

DEVELOPING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL
QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF)



GUIDELINE

03

Referencing to ACQF

ACQF
African Continental
Qualifications Framework

African
Union 

THE AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP
LE PARTENARIAT AFRIQUE-UE



This Guideline on referencing to ACQF in the context of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is elaborated in 2021-2022 within the project AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability/Skills Initiative for Africa, Technical Cooperation – Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework.

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List of acronyms

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
AUMS	AU Member States
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
MS	Member State/s
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
QA	quality assurance
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework
TCCA	Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

1 Introduction to the guideline on referencing to the ACQF

This guideline defines the objectives, criteria, procedures and main implementation arrangements of referencing of national qualifications frameworks or systems to the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF). This guideline is part of the compendium of ten ACQF Guidelines, developed as the technical foundation supporting the *ACQF policy document*.

The objectives, principles, and scope of the ACQF are defined in the ACQF policy document, in which the main areas of activity of the ACQF are formulated as follows:

“By virtue of its objectives, principles, and conceptual-technical design, the ACQF will deliver on the following main areas:¹

1. Referencing of national qualifications frameworks and systems to the ACQF, following agreed criteria and procedures. This includes the adequate support – for example, coordination, common instruments to facilitate the process, guidance and technical support to national referencing teams, and review and analysis on the state of play of referencing.
2. Support recognition of prior learning – for example, the development of common guidelines and approaches, updated inventory of RPL systems on the continent, and a wide information and support campaign.
3. ACQF Qualifications Platform (database): a set of digital instruments to systematise and disseminate information on national qualifications frameworks and systems, on national and international qualifications and credentials, on recognition of prior learning. The ACQF Qualifications Platform will also provide other services, such as digital certification and data analysis and monitoring.
4. Qualifications: a range of activities such as research and design of common approaches and methodologies. Development of qualifications profiles adequate for common continental use related to new and emerging tasks, technologies, skills, and occupations linked with continental integration policies such as AfCFTA; and to continental strategies related with specific economic sectors, especially sustainable agriculture, which is poised to be a major contributor to growth and jobs.
5. Capacity development in the relevant thematic areas, including a range of training programmes in hybrid and digital formats, an e-learning platform, peer-learning activities and thematic communities of practice. Provision of technical support to countries in developing, implementing and reviewing their national qualifications frameworks and systems and preparing for referencing with ACQF. Cooperation and mutual learning across African regions, supporting their initiatives related to qualifications frameworks and systems and recognition of prior learning.
6. Networking and cooperation with African stakeholders, especially the national and regional entities responsible for qualifications frameworks or systems, organisations delivering international qualifications, recognition bodies and committees, education and training providers, social partners, professional and sector associations, employment sector institutions, job centres and online job vacancies websites, labour market and skills observatories, and students’ unions. International networking and cooperation with regional and national qualifications frameworks on other continents, international organisations active in certification, recognition and research in the domain.

¹ These areas are developed in the ACQF Feasibility Study (ACQF. 2021d), presented to ACQF Advisory Group meeting of 28 July 2021.

7. Analysis, monitoring and evaluation on ACQF implementation and other policy and technical themes relevant for the continuing improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness of the ACQF and its instruments.”

Referencing of national qualifications frameworks and systems to the ACQF is the core function of the ACQF as a meta qualifications framework for the African continent. Referencing to the ACQF is guided by four *Referencing Criteria* (Table 1) and a set of procedures and follow-up steps defined in the *Governance, procedures and follow-up steps* (Table 2).

Referencing is a process of comparison and linking national qualifications frameworks to the ACQF and should be done through the national qualifications frameworks or, where these do not exist, national qualifications systems.

Table 1: ACQF referencing criteria

Referencing criteria	
1	There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the ACQF.
2	The national qualifications frameworks or systems are based on learning outcomes principles and related to arrangements for recognition of prior learning (including non-formal and informal) and, where appropriate, to credit systems.
3	There are transparent processes and procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the NQS and information on qualifications is accessible, trustworthy and verifiable in a national register(s) of qualifications.
4	The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF).

Table 2: Component ACQF referencing governance procedures and follow-up

Governance procedures and follow-up	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsibilities and/or legal competence of relevant national bodies involved in the ACQF referencing process are clearly defined and published by the relevant competent authorities. - The relevant national quality assurance bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report. - People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in certain aspects and steps of the referencing process. Their role is advisory and supports transparency, improvement and credibility. The national referencing committee informs the ACQF Governance Structure on the involved international experts. - Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria. - The referencing outcome is published by the participating country and the ACQF network upon its final validation by the ACQF Governance Structure, on the dedicated ACQF website. - Following the completion of referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g.: certificates, diplomas, supplements) and qualifications registers issued by the competent national authorities will contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level, based on national legislation and procedures. 	

1.1 Purpose of this guideline

The purpose of this guideline is to clarify and deepen what is meant by referencing in the context of the ACQF. It also provides technical orientation for national implementing bodies and stakeholders, especially

the leading bodies managing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and interacting with the (future) ACQF implementation unit.

1.2 Guideline structure

The ACQF guidelines give tangible substance to Output 3 of the ACQF project namely the ACQF policy and technical document. The guidelines are tools to support the practical application and sustainability of the principles, objectives and milestones defined in the ACQF document.

This referencing guideline includes a trio of documents: (1) a synthesis guideline, (2) a technical guideline and (3) a training module:

- Technical in-depth guideline: This document forms the core of the trio of documents. It will present as a short handbook: for clarification and technical support. This will be used by implementers, practitioners, and other groups
- Synthesis version: This version is a shortened version for policy purposes. It will be used primarily by policy institutions, and other groups, and has a key purpose to provide policy orientation
- Training module: This version will form part of the knowledge base and be used for the ACQF Training programme and ACQF e-learning platform.

