Introduction

Since the mid-90ies, the ILO has supported member countries in the Asia Pacific region to develop their national skills standards systems first under APSDEP, then under SKILLS-AP, which recently was renamed to the Skills and Employability Network. The development of the Regional Model Competency Standards (RMCS) was one of the initiatives developed under the programme. The RMCS have been available for a number of years now, and several new regional and country specific initiatives are placing fresh demands on the RMCS. Within the Asia Pacific region the dual issues of a regional qualifications framework and skills recognition, necessitated by the ASEAN 2015 borderless community, and the importance of migrant workers to the region have emerged as important areas for consideration.

Migration, and particularly skilled migration, is often circular, and recognition of skills, for attaining decent work, is therefore often required prior to departing and upon returning to the country of origin. The RMCS were developed and endorsed for different industry sub-sectors and may provide an opportunity as a ‘translation tool’ to assess skills of migrant workers. It is hoped that the RMCS may have a role along with other mechanisms in contributing to skills recognition and the assessment process within the Asian region, and, ideally more transparent, recruitment practices.

In recognition of the importance of these topics to the region, the ILO’s Skills and Employability Network has initiated inquiries into the potential of the RMCS as a vehicle for skills recognition and have held earlier discussions during several regional workshops around this topic. Documents related to these workshops are available here:

- ILO/SKILLS-AP/Korea Regional Training Workshop on Skills Assessment of Returning Migrant Workers, 15 – 16 September 2010
- Guidelines for Development of Regional Model Competency Standards (RMCS)
- Guidelines for Recognizing the Skills of Returning Migrant Workers
- Regional Model Competency Standard: Manufacturing Industry
- Making Full Use of Competency Standards: A handbook for governments, employers, workers and training organizations

For other documents on RMCS, please check on http://skills-ap.ilobkk.or.th.

This online forum was established to explore the:

- Effectiveness of the RMCS in assisting skills recognition for migrant workers;
- Challenges of implementing the RMCS as a tool for skills recognition;
- Possible solutions to implementing the RMCS for skills recognition; and
- Overall relevance of the RMCS to social partners, specifically, industry and employers, recruitment agencies and training institutions.
Discussion points

Several themes were proposed to focus the discussion on relevant issues during the forum. The themes were identified from issues that arose during the piloting of the RMCS for the recognition of skills. The theme areas were:

1. The format of the RMCS;
2. Uses and relevance of the RMCS;
3. Assessment of the RMCS; and
4. A new area of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) which developed during the discussion.

The debate during the forum was energetic, wide-ranging, and enthusiastic and could most likely have continued for a while longer. Given the limited amount of time at hand, many of the questions posed at the start of the forum were not answered in as much detail, as one would probably have wished. However, the range of issues addressed during the debate has provided a number of avenues for further consideration and more in-depth discussions.

During the discussion, members found:

- Value in the RMCS being available for use by countries in the region;
- Using a standardised format for the RMCS would be beneficial;
- Involvement of industry, employer associations and other social partners to be vital; and
- A communication campaign for the migrant skills recognition process is necessary and to be understood and valued by employers.

1. The format of the RMCS was discussed enthusiastically amongst forum participants with agreement on the following points:

- Regional competency standards need to be simple and without excess complexity, consisting primarily of unit title, elements, performance criteria, assessment and a range statement.
- A standardised format for all sectors should be applied and different countries may then choose to add detail around this core material.
- RMCS with too much information can be intimidating and difficult to understand. However, if there is not enough information, the RMCS tend to be too open to interpretation and thus providing inconsistencies in assessments.

2. Uses for the RMCS were considered with general consensus reached by forum members on the following points:

- RMCS offer a benchmark for competency standards in the region.
- Regional standards can facilitate the recognition of skills held by migrant workers or workers from the informal sector who do not have the breadth of skills to form a complete qualification and/or have developed their skills through informal learning.
- RMCS offer a standardised language that can be used by all stakeholders when discussing supply and demand of skilled labour.
- The recognition certification would give the receiving country an indicator that the incoming worker has been trained in, or has, certain skills. Regional competency standards are thus viewed as useful to governments to facilitate migration.
- Recognition of skills does not guarantee employment but increases the possibility of legal overseas employment and decent wages.
- RMCS could support and contribute to the development of TVET management and systems within a country. With one forum member noting that if nothing else is available, RMCS would provide a standardised language that can be used by all stakeholders when discussing supply and demand of skilled labour.

