF impact depends on their ability to strengthen transparency among end users
VOLUNTARY TOOL	As tools for communication, NQFs need to be trusted as high-quality information sources and to play a role
CENTRAL ROLE OF PROVIDERS	Providers play a key role in recognising the need for further learning and will therefore play a key role in NQF application for this purpose

Source: UIL, ETF and Cedefop, 2015.

FIGURE GN6.2 Elements of NQFs

levels using learning outcomes and competence criteria rather than the traditional duration or location of courses.

For the past two decades, **competency-based training (CBT) models** of curriculum development and instruction have been introduced in numerous countries with the aim of:

- identifying the practical skills that comprise different VET profiles and the standards of performance required for successful employment;
- in recent years, incorporation into NQFs that provided mechanisms to standardise and update the different qualifications profiles required by the workplaces.

CBT is viewed as being **VET training that is focused on the outcomes** of the process rather than on its inputs: in other words, the attained competences. It uses workplace-oriented competency standards as the basis for VET curriculum development, and is geared towards developing skills to the standards employers

will recognise. CBT is often modular in structure, and includes both on-the-job and off-job components.

It is worth mentioning that long-time existing NQFs, such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) took over 30 years to develop and is the culmination — and not the beginning — of a reform process that lasted decades. NQFs can contribute to making qualifications comparable by providing a certain structure, standards and assessment criteria. If conducted in an inclusive manner, the **multi-stakeholder dialogue needed to develop an NQF** is per se a positive result, as it can contribute to improving communication, trust and shared responsibility for education, training and employability among the relevant actors (see Box GN6.1).

Quality assurance arrangements are included to support NQF management and ensure the quality of NQF procedures. Some NQFs cover all qualifications, while others are related to sub-frameworks such as national vocational qualifications frameworks (NVQFs) alone. Quality assurance of VET programmes is recognised as important in countries as diverse as Australia,

BOX GN6.1 The NQF in Mauritius

The development, implementation and maintenance of the Mauritian NQF was entrusted to the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA), under the terms of the Mauritius Qualifications Authority Act 2001 (No. 42). The NQF was created to play two distinct roles:

- to organise qualifications across the three main sectors of the education and training system — primary and secondary education, technical and VET/workplace, and tertiary education;
- to be a mechanism for designing new outcomes-based qualifications and reforming educational provision in the VET/workplace sector.

The Mauritian NQF has enjoyed some success as an organising framework — that is, relationships between qualifications do appear to be more explicit and better understood. However, it appears to have enjoyed very limited success as mechanism for designing new qualifications and reforming delivery.

It has been suggested that some of the objectives of the Mauritian NQF were unrealistic and that it has become embedded in, but has not solved, institutional problems. The MQA is responsible for establishing representative committees to generate new qualifications. These qualifications are made up of unit standards which specify the outcomes and assessment criteria the learner must meet in order to achieve the qualification.

Source: Marock, 2011.

Ghana's Council of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET), Egypt's National Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (NAQAA) and the Malaysian Qualifications Authority, which is also responsible for quality assurance of higher education and vocational education.

NQFs can also be used as a platform to assist in the creation of representative bodies for employers and employees or build the capacity of existing organisations. VET policy reform processes always affect a **range of stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests**. The role of the state is to ensure that the potentially conflicting interests of the different stakeholders are balanced out. This is important throughout the entire NQF reform process: from setting out the objectives at the beginning to its design through implementation and financing. The reform process — and, if deemed pertinent, the NQF — needs to be developed with the inclusion of as many relevant stakeholders as possible such as national and international enterprises; employers' associations, unions, VET providers, and public administration involved in VET and labour market-related issues, and civil society.

Workplace representatives should take a leading role in NQF development. Their role is important to the success of a developmental NQF approach. The intrinsic logic of the **NQF needs to be aligned with the labour market**. In many countries, the initial task of designing and developing NQFs has brought stakeholders who do not ordinarily cooperate with or speak to each other (see Box GN6.2).

Where NQFs are created under time pressure, they have no **space in which to evolve and become mature**. During the second half of the 1990s, the Government of South Africa thought that a comprehensive and ambitious NQF could be created within a couple of years. Non-delivery, for various reasons, is probably the most worrisome failure of emerging NQFs. The often propagated short cut of taking another country's NQF as a blueprint and quickly adopting and adapting the imported national occupational standards and instruments can easily lead to lack of know-how, lack of local ownership and a new dependence on the exporting country.

Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Malawi, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey, to name a few.

Oversight authorities have been established to regulate quality assurance such as the South African Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). Typically, these authorities have an overall responsibility for improving dialogue among stakeholders, quality, access, etc., but do not take over the detailed administrative responsibilities of relevant ministries. Usually these authorities are responsible for developing and implementing quality assurance procedures and, at times, for developing policy tools such as qualifications frameworks. Some examples of these authorities are

BOX GN6.2 NQF development in Kazakhstan

In terms of qualitative matching, major developments have been initiated and partially implemented. An NQF was adopted, and sector frameworks are under development. Within three years, 350 vocational standards have been developed which consider employer requirements, and VET curricula revision is under preparation. In addition, independent certification of qualifications, under the responsibility of employers and sector associations, is being explored via the establishment of centres for six key economic sectors. It is not yet known whether such centres can handle all skills certification or whether this will partially remain with the Republican Scientific Methodological Centre, which currently performs this function for VET graduates, though with a more academic approach. VET qualifications have been developed at the system level mostly with employers — notably since 2013, via the involvement of the Chamber of Entrepreneurs, an organisation representing employers at the national and regional levels.

Despite these positive developments, the involvement of employers — and especially the small and medium-sized enterprise sector — remains an important challenge. The experience of large-scale reform of the qualification system has led to the identification of further issues to be addressed, such as a review of the classifier for VET. The key priority, however, is stronger involvement of employers.

Source: ETF, 2015.

Assessment seems to be the weakest point in many NQFs. In many developing countries, the development of VET quality assurance procedures and mechanisms is a work in progress. If this issue is neglected because the system is compromised, then the NQF as a whole will be undermined.

Procedure

Many developing countries are seeking to bridge the gap between educational institutions and labour markets, in some instances to improve on previous supply-driven VET systems. The International Labour Office in 2009 examined the implementation and impact of

NQFs in 17 countries around the world. The ILO study found very limited positive evidence in favour of NQFs. While in many cases this could have been because of the early stage of their development, considerable evidence of numerous difficulties was also found. A **central difficulty was employer involvement**: in nearly all cases, employers did not participate in structures designed for them to lead, despite the desire of policymakers for employer leadership.

STEP 1: Describe the current state of NQF development

Step 1 provides the baseline for further analysis and reasoning through a **quantitative mapping of the current status of the NQF**. This step aims to build a shared diagnostic assessment of the current NQF as a basis for identification of its key functional parameters. Given past worldwide experience with low social partner involvement, it is recommended that a stakeholder-driven national working group be established capable of designing new NQF policy options. This working group must be convinced of the need for such a process, with trust being built in particular between representatives of the public and private sectors through this concrete exercise.

STEP 2: Analyse the involvement of social partners

Step 2 uses the mapping completed in Step 1 to determine and analyse the involvement of social partners required for the development of a system for demand-driven VET qualifications in which VET qualifications and certification are quality assured and recognised nationally. This step will enable understanding of the main elements associated with the development of the NVQF as a sub-qualification framework of broader NQF development. Following this analysis, the development of a stakeholder-driven NVQF could be shared between the public and private sectors to some extent.

STEP 3: Approach labour market benefit assessment

Step 3 explores the **measurable benefits expected from the demand-driven VET qualifications**

described under Step 1. A word of caution is required here, as all of the qualifications identified must be measurable in terms of learning outcomes. Many NQF reforms take place over a long time span, meaning that their benefits mostly refer to long-term impacts on the labour market, leaving little opportunity for measurement of short-term results.

STEP 4: Explore policy options on the basis of social partner involvement

Step 4 consolidates the results of Steps 2 and 3 through a **social partner involvement analysis** that fosters the exploration of other NQF policy options. The adoption of such a forward-looking perspective is made possible through use of the key functional parameters identified in Step 1, thereby converting these into levers for change to move from a retrospective perspective of assessing current VET qualifications to a prospective perspective exploring alternative VET policies or measures to improve the relevance of VET programmes offered.

