

INFORM



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NEWS AND VIEWS
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BETTER QUALIFICATIONS

Our previous Policy Brief on qualifications systems focussed on qualifications frameworks. Most ETF partner countries now have NQFs at one stage or another. The majority have legislated their NQFs, others have begun piloting new standards and qualifications, while another group is in the vanguard and has established or designated authorities to manage the NQF and begun to populate its framework with new, outcomes-based qualifications. But these constructions will have no impact if not populated with new, outcomes-based qualifications.

So, in this edition, we drill down to the qualifications themselves. We try to capture – and encourage – the reforms underway in our 30 partner countries. We look at the role of qualifications in VET, how they are defined and developed; how their quality and relevance should be established and how they should be assessed to ensure societal trust and recognition; and how they are affecting curricula.

WHY QUALIFICATIONS MATTER

Better qualifications are necessary because, more than ever in a world of change and mobility, people need a clear and trusted way to demonstrate their competence to perform a job. Qualifications establish the all-important links between the worlds of work and education; they create a common language between employers and schools.

Employers want skilled staff. They are mainly interested in competence, what a worker can do in practice. But labour markets cannot function if employers have to conduct analyses whenever they recruit new staff. So they look at socially-recognised and widely-approved qualifications.

But qualifications do not only help individuals get their first job. For many, changing jobs or occupation is a necessity. Societies need qualifications which facilitate and recognise lifelong learning, including learning that has taken place after individuals leave the education system. Traditional vocational qualifications cannot do this.

CONTENTS

- Main elements of vocational qualifications systems
- How ETF partner countries are reforming their vocational qualifications
- ETF recommendations for better vocational qualifications



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TRANSFORMED ECONOMIES, NEW QUALIFICATIONS

Our countries are societies and economies in transition. They face the same challenges as other countries in the world but with the added obstacles of recent dramatic, sometimes traumatic, change. Borders have gone up, or states dissolved, new countries have emerged. Countries have moved from, in most cases, state-dominated economies, characterised by big employers, to a much more complex picture of smaller enterprises, NGOs and foreign or international firms.

These changes have challenged VET systems. Frequently, the transition has stretched or broken the VET school to employer relationship. Countries have gone from mainly state-run VET systems supplying command economies with a predictable stream of VET graduates in stable employment to a more complex economy with unpredictable job prospects and much more diverse VET provision.

VET has often contracted. It has also suffered by default as higher education in many countries has accelerated out of control, absorbing masses of young people, often pushed by their parents along the supposedly more prestigious academic path. New providers in VET are often not trusted. The same applies to some new qualifications. Learners and employers face a bewildering array of schools and qualifications, which they do not understand.



THE ETF'S FINDINGS

LEARNING OUTCOMES APPROACHES ARE NOW ESTABLISHED BUT DEFINITIONS ARE OUTDATED

Most partner countries now have outcomes-based NQFs, so most have some outcomes-based qualifications. But some countries do not use legal or formal definitions which refer to an outcomes basis for their qualifications. Indeed, they still define qualifications significantly differently from those commonly used by international instruments such as ISCED or the EQF.

Many countries do not differentiate between programme and qualification. Morocco does not have a generally-used definition, while Egypt does not distinguish between a qualification and certification. In Serbia and Palestine, the word qualification covers both certificates and curricula.

Increasingly, countries are emphasising formal certification of outcomes achieved. For example, Turkey uses definitions which refer to competences attained and recognised by the authorities. Azerbaijan's draft definition refers to outcomes and assessment against standards.

COUNTRIES ARE INCREASINGLY USING OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

While the most common VET qualifications are still based on educational standards, countries are increasingly using occupational standards as a basis for new qualifications - three out of four partner countries now use them. Occupational standards describe the competences needed for a specific occupation and so link qualifications to employment requirements. Outcomes-based standards set a common, objective benchmark for the final summative assessment; they move assessment away from a norm-referenced approach where vocational students are compared to each other, to objective criterion-referenced methods.

The two most frequently used techniques for developing occupational standards are DACUM (developing a curriculum) and functional analysis. Some partner countries, such as the Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Jordan prefer DACUM, while Russia, Ukraine and Egypt have opted for functional analysis.

