

# ACQF

African Continental  
Qualifications Framework



**Session 9:**  
**Level descriptors**  
**SADCQF**  
**Comparison of level descriptors of**  
**SADCQF and ACQF**

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*Special Meeting of the Technical Committee on  
Certification and Accreditation (TCCA)  
On the implementation of SADCQF*

11-12 May 2023,  
Johannesburg, South Africa

# Purpose of the session 9

1. Recall concepts / views on **level descriptors**.
  2. Relationship of **RQF and NQF level descriptors**
  3. Comparing RQFs: example – SADCQF-ACQF
  4. Conclusions, next steps
  5. Discussion, proposals
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01

**Concepts and views  
of Level descriptors**

# Recalling some key definitions

**RQF:** “broad structure of levels of learning outcomes agreed by countries in a defined geographical location that can enable one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for qualifications to be compared between countries

## **NQF:**

- “policy and instrument for development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims at integrating and coordinating national qualifications subsystems and improve transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society”
- “instrument for development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels- a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes – clear statements of what the learner must know or be able to do, whether learned in a classroom, on the job, or less formally.”
- The qualifications framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another, within and across occupations or industrial sectors (and even across vocational and academic fields if the NQF is designed to include both vocational and academic qualifications in a single framework).



# Level descriptors

A **statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of a Qualifications Framework** that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level.

## Level descriptors:

- Are at the heart of the concept and structure of qualifications frameworks (NQFs and RQFs)
- Are formulated as learning outcomes statements and signal transparency
- Are an agreed central reference point and multi-stakeholder platform for dialogue
- Based on logic along vertical and horizontal dimensions
- Relate to certain domains of learning: KSC, KSAR, other combinations.

# Understanding and using the level descriptors

- Application of learning outcomes-based level descriptors can be challenging.
- Understanding the role, concepts, vertical and horizontal logic of NQF level descriptors is fundamental, and should be a theme in every teacher training programme, in the curricula of pedagogical institutes and in relevant capacity development programmes promoted by ministries, NQF institutions, and curriculum development projects. Level descriptors are a fundamental link between the NQF and the vast system of learning, recognition, and certification.
- To ease understanding, and practical use, these level descriptors should:
  - Be detailed enough to capture the complexities of an NQF/ RQF
  - Be general enough to accommodate different parts of the qualifications systems
  - Be suitable for all contexts (not too academic, theoretical, and wordy)
  - Explain the logic of the domains, sub-domains, and levels preferably with an accompanying glossary
  - Be consistently applied in countries
  - Be made visible and accessible to users through training, capacity building, workshops, and information sessions
  - Capture the balance between being prescriptive and being descriptive

# 02

**Relationship NQF-  
RQF level descriptors**

# RQF – NQF level descriptors

- Formulations of level descriptors: a) Generic / brief (in RQF) vs b) specific, contextualised, detailed & extensive (in NQF)
- NQF: Attention to national context, orientations, issues to be addressed.
- RQF: Level descriptors are oriented to the purpose: linking, comparison, reference, translation, mutual understanding, common ground.
- RQF: in principle do not contain (national) qualifications - unlike NQF.

- Relationship, compatibility of NQF to RQF: via referencing / alignment / comparison
- Comparison: structural, semantic.



03

**Comparing RQFs –  
level descriptors**

# Key similarity

## Both Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs)

**ACQF**

- Brings together a community of 55 countries & different regions
- The only meta (overarching) qualifications framework working with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) & RQFs



