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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Examples of Qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Masters degree. Specialist professional qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bachelors degree. Professional qualifications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Contribution of NQF</th>
<th>Is NQF essential?</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 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

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| 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

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| 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

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| 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

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| 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 |


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<td>Qualifications not trusted</td>
<td>Introducing a system of national certification, based on good security measures, so that people know that any certificate with the NQF logo is genuine</td>
<td>No. Key factor is existence of competent and trustworthy certification agencies. NQF is a possible regulatory mechanism for certification bodies</td>
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| Qualifications not recognised globally | • 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