3. Assessment of the RMCS received attention from Community of Practice members who identified the following areas of importance:

- Units of competency (or their equivalent given variations in terminology) should be the smallest unit for assessment rather than modules.
- In some systems modules can contain competencies that have been grouped together for educational reasons into the one module and an individual might not hold all of them. Making a unit of competence (or its equivalent) the smallest assessment unit will offer individuals the greatest opportunity for recognition.
The Europass approach was suggested as a model to examine as it allows individuals to identify and list their own competencies which can then be compared to the needs of an employer in any European country.

4. The role of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) was developed as a theme during the forum and generated energetic debate with the following areas of agreement.

- Cross-national recognition will become more feasible when the countries in question have comparable NQFs.
- NQF / NVQF and national qualifications, despite their deficiencies and limitations, are vital for 'negotiating' and formulating cross-border skills recognition of migrant workers.
- Receiving countries will insist that qualifications are awarded based on a formal and credible framework.
- There was much debate around the recently published Allais report on “The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: A Report of 16 countries.” Most contributors felt the report seems to have a confused understanding of the purpose, scope and function of QFs. Contributors in the region were very supportive of the idea of QFs and two countries gave clear examples where a framework supports the pre-vocational training for disadvantaged groups and provide pathways into vocational qualifications.
- Contributors from outside the region mainly in Europe, tended to be less supportive of the RMCS and a Regional Qualifications Framework.

5. For the way forward, the forum members identified a number of areas where the ILO could take the lead with social partners:

- The ILO could explore further work on RMCS in the areas of generic competencies or core work skills like communication, inter-personal behaviour, problem solving, positive approaches, conflict resolution, and sustainable development for the region.
- RMCS should be reformatted and apply the recommended RMCS format as published in the Guidelines for the Development of RMCS by the International Labour Office, Bangkok, in 2006. Replacing the title of range statement with assessment statement will give a direct reference to the intended purpose of that topic.
- The ILO could consider developing a handbook on adapting competency standards for local conditions.
- The ILO could investigate the possibility of establishing a pilot in the area of domestic worker skills recognition.
- The ILO should consider a communications strategy to raise awareness of social partners and other relevant stakeholders of the value of recognising migrant workers' skills.
- The forum considered it unnecessary for countries to develop their own competency standards from scratch when there are so many good standards available for adaption. The ILO could facilitate a process for the nomination, validation and endorsement of quality competency standards from the region to become RMCS and then store them on a website accessible to all.

Concluding observations from the discussions

The increased interest in skills recognition of migrant workers can be seen in initiatives such as the GMS Mutual Recognition Framework for Skills and Qualifications of Migrant Workers and the move by the ASEAN to explore regional qualifications frameworks. Overall there were common areas of agreement amongst forum members in the region, including:

a) Value in regional competency standards for the region.

b) Involvement of industry, employer associations and other social partners is vital.

c) A communication campaign for the migrant skills recognition process to be understood and valued by employers.

d) The forum discussion did not directly address the effectiveness of the RMCS in assisting skills recognition for migrant workers. There were however, broad agreements amongst participants from
the region that regional competency standards, of some kind, could fulfil a useful role in recognising the skills of migrant workers.

e) The challenges of implementing the RMCS as a tool for skills recognition was touched upon several times, including the need to involve employer and industry groups in the development of competency standards, assessment processes and other recognition processes. Consultation and communication with employers needs to be on-going so as to get the message of regional recognition across.

f) Possible solutions for implementing the RMCS for skills recognition were suggested. The area of domestic housekeeping was raised as a possible area for implementation as it is a sector in demand across the region. The ILO is currently considering an international standard for domestic workers. This could be timely given the ILO already has developed a set of competency standards for domestic workers for India.

g) The overall relevance of the RMCS to social partners, specifically, industry and employers, recruitment agencies and training institutions was not specifically discussed. A pilot managed by the ILO in the area of domestic workers was seen as an opportunity to work with these social partners to identify and determine an approach for securing social partner buy-in for a regional approach to migrant worker skill recognition.

h) The recommended RMCS format is considered to be adequate and should be applied consistently.

i) Supporting the above recommendation, technical assistance by the ILO in reconciling and synthesizing different existing competency standards to develop new suitable standards for a country may be required, but this would not necessarily require developing a full set of RMCS.

j) The forum noted that it is important that the components of the recognition system are not more complex than the participating countries’ capacity to implement.
Discussion statistics

Total number of subscribed members: 20
- ILO: 10
- Non-ILO: 10
- Male: 11
- Female: 9

Total number of contributions:
- Week #1: 41
- Week #2: 33

Acknowledgments

The Skills and Employability Network would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the following individuals who made this discussion forum possible:

**Moderator:** Belinda Smith

**Forum participants:**

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For further information and raw data from this discussion forum, please visit: http://skills-ap.ilobkk.or.th/discussions/forums