- Brings together 16 countries
- SADC is one of the regions in Africa

**The key features of both ACQF & SADCQF are embedded in their respective regional policies**

**Both ACQF & SADCQF connect & cooperate with the NQFs of the respective member states**

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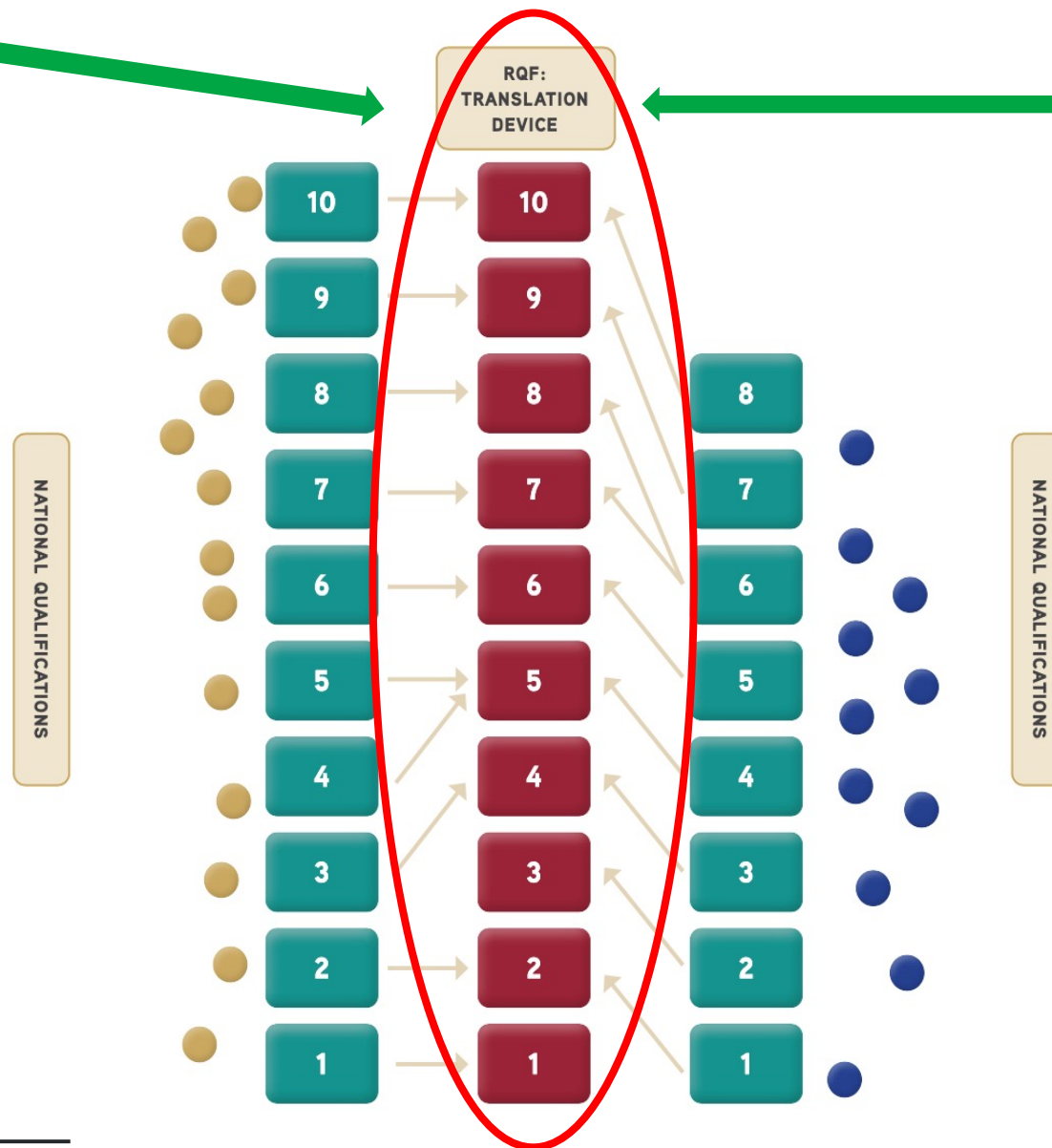


Referencing of RQFs and NQFs and systems to the ACQF is a core function of the ACQF as meta-QF for Africa.

