

INFORM



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NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS – CONTRIBUTING TO BETTER QUALIFICATIONS

WHAT ARE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS?

National qualifications frameworks or NQFs classify qualifications according to a hierarchy of levels in a grid structure. Each level is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the **learning outcomes** relevant to qualifications at that level, which vary in number according to national needs. Currently NQFs have 5, 7, 8, 10 and 12 levels.

Qualifications in an NQF can be compared by individuals, employers and institutions. When different countries' NQFs are linked internationally, qualifications can be compared, which in turn supports mobility. But the implications of establishing and using an NQF go well beyond simply classifying and comparing qualifications.

Countries develop NQFs for many reasons. While many EU Member States use NQFs to coordinate their existing qualifications systems more efficiently, ETF partner countries use them to support wider national education and training reforms. These include bringing education and training closer to the labour market, developing relevant qualifications, creating progression routes linking vocational education and training (VET) with higher education, and working towards a greater recognition of qualifications within the country and abroad.

NQFs are not new, but the recent surge in the number of countries developing them is remarkable for its speed and geographical coverage. Before 2000, only a handful of countries had NQFs. Now 142 countries worldwide have embarked on developing NQFs, including 27 of the ETF's 31 partner countries. NQFs are part of a wider search for international solutions in education and training. They are also an attempt to support mobility at a time when economies are increasingly integrated and interdependent, where technical specifications of products or services are becoming more unified and where labour migrates across borders.



In the EU and the ETF's partner countries, much of the impetus has come from the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. For countries wanting to join the EU, NQFs are a practical way to manage their qualifications and link them to the EQF. Indeed, most ETF partner countries have opted for an 8-level NQF, modelled on the EQF.



CONTENT

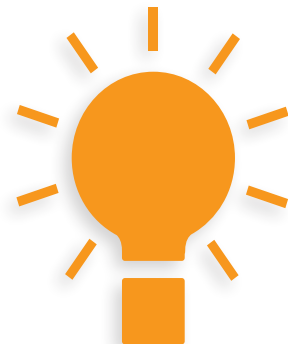
- The ETF approach to national qualifications frameworks in its 31 partner countries.
- How NQFs are implemented already or how they could be implemented in future.
- How NQFs can help to make qualifications more relevant and support wider education and training reform.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Countries are moving at different speeds to redefine curricula and qualifications by learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes say what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a learning process.

Learning outcomes facilitate diverse learning routes – formal or informal – that recognise and encourage lifelong learning, by defining a qualification by what the learner needs to achieve rather than by traditional inputs such as the duration of a programme. They also make it easier to compare qualifications nationally and internationally because of their neutral pathway, duration and location.



ETF PARTNER COUNTRIES

The worldwide surge in NQFs is not something that the ETF is observing without concern as they require considerable resources, capacity, expertise and time for development and implementation. The ETF does not advocate establishing NQFs indiscriminately; rather its position is to assist countries in finding fit-for-purpose solutions. Partner countries and regions differ in their socio-economic and demographic characteristics and in the types of qualifications needed.

For example, some former Soviet states have retained large industrial conglomerates with highly specialised jobs, but younger people are now less inclined to train in narrow industrial occupations. In the southern Mediterranean, governments struggle to find decent jobs for a growing young workforce. Many people end up in informal subsistence jobs in agriculture or services. Qualified personnel are difficult to find in growth sectors such as tourism, construction or ICT.

Traditional education and training systems struggle to address these and other problems, such as an oversupply of qualifications for which there is little demand on the labour market. Weak links between VET outcomes and labour market requirements leads employers to have little trust in qualifications. Qualifications systems also focus primarily on young people and offer few opportunities to facilitate and recognise lifelong learning. There are few nationally-accepted qualifications for adults. Validation of non-formal or informal learning is limited or non-existent. VET also has a low status and accordingly students usually prefer higher education.

A QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK AS A COMMON REFERENCE

The ETF is coordinating a regional project to support international cooperation in qualifications development and recognition. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia are developing qualifications in two economic sectors - construction and tourism. Two occupations were selected for each sector: bricklayer and site supervisor, and waiter and hotel receptionist, respectively.

To compare qualifications, the EQF is used as a common reference. Experts from each country were asked to (re)describe the qualifications for the occupations in terms of knowledge, skills and competences against the EQF descriptors, resulting in common profiles. The project demonstrates that a common reference tool (in this case the EQF) can support the development of relevant national qualifications.

The project also shows that no single institution can do all the work required. Reliable information on national qualifications and the necessary expertise to develop occupational standards requires a range of stakeholders, including ministries, sectors, qualification authorities and the social partners.

DEVELOPING RELEVANT QUALIFICATIONS

The **Turkish** NQF provides a platform for cooperation between the government and sectors to develop outcomes-based occupational standards followed by sectoral qualifications. National occupational standards ensure the relevance of qualifications for adult training, which was previously often unrecognised. The Vocational Qualifications Authority coordinates this new system, while sectors are in charge of developing standards and certification processes.

Now, in the second stage, a Turkish qualifications framework for lifelong learning is being developed. It builds on the same principles of quality and relevance and links higher education developments, sectoral qualifications and general, vocational and teacher training qualifications issued under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Education.

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

In **Georgia**, the NQF is an instrument for establishing a new approach to quality assurance in VET based on learning outcomes. The National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement is in charge of quality-assuring the development of qualifications and their use in provision and assessment. It works with sectoral bodies as well as public and private providers. The Centre ensures that learning outcomes drive provision and accredited providers must use participatory self-assessment methods involving staff, students and external stakeholders to improve their efficiency. The new Georgian system requires the active involvement of the sectors and local companies working with providers. The Centre has also started developing recognition of prior learning through VET providers.





WHAT VALUE DO NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS ADD?

An NQF has no value without qualifications inside it. The ETF believes that NQFs should lead to better qualifications that are more relevant to the labour market and flexible enough for holders to progress between qualifications or combine them from different fields.

Developing and implementing an NQF requires both technical and social/institutional processes.

NQFs introduce a common language – of levels, outcomes, credits, award types and so on – among stakeholders, in particular employers, sectoral representatives and the education world (ministries, qualifications authorities, schools etc.). This leads to a shared understanding and acceptance of concepts and implementation, policies and strategies.

The most important of these is the use of learning outcomes for level descriptors in the framework and the definition of individual qualifications in the different NQF levels. Level descriptors are usually generic, while those for individual qualifications are more specific.

Outcomes tell us what is inside the qualification enhancing comprehension and transparency. This creates the basis of trust essential for the recognition and acceptance of individual qualifications. In an NQF, the levels typically share a common set of descriptors of the knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired by the learner. The same descriptors are used across general education, academic education, VET and adult learning qualifications, underscoring the relationship between them and allowing individuals, employers, qualifications authorities and training providers to compare and link qualifications offered by different institutions.

In this way, NQFs help to illustrate potential learning pathways, enabling learners to choose and transfer between different types of qualifications at the same level (for example, between general, vocational and academic qualifications). They can also enable learners to progress to higher-level qualifications in the same field. Thus, NQFs can be a tool to help people manage their own careers.

In most ETF partner countries, a qualification has traditionally been obtainable only by taking a formal training course. But now countries are using NQFs to develop systems to validate non-formal and informal learning, usually for the first time. NQFs apply the same assessment standards to obtaining a qualification, no matter how the learner acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve it. So NQFs can support recognition of skills acquired informally and give a boost to learning beyond formal education, particularly for adults.



NQFs are therefore lifelong learning instruments, linking general education, higher education and VET, defining learning pathways for individuals and encompassing systems and procedures to recognise skills acquired lifewide.

