National Qualifications Frameworks

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What is a National Qualifications Framework?

An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. It may be comprehensive or confined to one sector of education

A Typical Framework

Level	Examples of Qualifications
8	PhD
7	Masters degree. Specialist professional qualifications
6	Bachelors degree. Professional qualifications
5	Sub-degree qualifications Specialist or advanced vocational qualifications
4	Upper secondary certificate. Qualifications for supervisors and fully skilled workers
3	Qualifications for skilled workers
2	Lower secondary certificate. Basic vocational qualifications. Qualifications for semi-skilled workers
1	Pre-vocational qualifications

Aims of NQFs

Lifelong Learning

- improving **understanding** of qualifications and how they relate to each other
- improving **access** to education and training opportunities
- making **progression** routes easier and clearer
- increasing and improving **credit transfer** between qualifications
- increasing the scope for **recognition of prior learning** (RPL)

Aims of NQFs

Quality

- ensuring that qualifications are **relevant** to perceived social and economic needs

- ensuring that education and training **standards** are defined and applied consistently

- ensuring that **education and training providers** meet certain quality standards

- securing **international recognition** for national qualifications

Is an NQF a beginning or an end? Is it a regulatory or communication mechanism?

- ***Beginning (e.g. South Africa and New Zealand)***
- NQF the organising principle for a comprehensive qualifications reform to introduce a common quality assurance system for all qualifications – a *regulatory* approach

- ***End (e.g. Scotland)***
- Introduced after more than a decade of separate but linked reforms in vocational, higher and general education – more a *communication* than regulatory mechanism

What problems are NQFs trying to address?

Higher education

- Global educational and career mobility

Aligning to international standards (e.g. Bologna)

General education

- Academic-vocational divide

Improving progression and transfer between general and vocational routes

- Ensuring secondary qualifications meet international standards

Aligning to recognised international levels

What problems are NQFs trying to address?

Vocational education and training

- People do not understand what the qualifications mean

- Difficulties for adults in accessing qualifications

- Not easy for people to progress through the education and training system

What problems are NQFs trying to address?

Vocational education and training

- Out-of-date content unrelated to the needs of the labour market

- Standards applied by different education institutions for the same qualification vary significantly

- People do not trust that certificates are genuine

- The country's qualifications are not recognised in other countries with consequences for mobility of labour

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Qualifications not well understood	Requirement that all national qualifications must: • use common national system of certificate titles • have clear statements of learning outcomes • be based on externally quality assured assessment	Not absolutely essential, but for countries facing this problem, an NQF is an effective means of standardising terminology and key practices (although it takes time!)

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Difficulties for adults in accessing qualifications	•Requiring qualifications to be modular and allow learners to transfer credit and use APL •Encouraging the development of qualifications designed specifically for the needs of adult learners •Ensuring that there is fair and open access to qualifications for all	No. Key factors are flexible qualifications design and flexible provider practices. NQF may help to encourage such practices

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Barriers to progression	•Encouraging the creation of progression routes between education sectors and levels or to other qualifications at the same level •Requiring qualifications to allow learners to transfer credit	Not absolutely essential, but development of progression routes and credit transfer much more likely with NQF

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Qualifications not aligned to labour market needs	Requirement that all national qualifications must be based on: •effective consultation with stakeholders •learning outcomes that reflect employment needs	No. Key factor is social partner involvement in definition of standards or design of qualifications. NQF is one possible regulatory mechanism

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Inconsistent quality and standards	Requirement that: •all assessment is subject to external quality assurance •all programmes leading to national qualifications can be offered only by externally approved institutions	No. Quality assurance and institutional audit systems don't require an NQF

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Qualifications not trusted	Introducing a system of national certification, based on good security measures, so that people know that any certificate with the NQF logo is genuine	No. Key factor is existence of competent and trustworthy certification agencies. NQF is a possible regulatory mechanism for certification bodies

Potential Impact of NQF

Problem	Contribution of NQF	Is NQF essential?
Qualifications not recognised internationally	•Placing all qualifications in a framework of levels benchmarked to international levels •Introducing systems for quality assurance of student assessment that engender international confidence in the quality of the qualifications	Not absolutely essential and not in itself sufficient but increasingly a very useful frame of reference

Summary of NQF Impact

- NQFs aid understanding and recognition of qualifications and encourage innovative thinking about progression routes and credit systems (Communication function)

- NQF is a *possible* organising concept for a system of quality assurance to ensure that qualifications are relevant, accessible, coherent and standards-based (Regulatory function)

Evidence of NQF Impact

- Very little independent evidence

- South African Ministerial Study Team and Impact Study are two examples

- Very difficult to isolate 'NQF effect'

What should developing countries do about an NQF?

- Start with identification of key problems

- If key problems are about understanding or recognition, then consider NQF

- If key problems are about relevance or quality, identify most direct and cost-effective solution

- If there is political will and capacity to work towards a *comprehensive* qualifications reform, build NQF development into the plan

What should developing countries do about an NQF?

- Greatest problem is *capacity*

- NQF could be an unhelpful distraction from effective short term action

- Could be a helpful organising concept

- Approach should be minimalist and incremental