• **To learn more:**

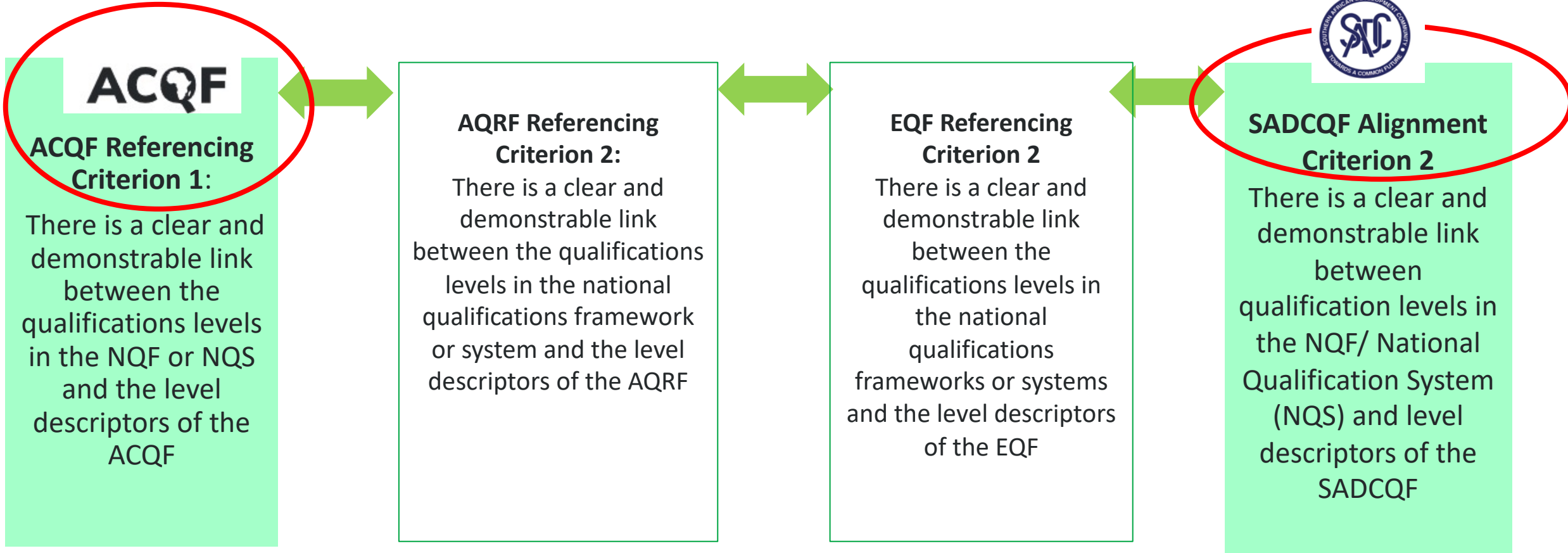
- ✓ ACQF Training Module 3: Referencing

• At: <https://acqf.africa/capacity-development-programme/training-modules/training-modules-1-to-10-english>



SADQF Alignment has same purpose of connecting and cooperating with NQFs of SADC Member States

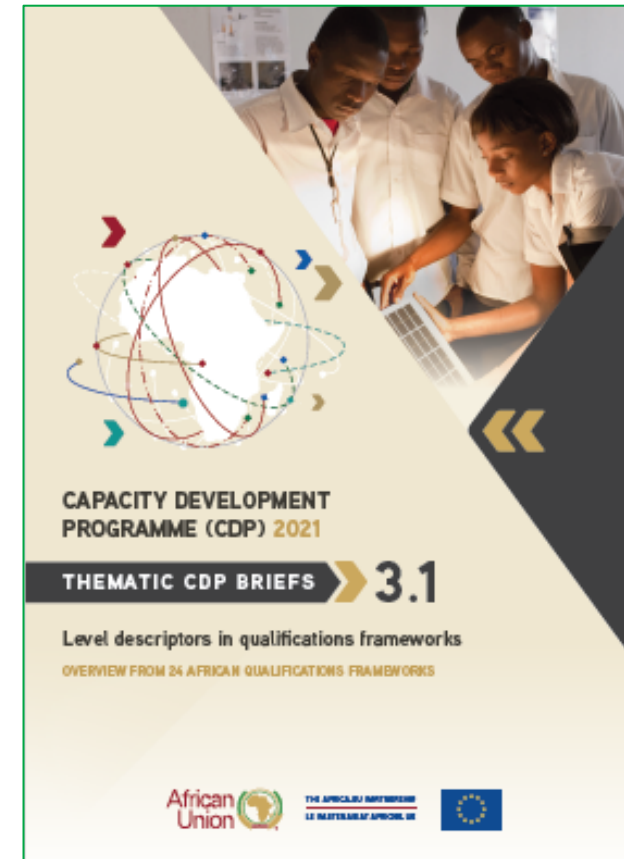
## Similar criteria in alignment/ referencing: ACQF, AQRF, EQF, SADCQF



## Early thinking: level descriptors in Africa

Includes synthetic mapping on level descriptors from 24 African qualifications frameworks based on the ACQF mapping study collection, and original country and regional sources:

- 22 NQFs: **Angola, Botswana**, Cape Verde, Egypt, **Eswatini**, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, **Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius**, Morocco, **Mozambique**, Nigeria, Rwanda, **Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania**, Tunisia, Uganda, **Zambia, Zimbabwe**
- Two RQFs (**SADCQF** and EAQF) in Africa



ACQF Thematic Brief 3.1: level descriptors

**1. Reference to global knowledge** and practice related to level descriptors in qualifications frameworks (national, regional)

## 2. Reference to the African context

- Stocktaking and overview of level descriptors and domains of learning in existing NQFs and RQFs in Africa. **Outputs: ACQF Feasibility Study (2021), ACQF Thematic Brief 3.1: level descriptors (2021).**
- Special survey on NQFs, level descriptors, and learning outcomes, carried out in August 2021. The findings of the survey informed the proposed domains of learning of ACQF level descriptors.