Frameworks are also usually associated with quality assurance arrangements. To be included in an NQF and associated qualifications registers, qualifications providers often have to be accredited to award the qualification. Assessments also have to be quality assured, or verified. In many ETF partner countries these are wholly new requirements, which should increase employer trust in qualifications.

In most cases, NQFs are established by laws before real implementation begins. Where ministries lead, the ETF observes two general approaches. One is driven by a labour ministry with an employability agenda, involving sectors and social partners and focussing on occupational standards. The second is

led by an education ministry or higher education community and focuses on education standards.

Ministries traditionally dominate education and training policy and in most ETF partner countries, social partner engagement in education and training is weak. But NQFs can provide a platform for social dialogue. They are usually developed by a range of actors, including ministries, employers, trades unions, education authorities, VET agencies and individual experts all working collaboratively on the framework, occupational standards and qualifications, thus supporting labour market relevance. Indeed, in some cases, notably Russia and Ukraine, employers have initiated the NQF process and in Turkey sectors play a strong role in developing and awarding vocational qualifications.

This wider stakeholder engagement is beginning to influence the design and content of curricula and qualifications. Traditionally ETF partner countries have used subject- or input-based curricula, but increasingly they are developing occupational standards to make vocational qualifications more relevant. Occupational standards – themselves a type of learning outcome – are normally developed by sectors or professional bodies and involve experts who practice the occupation. Basing qualifications on occupational standards and labour market demand, and linking them to higher-level qualifications and allowing for progression, raises their “market value”.

Developing an NQF also deepens institutional capacity, especially in transition or developing countries. Some states establish new bodies such as qualifications authorities to design, construct and coordinate the framework. Others are starting to build different forms of sectoral organisations, while new quality assurance bodies are also emerging.

The added value of NQFs is therefore in driving greater quality in qualifications and qualifications systems.



THE ETF'S FINDINGS

On the surface, most NQFs share common elements: reference levels, structure and purpose. In practice however, their specific arrangements such as quality assurance systems, governance and use vary from country to country. This is as it should be – NQFs must fit national institutions, meet national needs and keep evolving. NQFs cannot be copied or transplanted from other countries.

Implementing an NQF is more difficult than designing its structures. It implies a major reform of qualifications and the surrounding education and training system. As most NQFs are based on learning outcomes, this means adopting learning outcomes approaches not only for qualifications, but also for curricula, teaching and learning and assessment. In practice, the shift to learning outcomes is not a linear process solely determined by the implementation of the NQF. It is a more variable process of outcomes approaches being introduced gradually and integrating them in varying degrees into descriptors and qualifications, and assessment and learning processes. Furthermore, approaches or types of learning outcome used differ, for example, between VET and higher education.

NQFs don't remove the need for quality inputs. As an organisation concerned with capacity building, the ETF fully acknowledges the necessity of qualified teachers and quality schools and other providers to support the development of professional skills.

It appears that NQFs drive quality. They are usually linked to quality assurance systems. To be placed in an NQF, qualifications must meet specific criteria in terms of their design, basis on occupational or other standards, and demand on the labour market. Assessment and certification processes must be robust to ensure that only individuals meeting the necessary requirements receive a qualification. Providers often have to be accredited to award an NQF-levelled qualification.

Institutionally, it is clear that no single body can implement an NQF alone. The ministry or authority charged with leading NQF development needs to collaborate closely with other actors and the framework needs to be owned by its stakeholders. Nominating a single responsible agency or authority for qualifications can accelerate implementation and lead change in the national qualifications system. Capacity development, both of institutions and professionals engaged in NQF development and implementation, is also crucial.

NQFs also evolve over time. They undergo reviews and adjustments in line with changing national needs. In that sense implementation is never complete. Therefore, countries should not delay implementation in a quest for the perfect design.

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JOIN THE NETWORK!

The ETF has established an online community for people working on qualifications.

Join the Qualifications Platform by registering at:

www.qualificationsplatform.net