Occupational standards inform vocational qualifications in various ways. They can be translated directly into qualifications, e.g. Turkey's national vocational qualifications. Or information from several occupational standards can be used to develop a broader-based qualification, especially to prepare young people for several related careers.

Occupational standards are sometimes developed by sector skills councils coordinated by VET agencies or qualifications authorities. But often in our countries, they are developed by donors and sometimes bureaucratic bottlenecks prevent the standards' validation by national authorities. A result is that too frequently we see a proliferation of standards which are not converted into new qualifications.

There are arguably too many different approaches to qualifications development. While this is understandable given the heavy donor presence (and their conflicting advice) in some countries, a more standardised approach would ease implementation.

TYPES AND UNITS – LIFELONG LEARNING QUALIFICATIONS ARE EMERGING

Partner countries have traditionally offered qualifications mainly at upper secondary level. However, we now see more types (i.e. purpose and intended user). Russia, where employers are driving the change, offers re-training certificates for adults. Kosovo's Vocational Training Centres, run by its Ministry of Labour, develop qualifications for adult jobseekers.

Some countries, including Serbia and Kosovo, are now also adopting unitised qualifications that are made up of a number of assessable units. By contrast, most Arab countries still have only “solid” qualifications and in many countries partial qualifications are not yet included in the NQF because they are not considered full qualifications.

Units are qualifications in their own right. They offer flexible learning pathways - initial VET will usually have comprehensive unitised qualifications while adult learners already established in their occupation can take individual units as part of retraining. Unitisation also allows more flexible assessment, for example at different stages of an education programme, and also facilitates the recognition of prior learning. Flexible qualifications support workforce adaptability, useful in countries with economies that experience unpredictable and often rapid changes in skills demands.

Qualifications should also balance core and occupational-specific skills, as most individuals will change jobs several times during their careers.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PLACE BUT NEEDS TO ADDRESS THE QUALIFICATION MORE DIRECTLY

As countries move to lifelong learning systems and outcomes-based NQFs, so the number of qualification types and providers, has begun to increase.

This range of diverse qualifications, including in higher education, for adults and those offered by private or NGO actors, has created more of a “market.” A downside of this unregulated proliferation of providers and qualifications is incoherence and lack of trust. Countries are trying to ensure that new qualifications have value, and thus recognise that stakeholders need to cooperate to ensure standards are maintained through quality assurance systems.

Elements of quality assurance include: validation of the qualification, quality-assuring assessment and provider accreditation. In general, the focus is on provider accreditation. But countries are developing mechanisms to validate individual qualifications and assessments.

NQFs and associated registers set requirements for the validation or approval of qualifications against qualifications standards. Where this happens, for example in Turkey and Georgia, ministries or authorities specify criteria for inclusion in the register or framework, which might include demand on the labour market, participation of labour market actors, basis in occupational standards and a unitised structure.

It is possible to have different balances between the stakeholders in quality assurance, extending from prescriptive or controlled systems, to cooperative models with a division of responsibilities and more self-regulated systems. Many EU countries have cooperative models. However, the ETF partner countries are in a different situation. Their VET systems are either fractured or newly emerging and there is simply not yet the social trust to safely allow such cooperative or self-regulating approaches.

Some partner countries have decided to establish regulatory bodies such as qualifications authorities outside ministries to deal with the proliferation of new providers. But there are wider benefits to designating a lead institution or a separate authority which is mandated to lead qualifications reforms and staffed by qualifications professionals. Countries become more self-reliant, building their own capacities and less susceptible to donor pressures.

ENGAGEMENT OF THE LABOUR MARKET IS THERE BUT PATCHY

Quality assurance is also a matter of who. Qualifications are social constructs. In order to be effective they must possess broad national recognition from the important institutions in society, in particular employers and trades unions. This is the reason why the organised interests of employers and workers are so important whether organised in sector skills councils (SSCs) or in other forms.