## 3. Methodological Guidance:

- a) Developed and published the **Orientation Note on Regional Qualifications Frameworks (2021)** and other relevant sources
- b) **ACQF Guideline 2** and related **Training Module 2 on levels and level descriptors**; **ACQF Thematic Brief 10**

## 4. Practical method for conceptualisation, drafting, review of the ACQF level descriptors:

- Expert team: lead author and four contributors and reviewers
- Systematic process, based on:
  - Planned focused team meetings
  - Progressive matrix, encapsulating all versions, specific glossary, comments
  - Advanced draft of the grid of ACQF level descriptors was presented and discussed at a wider internal meeting with all experts
  - Final draft of the level descriptors was incorporated in the dedicated ACQF Guideline Two and presented for comments to the ACQF advisory group meeting, on 13 January, 2022. The guideline was shared with the advisory group four weeks before the meeting. All documents for review and debate by the advisory group are accessible at the ACQF intranet
  - The advisory group was invited to provide more substantive comments on all ACQF guidelines presented at the meeting held on 13 January, 2022. A period of four weeks was given for this consultation process, administered through a survey. The comments received were incorporated in the draft guidelines. The proposed draft level descriptors did not receive objections or requests of major modifications.

## The ACQF descriptors:

- are regional, generic, broad statements of learning outcomes complexity that can accommodate and value all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal)
- can be applied across all African Union countries and all education and training sectors

10 levels

Detailed glossary explaining terms in the ACQF descriptors

3 domains

1.

“Knowledge” includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas

2.

“Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.

3.

“Autonomy and responsibility” refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility

## Underpinning principles of ACQF LDs



learning outcomes orientation



transparency



Future orientation



Generic in scope



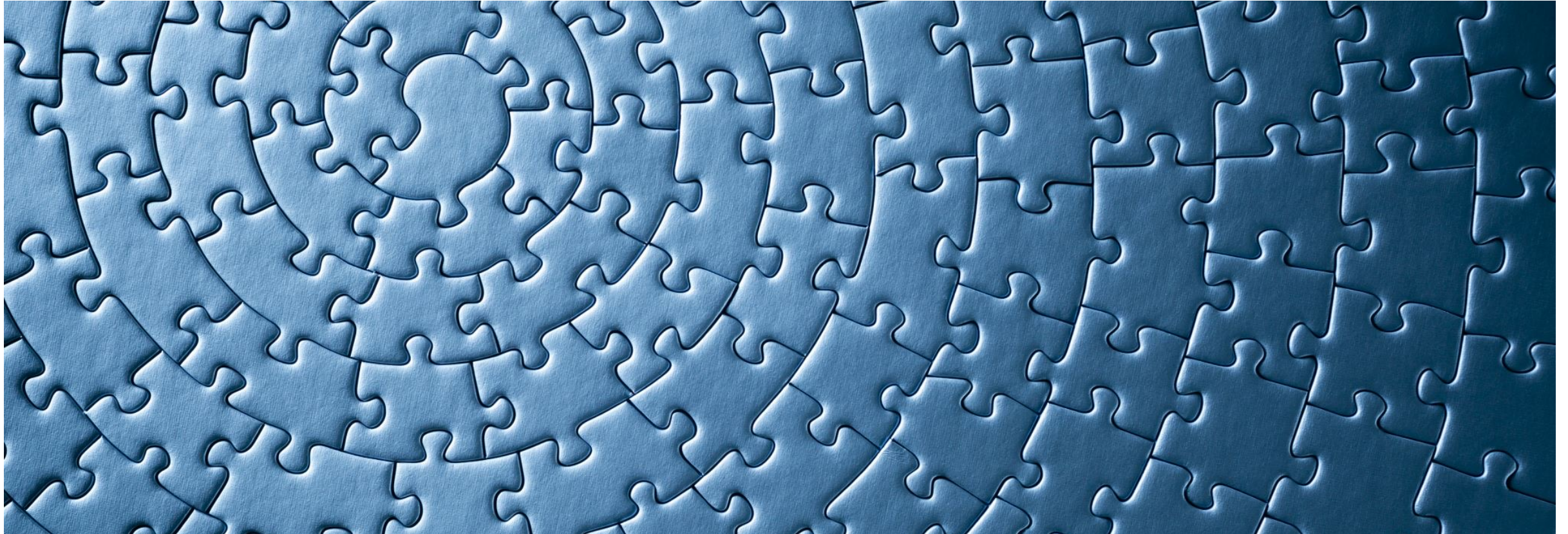
Developmental and cumulative



Conceptual and technical clarity



# Similarities



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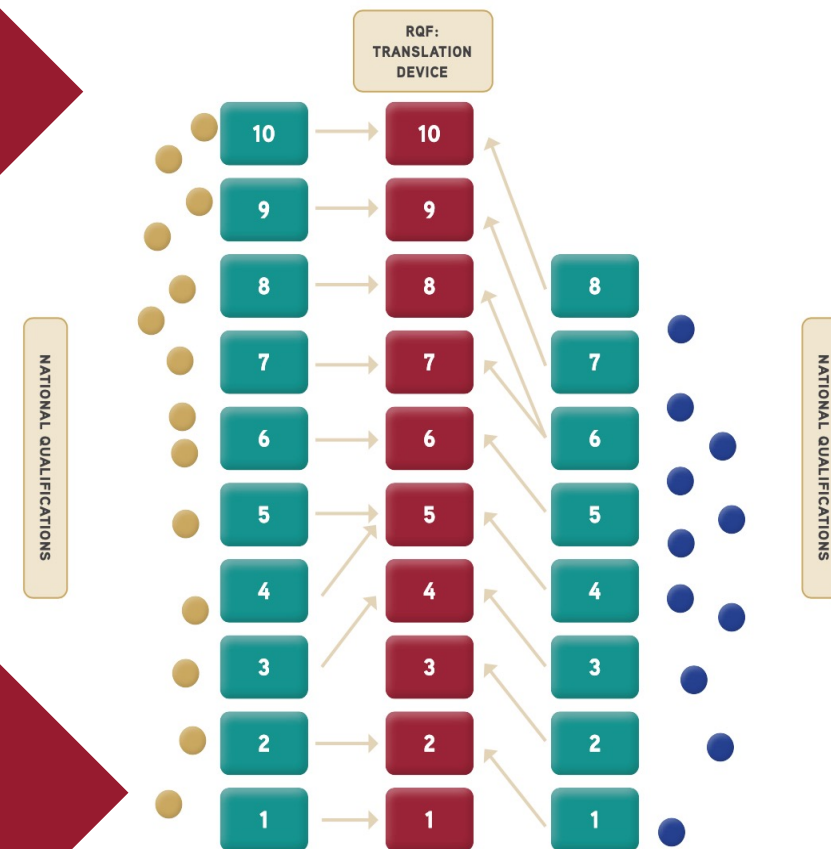
# Similarities (1)

## As RQFs, both the ACQF and the SADCQF

- Serve as a transparent basis for referencing levels of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) or systems to the ACQF or SADCQF respectively

- Serve as a reference and translation tool that may be used to understand and interpret qualification levels on the African continent and SADC region respectively

- Provide an orientation for countries/ regions to develop qualifications frameworks or systems and orientate towards common minimum benchmarks for learning outcomes within the continent/ region

