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African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) Network

Steps in Referencing to the ACQF

A Phased Approach

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This procedure has been consulted with the ACQF Cluster1- Referencing at a webinar on 13 March 2026.

1 Introduction

Referencing a national qualifications framework (NQF) to the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is a voluntary, systematic, and transparent process that establishes a formal relationship between the NQF and the ACQF. It demonstrates how national qualifications levels and frameworks align with the continental level descriptors and benchmarks. Referencing enhances the comparability, portability, and recognition of qualifications across African countries, supporting mobility, lifelong learning, and the implementation of the Addis Convention. The process is guided by agreed criteria, norms, and procedures to ensure credibility, mutual trust, and ownership by participating countries.

The referencing process is structured into six sequential phases, from initial preparation to final publication. Each phase groups together key actions to provide a clear roadmap for countries.

2 Phase I: Initiation & Readiness (Steps 1–4)

This phase focuses on establishing the national foundation, securing a mandate, and setting up the necessary structures to guide the referencing process.

1. Assess the country's readiness for referencing to the ACQF.

This self-assessment exercise is usually conducted by the national body responsible for the qualifications framework or system and involves key stakeholders. It typically considers the legal status and operational maturity of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) or qualification systems, the functioning of quality assurance arrangements, and the availability of level descriptors and learning-outcomes-based qualifications.

2. Seek approval from Government to proceed with referencing and establish a National Referencing Committee (NRC).

Government approval should include a clear mandate for referencing and ensure commitments for budgetary and human resources. The composition of the NRC and its terms of reference are to be determined at this stage. It is important to specify minimum representation in the NRC (e.g., quality assurance bodies, ministries, social partners, higher education and TVET institutions, RPL authorities).

3. Notify the ACQF Governing Body of the intent to proceed with referencing.

Notification should be sent to the Presidency, copied to the Cluster 1 Chairperson and Secretary. The Cluster maintains a dashboard to track all referencing processes.

4. Set up the NRC and a Technical Working Group (TWG).

The TWG supports the NRC, and its composition and terms of reference also need to be defined. A clear distinction should be made between the strategic role of the NRC (oversight, endorsement, national ownership) and the technical role of the TWG (mapping, evidence gathering, drafting). Particular attention is required to include conflict-of-interest and transparency provisions, in line with ACQF norms.

3 Phase II: Capacity building & Planning (Steps 5–6)

This phase ensures that the national team is equipped with the necessary knowledge and that a detailed roadmap is in place to guide the technical work.

5. Provide capacity building on referencing methodology.

The Cluster plans activities for capacity building to support the referencing journey, for example, by linking capacity building explicitly to ACQF level descriptors, learning outcomes and credit systems, and referencing criteria and evidence requirements. This can be coupled with other themes around recognition, mobility, and the Addis Convention as per its terms of reference. It is important to clarify expected outputs (e.g., common understanding, agreed methodology) for identified target groups (e.g., policymakers, technical drafters, quality assurance agencies, institutions).

6. Develop a plan for referencing.

The country plan should include all steps from start to finish with deliverables at scheduled dates, allowing for contingencies. It is recommended that the referencing plan maps each chapter to specific ACQF referencing criteria, identifies sources of evidence for each criterion, and ensures that each draft explicitly demonstrates how national levels correspond to ACQF levels and how quality assurance, RPL, and credit systems support comparability. The process should avoid an overly linear approach by allowing overlapping consultation and drafting where appropriate.

4 Phase III: Drafting & Consultations (Steps 7–13)

This phase involves the iterative development of the referencing report through drafting, structured consultations, and expert reviews to ensure accuracy, legitimacy, and buy-in.

7. Prepare the 1st draft of the referencing report.

This is based on desk research using available reports, data, and policy documents.

8. Conduct a preliminary consultation.

This involves engaging key stakeholders on the 1st draft with clearly defined consultation objectives, such as validation of evidence, legitimacy, and buy-in.

9. Prepare the 2nd draft.

This draft incorporates input received during the preliminary consultation.

10. Seek expert views.

The experts to be consulted are determined in consultation with the Cluster.

11. Prepare the 3rd draft.

This draft incorporates input received from experts on the 2nd draft.

12. Facilitate a review by peer countries.

The Cluster will determine the number of peers to review the drafts, how the selection is made, and any criteria to be fulfilled (e.g., similar NQF maturity, prior ACQF referencing experience).

13. Prepare the 4th draft.

This draft incorporates input received from peer countries on the 3rd draft.

5 Phase IV: National endorsement (Steps 14 -16)

This phase secures national ownership and formal endorsement of the referencing report prior to submission to the ACQF.

14. Conduct stakeholder validation.

It is important to distinguish clearly between technical validation and political/administrative endorsement during this step.

15. Obtain endorsement by national bodies.

This includes key bodies involved in the referencing process.

16. Obtain approval by Government for submission.

This approval should come from the highest authority, typically the Cabinet of Ministers (or as mandated). This final national step secures the highest level of government approval, authorizing the official submission of the report.

6 Phase V: ACQF Submission and Validation (Steps 17–20)

This phase covers the formal submission to the ACQF, the independent review process, and network validation.

17. Submit the Referencing Report to the Presidency.

This is the formal submission of the final report following national endorsement and Government approval.

18. Facilitate a review by an ACQF Panel.

The Presidency will determine the composition of the Review Panel and its terms of reference. The report will be shared with the panel members who will submit a written assessment of the report.

19. Present the findings to the ACQF Forum.

The presentation may be made virtually or in-person at the next available forum, including the comments from the Panel – all Network Members will have the opportunity to comment.

20. Obtain ACQF Network validation.

This is the formal endorsement of the referencing by all network members. The Presidency, after consultations with experts and peer-reviewers, accepts the report for publishing (if necessary – after last amendments).

7 Phase VI: Post-referencing (Step 21)

21. Publish the report on the ACQF website.

Official use of the ACQF logo on certificates and related documents is authorized following successful publication. The qualifications and certificates would thereafter reflect the corresponding ACQF level in addition to the national level. ACQF level information would be integrated into national and regional qualifications databases to support transparency, comparability, and recognition.

Annex 1:

ACQF

Summary - ACQF Referencing Process