Many partner countries either have or plan sector skills councils to support development of relevant qualifications. Sector councils are platforms of cooperation where sectoral social partners, VET institutes and other stakeholders work together to channel labour market input to education and training policies. They have been established most notably in the Eastern Partnership countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Elsewhere, this role is played by social partners and individual companies, or chambers of commerce. Our experience is that the more structured engagement of social partners via SSCs is preferable to the ad-hoc involvement of social partners, which tends to place such actors at a disadvantage in discussions with ministries and education experts.

ASSESSMENT IS CHANGING..... BUT SLOWLY

New qualifications are one thing, but will not have the impact needed if assessment and learning do not change as well. Assessment is the basis of the trust that individuals and labour markets have in the quality and relevance of qualifications.

Traditionally, assessment for vocational qualifications was based on curricula rather than on the competences developed by the individual and as everyone was studying the same content in the same programme, it mainly served to compare performance between learners. But when people learn in different settings assessment cannot just compare learners in a group. The process of developing new outcomes-based qualifications includes the development of precise assessment standards for each qualification.

In new outcome-based qualifications, teaching and learning should be clearly separated from assessment. Individuals can be assessed following a wide range of learning pathways. Most learners are still assessed in formal, initial education, but an increasing number undertake adult education, in-company training or learn at work to acquire the competences required to be awarded a specific qualification. Diverse learning practices require more assessment options.



Some partner countries have introduced recognition of prior learning (RPL), but often this remains on paper. RPL is potentially very useful for them given the weaknesses of formal VET and the often uncertified skills and competences held by returning migrants.

Qualifications reform should also review how assessment is carried out. In addition to classical oral and written exams there are a range of methods that can be used; methods that extract evidence from real-life situations (observation, simulation etc.) are usually neglected, but they are essential to ensure that learners have achieved the learning outcomes.

Trades unions and employers are increasingly engaged in designing and carrying out assessment procedures. Their direct involvement is strengthening the quality and relevance of the qualifications and so boosting their appeal to learners. In Turkey, the sectors can become authorised certification bodies for standards-based qualifications, via, first, ISO accreditation, and then authorisation by the country's Vocational Qualifications Authority. The VQA then issues national certificates for these sector-led assessments.

But, overall, ETF partner countries are proceeding cautiously in introducing new assessment approaches. Existing assessment procedures are long-established and have acquired strong recognition among the public.

IMPACT ON CURRICULA IS IN ITS EARLY STAGES

Qualifications, as we noted earlier, have traditionally been indistinguishable from curricula in some of our countries. However, the relationship between the two is changing.

A regrettable impact of the transition to market economies has been the breaking of the school-employer link, so that training is confined within schools, with an inevitable imbalance towards theory over practice, and so insufficient emphasis on occupational skills. Additionally, VET curricula often remain mainly supply-driven, determined by available provision rather than learner need and often centralised, with one sole, national curriculum.

But we see some moves to use qualifications as the starting point to plan learning. The learning outcomes within the qualifications can be used to identify the needs of learners and the labour market and so what learning experiences can best support these aims. It is important that the learning outcomes originate from workplace competences, rather than from elements of the existing curriculum. Unitised qualifications support more modular curricula and so flexible provision.

Moving to outcomes-based curricula is easier in CVET, where curricula can draw more fully on occupational standards, than in IVET, where a broader coverage of more general subjects in addition to occupational skills is necessary.

ETF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

- Countries should use one definition of qualifications. A definition compatible with the EQF definition of a qualification is desirable, given the adherence of most partner countries to EQF principles and structure.
- Use occupational standards as the base for VET qualifications – and bring standards developed by donors into the national system.
- Our modern world needs a lifelong approach to learning. So ensure a range of qualifications types – for young people, for adult learners. Build qualifications around units for flexible delivery, learner access and simpler assessment.
- Regulate for quality. Quality-assure the qualification so that it meets NQF criteria for levelling; and assure the assessments.
- VET isn't VET without the labour market actors – establish sector skills councils or similar bodies.
- Vary assessment – develop a range of methods and build systems for Recognition of Prior Learning.
- Make qualifications national. Ensure comparability. Limit the number of awarding bodies.
- Qualifications should drive curricula planning by setting learning outcomes. And develop a national core curriculum, allied to tailored implementation arrangements at local level.
- Above all, start now – the urgent need is to develop many more vocational qualifications.