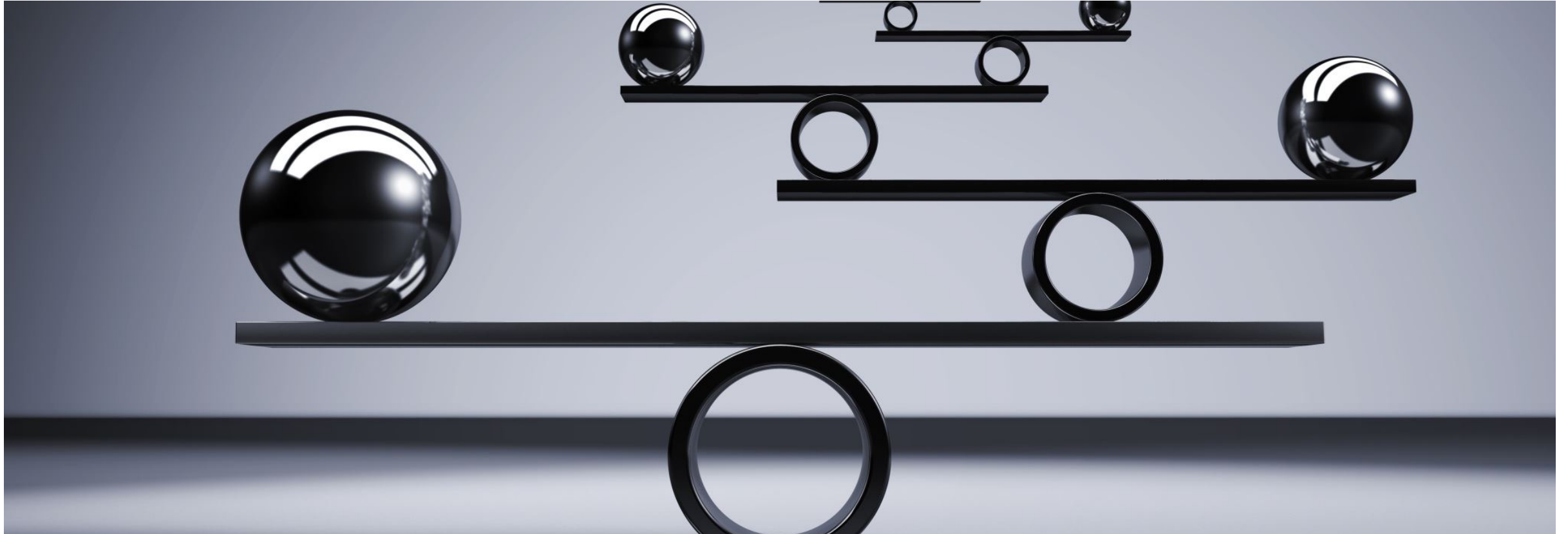


# Similarities (2)

As overarching RQFs of a community of countries, they share certain features. In both cases the level descriptors:

- Are formulated as regional, generic, broad statements of learning outcomes complexity that can accommodate and value all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) and can be applied in all education and training sectors and across all African Union (AU) and SADC countries respectively
- Serve their respective regional agendas and will not capture the same complexities as national level descriptors
- Are learning outcomes based, and describe learning at a specific RQF level, regardless of how or where this learning was obtained
- **Are structured in 10 levels and 3 domains of learning : knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility**

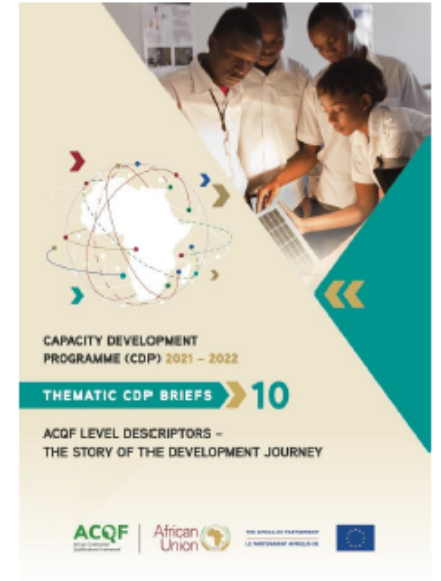
# Differences



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# Main areas of differentiation

- ❖ Guiding principles
- ❖ The explicit mention to “formal, non-formal and informal learning”
- ❖ Order of levels in the Matrix of level descriptors: 1-10 vs 10-1
- ❖ Definitions and sub-elements of domains



These observations do not prevent a comparison of the two frameworks. On the contrary, comparison adds value, by enhancing transparency and mutual understanding of the purpose, features and specificity of each framework.

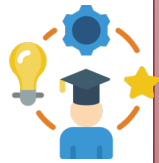


- ACQF: A set of principles was established together with the definition of key objectives.
    - The 3 principles of ACQF are: inclusiveness (all levels and types of learning and qualifications); innovation (future proof, open to new demands, skills); openness (to stakeholders needs, lessons learned from international and African practice).
    - The ACQF is defined as an overarching qualifications framework supporting referencing and comparison, underpinned by quality assurance, based on learning outcomes and supporting mutual trust and information-sharing between qualifications frameworks at national, regional and continental levels.
    - The conceptualisation of the ACQF level descriptors is based on three domains (knowledge, skills, autonomy and responsibility), and coherence of the components of transparency, generic scope, developmental and cumulative aspects, and conceptual and technical clarity.
  - SADCQF: It is not clear whether similar principles exist for the SADCQF
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# Documentation of the ACQF approach – NFIL - domains

## Developmental approach and decision on number of levels and domains of learning

- ACQF descriptors build on existing literature, research and consultation, guiding principles and a methodological approach to the writing, and is in the public domain.
- SADCQF: There is evidence of consultations regarding the SADCQF development. It is not, however, clear how the SADCQF descriptors evolved and what methodological approach was applied in their development.