As an ACQF instrument, the referencing guideline:

- works in synergy with, and complements, other ACQF guidelines
- refers to the relevant existing (or planned) African Union (AU) policies, instruments and recommendations
- contributes to an AU area of education and qualifications, based on converging elements and recommendations that eventually contribute to continental integration and mutual understanding while respecting the diversity of the national and regional context.

1.3 Target users

The main target users of this referencing guideline are members or stakeholders of steering groups/ implementation groups for the ACQF, as well as NQFs and National Qualifications Systems (NQSs). These include National Referencing Committees/ National Coordination Points and policy advisers involved in education and training.

In terms of this guideline the NQF-ACQF referencing has implications for:

- NQF/ NQS leading / coordinating bodies:
 - Referencing is a process of enhancing transparency in the NQF/ NQS. It highlights, and brings into the public space the issues, gaps, areas of further review and streamlining of the NQF / NQS
 - NQF/ NQS bodies need to be open and ready for the referencing exercise, it should be seen as part of NQF/ NQS growth, maturity and evolution
- NQF/ NQS stakeholders:
 - Stakeholders will become more aware of what their NQF/ NQS is, how it compares with the ACQF, and by implication comparison with other frameworks
 - Stakeholders also need to be part of this growth process

- ACQF implementers
 - ACQF implementers are the experts of the ACQF implementation unit. They provide the necessary technical and methodological contribution to ACQF functions and operations. Technical support to AU member countries for efficient and good quality referencing to ACQF is one of the functions of the ACQF implementation unit, and should be based on a combination of methods, e.g., introduction training, coaching and facilitation, training on the use of digital referencing tools, provision of examples and sharing of good practice. This technical and methodological support should be insulated from the conduction of the referencing process, and drafting of the report, to prevent conflicts of interest in the discussion and validation of the referencing report. The referencing process is coordinated and led by the national referencing team and relevant authorities.

Each NQF/ NQS has intrinsic value in its diversity and its contribution to the continent. The ACQF should be able to nurture and support the inherent value of every NQF/ NQS and encourage dynamics of closer integration, a common language and mutual trust.

1.4 Objectives

The referencing guideline aims to:

- clarify how referencing relates to the ACQF and what are the related key requirements for countries engaging in referencing to the ACQF
- provide conceptual and technical orientations to countries and regional economic communities (RECs) to support the improvement and consolidation of their own NQs and NQFs and links with the ACQF. This reinforces objective 3 of the ACQF which is to work in cooperation and complementarity with the NQFs
- generate a set of applicable concepts, principles, criteria and procedures, as well as tools for referencing
- contribute to a common understanding and application of referencing across countries and regions to ease the implementation of the ACQF at continental, regional and national levels
- present and elaborate on specific tools and
- seek synergy between referencing and complementarity with already existing AU policies and instruments.

1.5 Links between the referencing guideline and other ACQF guidelines

The ten ACQF guidelines have a key intention to contribute technical and methodological support to countries participating in the ACQF process.

The referencing guideline (Guideline 3) links with the other nine ACQF guidelines and corresponds with the ACQF referencing criteria:

- **ACQF Referencing Criterion 1:** *There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the ACQF* links with Guideline 2: ACQF levels and level descriptors.
- **ACQF Referencing Criterion 2:** *The national qualifications frameworks or systems are based on learning outcomes principles and related to arrangements for recognition of prior learning (including non-formal and informal) and, where appropriate, to credit systems* links with Guideline 1: learning Outcomes and Guideline 4: Validation of Learning.
- **ACQF Referencing Criterion 3:** *There are transparent processes and procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the NQS and information*

on qualifications is accessible, trustworthy and verifiable in a national register(s) of qualifications links with Guideline 6: Registration of qualifications and Guideline 9: Innovation and technology in NQF/NQS and ACQF.

- **ACQF Referencing Criterion 4:** *The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) links with Guideline 5: Quality Assurance. The QA aspect of the referencing criteria is pervasive and is embedded in the concepts of all the guidelines.*

ACQF governance procedures and follow up links with Guideline 8: Communication and Guideline 10: Qualifications and NQFs – systemic view:

- *Responsibilities and/or legal competence of relevant national bodies involved in the ACQF referencing process are clearly defined and published by the relevant competent authorities.*
- *The relevant national quality assurance bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report.*
- *People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in certain aspects and steps of the referencing process. Their role is advisory and supports transparency, improvement and credibility. The national referencing committee informs the ACQF Governance Structure on the involved international experts.*
- *Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria.*
- *The referencing outcome is published by the participating country and the ACQF network upon its final validation by the ACQF Governance Structure, on the dedicated ACQF website.*
- *Following the completion of referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g.: certificates, diplomas, supplements) and qualifications registers issued by the competent national authorities will contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level, based on national legislation and procedures.*

All the Guidelines mentioned above are related to each other and interlinked in various ways, including being linked to the overarching Guideline: Guideline 7: Monitoring and evaluation.

2 Theoretical-conceptual underpinnings of referencing

This guideline elaborates a referencing and trust building process for the ACQF, one that encourages participation yet maintains quality, coherence and comparability across countries and with other RQFs. It proposes referencing criteria and governance procedures and a brief methodology and support package to assist countries engaging in referencing.