STEP 5: Planning and budgeting preferred NQF scenarios

Step 5 looks at the details of a limited number of **preferred scenarios for future expansion/improvement of the VET system**, focusing on planning and budgeting within a mid- to long-term perspective. The aim of Step 5 is to transfer the policy decision (or options) into a planning and budgeting phase in order to realistically prepare for implementation. These NQF scenarios will be designed to anticipate any evolution in the NQF from the baseline year to the horizon for an NQF reform on a year-by-year basis. If any substantial changes are expected, a medium-term horizon (e.g. 10 years) would generally be a preferable reference

term in order to provide a more realistic overview of the rate of change.

References and further reading

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Case study: Uganda's Vocational Qualifications Framework

CONTEXT

In Uganda, the majority of workers are in the informal economy, and some 70 % of the Ugandan workforce continues to work in agriculture. Employment in the non-agricultural informal sector (comprising mainly micro-enterprises, own account workers and unpaid family workers) accounts for 18 % of total employment. The Ugandan Vocational Qualifications Framework (UVQF) was officially introduced through the Business, Technical and Vocational Training (BTVET) Act of 2008. The act's objective is, among other concerns, to provide relevant knowledge, values and skills for purposes of academic progression and employment in the labour market as well as to enhance the **productivity capabilities of individuals for employment and self-employment**. The UVQF initiative was originally led by the Ministry of Education and Science. Conceptualisation and piloting was intended to be a meso-level approach involving industry associations, trade unions and the Association of Private Training Providers (UGAPRIVI). However, the Ugandan government has changed the implementation process into a government-driven top-down approach.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Establishment of the UVQF was triggered by a number of issues such as **lack of employment relevance of existing VET programmes**, hampering the productivity of industries and businesses, provision of access to vocational qualifications and — in turn — employment for some 800 000 school leavers annually.

Furthermore, **reductions in the cost of training programmes** was expected through the introduction of modular training and the encouragement of on-the-job training in the private sector. The four proposed competency levels envisaged (see Figure GN6.3) begin with an entry level and go up to UVQF Level 4, which is seen as the equivalent of a national diploma. However, whether this will materialise is uncertain, because the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has always claimed that the national diploma belongs to higher education and should therefore be under its jurisdiction.

FIGURE GN6.3 The Ugandan Vocational Qualifications Framework

Virtual NQF	General education GEQF	Higher education HEQF	VET UVQF
NQF 8		HE 4	
NQF 7		HE 3	
NQF 6		HE 2	
NQF 5		HE 1	UVQF 4
NQF 4	GE 4		UVQF 3
NQF 3	GE 3		UVQF 2
NQF 2	GE 2		UVQF 1
NQF 1	GE 1		

Source: Heitmann, 2012.

Note: The educational sub-sectors of general education, higher education and VET are self-contained, with no or marginal interfaces between them, resulting in a virtual NQF.

ACTIONS TAKEN	• The Developing a Curriculum (DACUM) job analysis approach has been used for national occupational standards development. Working groups consisting of industry experts and school instructors develop test item banks and training modules. Performance criteria are included in performance test items. Assessment standards in the form of criterion-referenced practical/performance test items and written test items for theory and understanding are mandatory. Overarching criteria exist and are used during item development, test paper composition and test conduct. In some cases, the performance assessment has to be conducted at workplaces (e.g. in restaurants for waiters/waitresses). • The BTVET Act envisages assessment of prior learning (APL). Mechanisms to allow a transfer from the UVQF to other sub-sector qualifications frameworks are stated in the BTVET Act in principle, but are neither conceptualised nor regulated yet. Many stakeholders wish to have upward mobility to higher education regulated.
LESSONS LEARNED	• The BTVET Act makes provision for the assessment of prior learning (APL) against the UVQF. • Learners from VET providers who have acquired skills in the informal economy will have the chance to rejoin the system of formal VET programmes. The UVQF does not per se guarantee good quality teaching and learning outcomes. • The UVQF development process is highly donor driven. The national government was heavily involved, represented by a varying combination of ministries (education, labour, finance, etc.), but other stakeholders such as the private sector were not always and permanently involved. • Considerable resources have been dedicated from donors to the design of a highly complex UVQF system. This can be an exhausting process for all actors involved and draws attention away from practical aspects of implementation.

Source: Heitmann, 2012.