## Explicit learning outcomes approach and relevance to formal, non-formal and informal learning

- ACQF is explicit about the learning outcomes approach and relevance to formal, non-formal and informal learning hence the wording introducing each level: “Level 1: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include...”.
- SADCQF is not explicit but the learning outcomes approach is implied.

## Order to levels in the Matrix of level descriptors

- ACQF descriptors show Level 1 at the top of the matrix.
- SADCQF descriptors show level 10 at the top of the matrix.



## Definitions and sub-elements

- ACQF definitions of each of the domains are included: clear, future-oriented, generically applicable across all types of learning and consistent with the domain descriptions. The ACQF includes the explicit sub-elements of levels and domains. The ACQF includes a level descriptor glossary.
- SADCQF: There are no definitions available for SADCQF domains, the sub-elements are not explicit and there is no glossary.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Definition:</b> In the context of ACQF “Knowledge” includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles, and theories in various areas.</li> <li>• The knowledge domain has two sub-domains/ elements namely “type of knowledge” and “scope of knowledge”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No definitions</li> <li>• The sub-domain/ elements, that define the SADCQF Knowledge domain, are not clear.</li> </ul>
General		
L1 knowledge	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy</p> <p>L1: Uses “simple” for the description of knowledge at L1, the lowest level of complexity. Reserves the word “basic” for level 2 (L2) knowledge</p>	<p>SADCQF: Demonstrates basic general knowledge and numeracy and literacy for everyday purposes</p> <p>L1, the lowest level of complexity, describes knowledge as “basic... for everyday purposes”. The word “basic” is also used to describe knowledge at L3</p>
L5 knowledge	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth in a discipline/ area</p> <p>At L5 (midway) knowledge is “mainly technical or theoretical with substantial depth”</p>	<p>SADCQF: Demonstrate a broad knowledge base with substantial depth in some areas, ability to analyse information and construct a coherent argument</p> <p>At L5 (midway), there is a “broad knowledge base with substantial depth in some areas, ability to analyse information and construct a coherent argument”</p>
L10 knowledge	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include substantial and original knowledge contribution that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas</p> <p>At L10, it shows that a “substantial and original knowledge contribution” is indicative of the highest level of complexity, with a scope “that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas”</p>	<p>SADCQF: Makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge in the field of study through research and scholarship</p> <p>At L10, indicative of the highest level of complexity, “makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge in the field of study through research and scholarship”.</p>





**Definition:** In the context of ACQF “Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.  
**The definition is future-oriented and comprises three sub-domains/ elements: “type of skills”, “response to information” and “addressing types of problems”**

- No definitions
- The sub-domain/ elements that comprise the SADCQF Skills domain are not clear.

ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include simple communication, cognitive and practical skills required to follow simple instructions, and use simple, repetitive solutions to address simple problems

SADCQF: Can follow simple instructions and perform actions required to carry out simple concrete tasks requiring no special skills

- “Type of skills” is described as **simple** communication, cognitive and practical skills at the lowest level of complexity (L1)
- “Response to information” is described by “following **simple** instructions” at the lowest complexity (L1)
- “Addressing types of problems” is described as “using **simple** repetitive solutions to address simple problems” at the lowest complexity (L1)

At the lowest level of complexity (L1), “can follow **simple** instructions and perform actions required to carry out **simple** concrete tasks requiring no special skills”

ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include a range of well-developed technical skills, with some specialisation, required to analyse information and new ideas, construct and communicate a coherent argument, and apply a range of solutions, often in combination, to address unfamiliar problems

SADCQF: Applies a wide range of technical and/or scholastic skills in variable contexts using standard and non-standard procedures, often in combination

- “Type of skills” moves to “a **range** of well-developed technical skills with some specialisation” at L5 (midway)
- “Response to information” moves to “**analysing information and new ideas and constructing and communicating coherent arguments**” at L5 (midway)
- “Addressing types of problems” moves to “**applying a range of solutions often in combination** to address unfamiliar problems at L5 (midway)

At L5 (midway), “applies a wide **range** of technical and/or **scholastic skills** in variable contexts using **standard and non-standard procedures, often in combination**”

ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include expert skills and techniques that demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of new ideas required to critically evaluate, formulate and test theories to address emergent, new and critical problems

SADCQF: Conducts original research which is evaluated by independent experts against international standards. Demonstrates problem solving ability and critical evaluation of research findings for academic discussion.