2.1 Purpose and benefit of referencing to the ACQF

Referencing is one of the methodologies used to compare, and build trust in qualifications frameworks/ qualifications levels. In the ACQF context, referencing is a way of comparing qualifications levels, using the ACQF and its level descriptors as a common reference point and then linking qualifications frameworks (QFs) to the ACQF. Through a structured and transparent referencing process, a national multi-stakeholder body agrees, with the ACQF Governance Structure, on the link between each of the levels of the NQF/ NQS and the corresponding level in the ACQF.

Referencing to the ACQF should be done through the NQFs or, where these do not exist, NQs on condition that their qualifications levels are clearly described and qualifications that are included follow transparent and quality assured processes.

2.1.1 ACQF as common reference point for comparison and translation

The ACQF is envisaged as a common qualifications reference framework that promotes a lifelong learning objective, comprises all types of learning, is based on learning outcomes and built on a set of level descriptors. This common point of comparison will serve as a translation device between the NQF/ NQS on the African continent. Member States will relate their own learning outcomes based frameworks/ systems to the level descriptors of the ACQF through the referencing process which in turn enables further linkages to qualification level descriptors in other AU Member States. The increased transparency will further enhance mutual understanding of qualifications and quality assurance and promote cooperation.

The ACQF is a framework of NQFs. National qualifications are not to be registered in the ACQF, because they are in the respective NQFs. The referencing process determines the level to level correspondence between the NQF and the ACQF. By this process, national qualifications that are included in the referenced NQF are referenced to the ACQF. This is a key outcome of the process. Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the NQF or system (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and / or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of the NQF or systems, to the appropriate ACQF level.

ACQF Qualifications Platform (database)

AU member states are encouraged to use the ACQF Qualifications Platform / database, as a free service, to publish information on their NQF and their national qualifications. Besides information on national qualifications published by the national competent authorities on a voluntary basis, the ACQF Qualifications Platform will contain information on other qualifications and standards, such as i) international qualifications and ii) common continental qualifications profiles related with continental integration objectives (e.g.: AfCFTA). For more information: refer to ACQF Guideline 6.

2.1.2 Referencing connects community of AU member States

The policy documents and strategic initiatives of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) have called for integration and recognition of education outcomes. This intention is strengthened in the objectives of the ACQF which are:

- To ensure comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications and support to people's lifelong learning,
- To facilitate recognition of learning outcomes in different contexts, diplomas and certificates, and support mobility (learners, workers, businesses),
- To work in cooperation and complementarity with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs) and support the creation of an African education and qualifications space, and
- To promote cooperation, referencing between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa and worldwide.

As an overarching and referencing qualifications framework for the African continent, the ACQF aims at connecting the national (and regional) qualifications frameworks of the AU community. This core function is based on the process of referencing NQFs or systems to the ACQF, following agreed referencing criteria and procedures, and peer review by the member countries.

Referencing to ACQF is a way of creating a common zone of trusted qualifications by bringing together the African Union member states and key stakeholders to compare qualifications frameworks/ systems and disseminate updated information on qualifications and the referenced NQFs. Integration is further strengthened through the collaborative element of participating in the referencing process to enhance trust, transparency, recognition of learning outcomes and to support mobility. National players can facilitate a self-directed review by benchmarking their own NQFs against the referencing criteria thus contributing to the growth and improvement process of their NQF/ NQS.

2.1.3 Strengthened learning outcomes approaches

The ACQF level descriptors are written as a hierarchy of learning complexity, based on learning outcomes. In order to ease the comparison between national qualifications systems and the ACQF, countries engaging in referencing are encouraged to use learning outcomes approaches to describe their qualifications and related standards. In this way the referencing process itself will promote the strengthening of learning outcomes approaches across the continent.

2.1.4 Collaboration, transparency and deeper understanding of NQF/NQS

Referencing is, however, much more than a technical exercise of linking qualifications levels. It is also a social, collaborative process that is based on nationally agreed objectives and contributing to improvement of the NQF / NQS. It involves an inter-stakeholder group at national level, led by a relevant body that ensures the quality and reliability of the referencing process. This inter-stakeholder group is the interface between the national process and the ACQF Governance Structure. Confidence and trust in the ACQF referencing process requires that the relevant stakeholders work together to consult, review and agree on the level-to-level linkages between the national qualification levels and the levels of the ACQF.

Engagement in the structured referencing process is beneficial as it will bring together key stakeholders in a collaborative process to promote mutual learning, share good practice and build trust. The process will also support member countries to develop, consolidate or review their NQFs, as engagement in the process offers an opportunity for critical reflection and may identify areas for further development of the RQF/NQF/NQS.

A key benefit of referencing is that it allows stakeholders to develop a deeper understanding of NQFs/ NQSS referenced to the ACQF. The comparable and accessible information generated through referencing enhances trust, transparency and comparability of qualifications and NQFs/NQS on the continent. It also strengthens integration by offering some agreement on a common language and concepts regarding qualifications and qualifications frameworks across diverse NQFs/ NQS on the continent. In this context, transparency is understanding similarities and differences between frameworks and systems of different countries.

2.1.5 Referencing facilitates recognition of qualifications

Referencing to ACQF and the resulting reports and comparable information on NQFs and qualifications contributes to facilitate recognition of qualifications between countries. By referencing national qualifications levels to a single continental qualifications framework (the reference point or translation device), the community of countries creates a transparent relationship and correspondence between levels of different NQFs / NQS.

But the ACQF is not an instrument equipped to carry out recognition of qualifications, which is a policy domain under the responsibility of each country. To ascertain the indispensable coherence with existing international Conventions, the ACQF acknowledges and works in complementarity with other relevant

policies and conventions related to recognition of qualifications, such as the UNESCO's Addis Recognition Convention (entered into force on 15/12/2019)² and the UNESCO's Global Recognition Convention³ (not yet entered into force as of May 2022), and it is not intended to interfere or replace national recognition legislation and mechanisms.