- “Type of skills” moves to “**expert skills and techniques**” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “Response to information” moves to “innovation, interpretation and creation of emergent and new ideas” at the highest complexity (L10)
- “Addressing types of problems” moves to “**critically evaluating, formulating and testing theories**” to address emergent, new and critical problems” at the highest complexity (L10).

At the highest level of complexity (L10), “**Conducts original research**” which is evaluated by independent experts against international standards. Demonstrates problem solving ability and “**critical evaluation** of research findings for academic **discussion**” .

broadly comparable



Gen	<p><b>Definition:</b> In the context of ACQF “Autonomy and responsibility” refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility (A&amp;R)  <b>The A&amp;R domain is inclusive of 3 sub-domains/ elements:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “the context in which autonomy and responsibility is applied”,</li> <li>• “the extent to which autonomy is applied” and</li> <li>• “the extent to which responsibility is applied”. Responsibility further includes three elements: “responsibility for self”, “responsibility for group outcomes” and “responsibility for resources”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No definitions</li> <li>• The sub-domain/ elements that comprise the SADCQF A&amp;R domain are not clear.</li> </ul>
L1 A&R	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include highly structured, repetitive contexts under close supervision and guidance taking minimal responsibility for self</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Context” is described as “highly structured and repetitive” at the lowest complexity (L1)</li> <li>• “Application of autonomy” is described as “close supervision and guidance” at the lowest complexity (L1)</li> <li>• “Application of responsibility” is described as “minimal responsibility for self” at the lowest complexity level (L1)</li> </ul>	<p>SADCQF: Works under close supervision in familiar situations and structured contexts</p> <p>At L1, “works under close supervision in familiar situations and structured contexts”</p>
L5 A&R	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include unpredictable contexts with full autonomy and full responsibility for self and group outcomes, and some responsibility for others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Context” moves to “unpredictable” at L5 (midway)</li> <li>• “Application of autonomy” grows to “full autonomy” at Level 5 (midway)</li> <li>• “Application of responsibility” grows to “full responsibility (self and group outcomes)/ initiative for responsibility for others” at L5 (midway)</li> </ul>	<p>SADCQF: Works independently under broad guidance and can take some responsibility for supervising the work of others and group outcomes</p> <p>At L5, “works independently under broad guidance and can take some responsibility for supervising the work of others and group outcomes”</p>
L10 A&R	<p>ACQF: The learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include emergent new contexts demonstrating expertise in management of new ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Context” moves to “emergent, new contexts” at the highest complexity (L10)</li> <li>• “Application of autonomy” grows to “expertise” at the highest complexity (L10)</li> <li>• “Application of responsibility” grows to “expertise in management of new ideas” at the highest complexity (L10)</li> </ul>	<p>SADCQF: Demonstrates full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of advanced research work.</p> <p>At L10, “demonstrates full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of advanced research work”</p>

broadly comparable

04

**Conclusions and next  
steps**

# Conclusions and next steps

The ACQF and SADCQF have similarities and differences in their respective purposes and are **suitable to their contexts**.

The comments below are observations only that may be used in a further comparison and /or development of the two frameworks, and **do not position one as better than the other**.

- Both the ACQF and SADCQF are RQFs- there are key similarities regarding their **conceptualisation as regional structures with their respective descriptors**.
- This presentation only compares levels 1, 5 and 10 of the two frameworks. A **more detailed comparison** may need to be done later which **considers all the ten levels**.
- Although **different approaches** are applied in the development of the two RQFs, their level descriptors are **broadly comparable in the three domains of knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility**.
- A **further research** will consider a **more structured approach** to the comparison.



# Some guiding questions for discussion

- Please could you share your views / experiences on level descriptors of qualifications frameworks (national and regional): main issues, complexities, benefits?
  - Your comments on the comparison of level descriptors of SADCQF and ACQF?
  - Any suggestions:
    - How to improve the understanding and clarity of level descriptors, and their use at national and regional level?
    - How can they better serve the purposes of NQFs (transparency, comparability, articulation, integration, inclusiveness of all forms of learning, learning outcomes approach, mutual understanding between NQFs / NQS)?
-