The ACQF is a framework of NQFs/ qualifications levels, however national qualifications are not to be registered on the ACQF because they are registered in their own respective NQFs and implemented in accordance with national legislation and relevant conventions in their countries.

Information sharing and the robustness of the referencing documentation are major contributors to transparent and efficient recognition practices. Referencing facilitates recognition in different ways:

- Information-sharing via a common source (ACQF Qualifications Platform / database) on qualifications of NQFs and systems referenced to the ACQF.
- Comparable and coherent information on the NQFs / NQS of all involved countries.
- Involvement of national recognition bodies in the referencing process and in the validation of national referencing reports.

National referencing reports are valuable and relevant for credential evaluators and entities involved in, and in charge of, recognition of qualifications. By bringing referencing reports into the public space, the ACQF contributes to easier dissemination of credible information for learners, awarding bodies, education and training institutions, and recognition bodies.

2.1.6 Post-referencing display of ACQF levels on qualifications documents and ACQF Qualifications Platform

The outcome of the ACQF referencing process includes enhanced trust and mutual understanding between countries and their qualifications frameworks and systems.

After successful referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the NQF or system (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and / or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities may contain a clear reference, by way of NQF or systems, to the appropriate ACQF level. This display of the relevant ACQF levels on qualifications documents is a major benefit of the ACQF referencing. The referencing outcomes and implications, in particular the labelling/ acknowledgement of ACQF levels on qualifications documents will support mobility for lifelong learning by easing recognition of qualifications as well as the facilitation of learner and worker mobility inside and outside the continent.

2.1.7 Information-sharing on qualifications

The ACQF supports information-sharing on NQFs in Africa to facilitate recognition and portability of qualifications.

² UNESCO, 2014. Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States 2014. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49282&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html#STATE_PARTIES

³ UNESCO, 2020. Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373602.locale=en>

The ACQF is a framework of NQFs, but national qualifications are not to be registered on the ACQF because they are registered in their own respective NQFs and their integrity maintained in accordance with national legislation. To facilitate access to open, comparable and reliable information on qualifications of African countries for all users, the planned digital ACQF Qualifications Platform will enable publication of information on national qualifications by the relevant institutions, and support the use of common minimum fields of data for electronic publication of such information.

Also, the ACQF contributes to innovation in the domain of qualifications and credentials and its main instruments for information-sharing are the website and the Qualifications Platform / database. The database development will be supported by adequate and transparent procedures and be conceived to cater to the diversity of qualifications systems and ongoing rapid developments related with new types of qualifications and credentials. AU MS are encouraged to use the ACQF Qualifications Platform/ database to publish information on their NQF and their national qualifications.

2.1.8 Internationalisation and referencing to other RQFs

Referencing will contribute to internationalisation of qualifications from African NQFs/ NQs and also strengthen international co-operation with other continents and regions. The ACQF is part of a global community of 17 RQF initiatives (European Training Foundation, 2021a):

1. African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)
2. Arab Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (AQF; ANQAHE model)
3. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf)
4. CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF)
5. Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement supérieur (CAMES)
6. ECOWAS Regional Qualifications Framework of West Africa
7. East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)
8. European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
9. Gulf Qualifications Framework (GQF)
10. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa
11. Marco de Cualificaciones Alianza del Pacifico (Pacific Alliance) (MCAP)
12. Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación superior centroamericana (MCECSA)
13. Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards/ Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF)
14. Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)
15. Southern African Development Community (SADC) Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)
16. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Qualifications Framework
17. Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (TQF VUSSC)

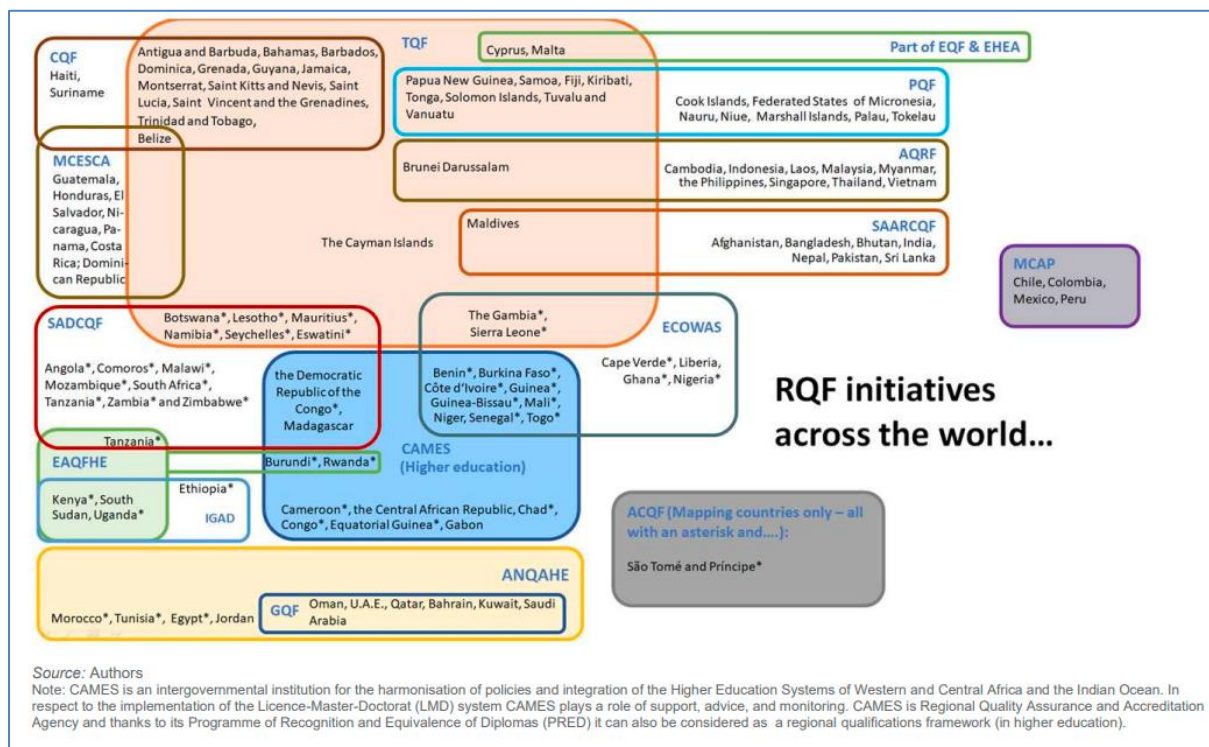


Figure 1: RQF initiatives around the world (excluding EQF and EHEA)

Source: ETF, 2021a, p.44

Figure 1 shows where the ACQF mapping countries fit into the regional initiatives, with many African countries belonging to more than one RQF. As the ACQF develops and progresses, it can be referenced to other RQFs. This will enhance international collaboration initiatives and the comparability of the ACQF with other parts of the world, and eventually the global transparency of qualifications.

2.2 Examples of RQFs that implement referencing

The ACQF can, to its advantage, draw upon established knowledge on the referencing processes undertaken in three RQFs (ACQF, 2021a to j, ETF, 2021a and b) namely:

- European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) and
- Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR)

As in the case of the ACQF, the three RQFs are also described as regional common reference frameworks that function as a translation device to enable comparisons of qualifications across their member countries. These RQFs relate to the ACQF as they also include all types and levels of qualifications (incorporating formal, non-formal and informal learning), with the wider objective of promoting lifelong learning and facilitating mobility of learners and workers. As is the case of the ACQF, these RQFs encourage learning outcomes approaches, support and enhance Member States' NQFs/ NQSS, while serving as a mechanism for comparison, transparency and quality of qualifications.

The SADCQF and the AQR adapted their alignment and referencing criteria respectively using the EQF referencing criteria as a basis.

EQF: Referencing has its origins in Europe where it was developed as a methodology to establish a correlation between the EQF and qualifications levels in Europe. The EQF was set up in 2008 and revised in 2017. In March 2009, the EQF Advisory Group adopted ten referencing criteria and procedures for the

referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF. Europe has a similar process where countries self-certify to the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). Most countries undertake both the EQF referencing and self-certification at the same time, and publish one single report. Europe has made the most advancements in referencing. By November 2021, 38 EQF countries had referenced to the EQF, 33 (out of 38) countries use EQF levels in qualifications and Europass supplements and 23 countries in qualifications databases. The actual reports on the referencing of NQFs to EQF can be accessed at [Europass / EQF](#).

The main achievements of the EQF for transparency of qualifications and mutual trust between NQFs, as of February 2022 can be summarized as follows:

- EQF acted as a catalyst to develop NQFs. If in 2008 only three EQF countries had NQFs, 37 out of 38 involved countries have adopted and are implementing NQFs.
- The large majority of EQF countries have developed and launched digital qualifications databases, accessible online.
- 36 (out of 38) involved countries have completed the process of referencing to EQF, and five countries have presented a renewed updated referencing report.
- 33 (out of 38) countries are using EQF levels on their qualifications documents (certificates, diplomas, supplements) and 23 are using EQF levels on their national qualifications databases.
- Other transparency tools of the EQF include the [portal of referencing reports](#) (in which 31 reports are published), and the [digital tool to compare NQFs](#) across Europe (in which 29 NQF are included).
- More recent developments include the connection of national qualifications databases and registers with the EQF (Europass) Qualifications database register. A growing number of countries are linking their databases through this mechanism.

SADCQF: The SADCQF, for purposes of accelerating the adoption of mutual standards and the development of NQFs in SADC used the word “alignment” instead of referencing to describe its process. The SADCQF was approved by relevant ministers in 2011 but a number of constraints delayed implementation. The process was revived in 2016 and the SADCQF was technically launched in 2017. The SADC Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA) is responsible for implementing the SADCQF and adopted ten alignment criteria in September 2016 to accelerate the alignment process. The ten SADCQF alignment criteria are similar to the referencing criteria used in the EQF. At the time of writing this report, two SADCQF countries (South Africa and Seychelles) had completed the alignment process with the SADCQF, while one country had reached the final stage of the process (Mauritius).

AQRF: The AQRF was fully endorsed in 2015 and the eleven AQRF referencing guidelines were adopted in 2016 and revised in 2020. The AQRF and the referencing process is implemented through the AQRF Committee established in 2017 for this purpose. The AQRF referencing criteria are also based on the EQF referencing criteria with some differentiation. By the time of writing this report four AQRF countries had completed their referencing reports: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand.

2.3 Referencing: clarifying what it is not

The intention of referencing is often misunderstood. While it is important to communicate the purpose and benefit of referencing, it is also important to communicate what it is not. Importantly, referencing:

- does not mean automatic recognition of qualifications and
- does not harmonise or standardise or replace NQFs/ NQSSs.

Referencing is a demanding process, requiring coordination between the national and regional authorities, technical expertise to carry out the analysis and draft the conclusions based on the referencing criteria,

and collaboration of the relevant national stakeholders. Some challenges and possible solutions are summarised in table 3.

Table 3: Challenges to referencing

Challenges to referencing	
Challenge	Possible solutions
There are typically too many referencing criteria, with many being procedural and related to governance of the process	This guideline proposes that the governance components be separated from the referencing criteria that actually deals with the relationship/ interplay between the NQF/ NQS and the ACQF
The referencing processes may span many years due to delays in national decision-making processes	The National ACQF Referencing Committee (team or task force) may propose ways to minimise delays in decision-making
It may be difficult to link NQFs (with actual qualifications) to a meta-framework RQF like the ACQF that has no qualifications	A methodology, for linking, is proposed to bring some consistency to the process. Only the QF levels will be used
Learning outcomes approaches may not be adopted or well developed, or well understood	The referencing process itself will strengthen learning outcomes approaches
Countries may not be able to meet all the referencing criteria fully	A phased referencing process is proposed for these countries
Some countries only have sectoral QFs and only these may have QF levels. How will referencing be undertaken here?	A partial/ sectoral referencing is proposed for these countries
Countries may not fully meet the requirements of all the referencing criteria, but are committed to undertake the preparation to referencing. How will they be encouraged?	The national referencing report will explicitly indicate the main gaps and challenges of the NQF/ NQS by referencing criterion. The ACQF Governance Structure will discuss and agree a roadmap for improvements with each AUMS, for a period of up to 3 years. A revised report with evidence on the improvements and responses to ACQF remarks will be submitted and discussed for validation. This process motivates the countries to plan and undertake the necessary improvements.

3 Referencing model for the ACQF

This section elaborates a set of processes to support the African Union Member States (AUMS) to initiate, undertake and report on the outcomes of its referencing namely:

- Process of establishing ACQF referencing criteria
- Referencing criteria, governance procedures and follow-up
- Report structure, referencing steps and digitalised process
- Referencing capacity and arrangements

3.1 Process of establishing ACQF referencing criteria

To ensure that the ACQF “linking” process is consistent, coherent and transparent, referencing criteria are proposed. ETF (2021b) reports that some countries that have engaged in referencing have suggested that consideration be given to reducing the referencing criteria to focus on building trust and transparency, and separating these criteria (for comparison of key features of the NQF and ACQF) from procedural components.

In developing the ACQF referencing criteria, the referencing approaches of the most operational RQFs (AQRf, EQF and SADCQF) were analysed and lessons considered, and the details of this exercise are available and will be annexed for a later comprehensive version of this guideline. Common key referencing criteria across RQFs are essential for ensuring comparison of the ACQF with other RQFs, in view of future cooperation and comparison between RQFs.

The ACQF approach compared the existing referencing criteria and methods to establish a set of streamlined ACQF referencing criteria. The ACQF referencing model focuses on the four criteria providing for comparison of key features of NQF/ NQS and ACQF. These features are: levels and level descriptors; application of the learning outcomes approach; transparency of the procedures applied for inclusion of qualifications in NQFs; quality assurance.

Once the referencing criteria have been validated by the ACQF Governance Structure, all the countries will apply the same set of criteria and procedures. AU MS typically work together, within their national stakeholder groupings to provide a national response to each of the referencing criteria.

3.2 ACQF referencing criteria and governance procedures

There are four referencing criteria and one governance procedures component.

Proposed referencing criteria

1	There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the ACQF.
2	The national qualifications frameworks or systems are based on learning outcomes principles and related to arrangements for recognition of prior learning (including non-formal and informal) and, where appropriate, to credit systems.
3	There are transparent processes and procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the NQS and information on qualifications is accessible, trustworthy and verifiable in a national register(s) of qualifications.
4	The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF). ACQF Guideline 5 elaborates the QA principles of ACQF

Governance procedures and follow-up

- Responsibilities and/or legal competence of relevant national bodies involved in the ACQF referencing process are determined and published by the relevant competent authorities.
- The relevant national QA bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report.
- People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in certain aspects and steps of the referencing process. Their role is advisory and supports transparency, improvement and credibility. The national referencing committee informs the ACQF Governance Structure on the involved international experts.
- Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria.
- The referencing outcome is published by the participating country and the ACQF network upon its final validation by ACQF Governance Structure, on the dedicated ACQF website.
- Following the completion of referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g.: certificates, diplomas, supplements) and qualifications registers issued by the competent national authorities will contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level, based on national legislation and procedures.

3.2.1 Use of the referencing criteria

The national report of referencing to ACQF provides the argumentation and evidence on the degree to which the agreed referencing criteria are met.

For a focused elaboration, it is recommended that the country report presents this argumentation criterion by criterion, and specifies the used conceptual and methodological underpinnings, the main conclusions, and relevant evidence. Each criterion addresses a different dimension and requires a dedicated section in the report. However, it is also important to consider the linkages between the key referencing criteria, especially between quality assurance, the use of learning outcomes and transparency in the inclusion and classification of qualifications in the NQF.

Understanding the referencing criteria is therefore an essential premise for effective referencing processes. The workflow of ACQF referencing comprises preparatory steps that contribute to self-assess the country's readiness to engage with the process and to raise awareness and train the relevant stakeholders and contributors to the process and write-up of the referencing report.

3.2.2 ACQF Referencing Criterion 1

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the ACQF.

The purpose of this referencing criterion is to demonstrate the compatibility and define the link between each level of the NQF, or placement of qualifications in the NQS, and the ACQF level descriptors.

The ACQF guidelines that will provide complementary methodological support include Guideline 1: Learning outcomes and Guideline 2: Level descriptors.

The ACQF level descriptors are written as a hierarchy of learning and are formulated as learning outcomes. This feature allows the comparison and the demonstration of correspondence between levels of the NQF (or NQS) and the levels of the ACQF. When a number of countries complete this process of referencing of national qualifications levels to the ACQF levels following the agreed rules, the comparison of qualification levels between the involved countries (NQFs) becomes clear (transparent) and well-grounded (reliable).

To meet this criterion the country's referencing group analyses and compares the level descriptors of the NQF and those of the ACQF, showing the similarities and differences in terms of:

- Scope of the frameworks
- Levels' structure
- Domains of learning underpinning the level descriptors
- The level descriptors – semantic comparison, purpose, vertical and horizontal logic

The response to this referencing criterion typically encompasses 1) National qualifications levels; 2) Compatibility and link between the level descriptors of the ACQF and the NQF.

A perfect fit between the national and ACQF descriptors is not expected as they serve distinctly different purposes. National level descriptors serve a national context and will be more detailed than those of the ACQF, whereas the ACQF descriptors will be broader and more general.

There will be no national qualifications directly linked / registered to the ACQF, as a result of referencing, since the comparison is between levels (NQF and ACQF). National qualifications are pegged / registered to the national framework or system.

Meeting criterion 1 is a major output of the referencing process, therefore the used approach must be robust and clear in explaining the relationship between the NQF/ NQS and the ACQF levels. The method or

procedure for linking levels must be transparent, consistently applied and described. Most importantly there should be good understanding of the NQF and ACQF levels and descriptors.

3.2.3 ACQF Referencing Criterion 2

The national qualifications frameworks or systems are based on learning outcomes principles and related to arrangements for recognition of prior learning (including non-formal and informal) and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

The purpose of this referencing criterion is to provide insight into the learning outcomes approach used in the NQF/NQS and its links with non-formal and informal learning and credit systems.

The response to this referencing criterion will increase the transparency and comparability of qualifications across the involved countries. This response typically encompasses: 1) Learning outcomes approach and status of application in the different sub-sectors of education and training (primary, secondary general and vocational, post-secondary, tertiary, continuing training, employment training); 2) Importance for expansion and credibility of Recognition of prior learning (RPL); 3) Credit accumulation and transfer.

The relevant complementary methodological orientation is given in the Guideline 1- Learning outcomes approach and Guideline 4- Validation of learning

The ACQF is a meta-qualifications framework for lifelong learning that embraces all forms of learning. Referencing to the ACQF supports the lifelong learning objective and encourages quality-assured learning outcomes approaches, recognition of non-formal and informal learning and development of credit accumulation and transfer systems. The ACQF level descriptors are written as a hierarchy of learning complexity, based on learning outcomes and AU MS are encouraged to use learning outcomes approaches to describe their qualifications. This shift eases the comparison between national and the ACQF descriptors. In this way the referencing process itself will promote the strengthening of learning outcomes approaches across the continent.

A learning outcomes approach is one which signals a move from input and duration of learning to output and actual knowledge, skills and competences acquired through the learning process. As such, this approach supports RPL and CAT. The use of learning outcomes contributes to greater transparency and comparability of qualifications of different national systems.

Assessed learning outcomes usually lead to a qualification (full or part), which signals that an individual has achieved the relevant learning outcomes according to standards. These learning outcomes may be obtained through formal, non-formal or informal learning modalities and pathways. The learning outcomes information and links with RPL should therefore be transparent and accessible.

The learning outcomes principles are implemented differently in different countries and in different contexts e.g. level descriptors, qualifications, professional standards, assessment standards, curricula, etc.

3.2.4 ACQF Referencing Criterion 3

There are transparent processes and procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the NQS and information on qualifications is accessible, trustworthy and verifiable in a national register(s) of qualifications.

The purpose of this referencing criterion is to explain how the qualifications are levelled and classified in the NQF, or where there is no NQF, how these qualifications are described and placed in the NQS. It also relates to the accessibility of the qualifications' information in a publicly open, trustworthy, verifiable national register of qualifications.

It is important that the level of a qualification is attributed in a transparent way, which key stakeholders can understand and trust. The response to this criterion is an additional and substantive contribution to transparency and mutual trust expected from robust referencing processes.

The responses may include: 1) Scope of the NQF/ NQS: which qualifications and levels are included; 2) Qualifications development and approval process and relationship with NQF/ NQS decision-making on levels / classification; 3) Verifiable, national register(s) of qualifications.

Complementary orientation is given in Guideline 2 - Level descriptors; Guideline 6 - Registration of qualifications and Guideline 9 - Innovation and technology in NQF/ NQS and ACQF.

It is important that stakeholders trust the qualifications levels. The information in this criterion will facilitate a better understanding of the quality assurance of the “levelling” process in the member country. This offers an opportunity for the country to showcase the NQF levels/ NQS qualifications levels of all the key qualifications (or types), and the processes that lead to decisions on classification in the NQF/ NQS.

The classification of qualifications in an NQF level adds to the currency of the NQF and relevant NQF level for countries. The referencing process and its outcome will highlight the currency of the NQF at ACQF level. Critical to the referencing process, then, is the way a qualification is placed in NQF/ NQS levels.

Qualifications signal trust and indicate the successful outcome of assessment and certification, made visible through formal qualifications documents. It stands to reason that qualifications have an important role in mobility of learners and workers as the qualification may grant access to further learning, work opportunities, and/or may grant access to certain professions. One of the purposes of a qualification is to signal to education and training authorities and employers what learning outcomes have been achieved by the qualification holder (what the holder knows and is able to do). Qualifications based on learning outcomes are therefore pivotal to personal and social achievement. Moreover, learning outcomes-based qualifications contribute to social inclusion and equity by facilitating access of people with limited formal schooling to recognition of their learning outcomes gained in professional and work experiences, volunteering and other social activities, with the possibility to acquire part of full qualifications.

It would defeat the mobility purpose if the information on qualifications cannot be verified in accessible, trustworthy, national platform(s) (preferably online). This description of the central qualifications information systems would also align with some of the counter-fraud protocols of the Addis Convention (UNESCO, 2014).

Many countries have national registers/ catalogues/ databases of their quality assured qualifications. These registers store information, including information on officially recognised qualifications (certificates, degrees, diplomas), qualifications standards, titles, credits, NQF levels and more. These registers need to be available and accessible to facilitate mobility of learners and workers, and organisations seeking information should be able to access and verify the information. It is critically important that the information be credible and trustworthy.

3.2.5 ACQF Referencing Criterion 4

The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF). ACQF Guideline 5 elaborates the QA principles of ACQF.

The purpose of this referencing criterion is to establish trust in the QA of the qualifications of ACQF Member countries, and also to establish a link between the QA of members and the QA instruments available on the continent. The relevant ACQF guideline is Guideline 5: Quality assurance.

To clarify the interplay between quality assurance and referencing, the following principles are recommended:

Quality assurance – a criterion for ACQF referencing: the referencing to the ACQF of national qualifications frameworks or systems demonstrates the degree to which quality assurance of national qualifications:

- addresses the qualifications quality chain, from design of standards underpinning qualifications to learning, assessment, and certification;
- addresses the application of the learning outcomes approach;
- includes feedback instruments and processes supporting continuous quality improvement;
- addresses internal and external quality assurance, and the regular review of quality assurance agencies;
- is based on measurable objectives, standards, and guidelines for quality assurance;
- is supported by resources; and
- provides transparent information-sharing on results of evaluation.
- takes account of African Union policy orientations such as African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (for higher education), to which both internal and external quality assurance adhere.

One objective of the ACQF is to foster trust in the quality of qualifications of the Member States. The referencing report needs to describe and explain the key national QA systems that operate in the country. Given that there may be many QA systems operating in one country, the referencing process is an opportunity to bring coherence to the system. It also presents an opportunity to present the country's response to the quality assurance of the learning outcomes approach used in the country. A further strengthening of the country's QA can be demonstrated in its compatibility with any overarching QA principles/ ACQF QA guidelines.

3.2.6 Governance procedures and follow-up

The governance procedure is composed of six items:

- Responsibilities and/or legal competence of relevant national bodies involved in the ACQF referencing process are determined and published by the relevant competent authorities.
- The relevant national QA bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report.
- People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in certain aspects and steps of the referencing process. Their role is advisory and supports transparency, improvement and credibility. The national referencing committee informs the ACQF Governance Structure on the involved international experts.
- Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria.
- The referencing outcome is published by the participating country and the ACQF network upon its final validation by ACQF Governance Structure, on the dedicated ACQF website.
- Following the completion of referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g.: certificates, diplomas, supplements) and qualifications registers issued by the competent national authorities will contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level, based on national legislation and procedures.

The purpose of these procedures is to demonstrate the participation, transparency, mutual learning, support and quality of the referencing process.

The relevant ACQF guidelines for further information are Guideline 8 - Communication and Guideline 10 - Qualifications and qualifications systems – the systemic view.

It is important to establish clearly the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the referencing process, as this can contribute to broaden and improve stakeholder participation in the NQF dialogue at country level. Critical to the referencing process in each country is the establishment of a National Referencing Task Team or Committee. Annex 4.3 includes draft Terms of Reference (ToRs) that may be used to guide this process. This Task Team is a multi-stakeholder referencing group duly mandated to coordinate, draft, consult, quality assure the process, report to the ACQF Governance Structure and present the referencing outcomes and report.

To ensure consistency and transparency in the process, the involved African Union member states are invited to address each of the referencing criteria from a national perspective and to report the national position in a referencing report. However, it is not expected that all member states will be able to meet all the referencing criteria immediately. The way that referencing is used / applied in the ACQF context is a matter of organisation, phasing, follow-up, and dialogue, and the process will allow for gradual improvement. It also ensures the robustness of the process and peer review can contribute to a quality, consulted outcome.

Once the ACQF Governance Structure is satisfied that the referencing criteria have been met, and they endorse the referencing (formal linking) of the NQF/ NQS levels to the ACQF, the referencing process is considered to be complete. After endorsement by the ACQF Governance Structure:

- the report will be finalised and uploaded onto the ACQF website
- the adequate post-referencing steps will be undertaken, as defined in the report.

Following endorsement of referencing, an important aspect is to make visible the benefit of referencing to the ACQF, and ensure that qualifications are associated with an ACQF level. Because of the diversity of qualifications systems, MS may develop plans within their institutions, to see how best to show the ACQF level on the qualifications awards. Different sectors in each member country may have a different approach and may require changes to legislation on qualifications awards. Qualifications are constantly evolving and national qualifications frameworks/ systems change over time and therefore referencing to the ACQF should be reviewed and updated, as and when relevant. Annex 4.4 provides some guidance on the response to this Referencing Criterion.

3.3 Referencing report

Member States are invited to address each of the referencing criteria from a national perspective and to report the national position. The referencing outcome is consolidated in a validated single national referencing report which, according to the agreed set of referencing criteria, represents a statement of the comparable relationship between the NQF/ NQS and the ACQF. This referencing report is shared with members of the ACQF Governance Structure for comments and remarks, and may require reviews and amendments before endorsement at the ACQF governance level.

3.3.1 Minimum elements of the referencing report

The structure of the referencing report may be defined by the country's referencing team. However, there are a few minimum elements:

- Description of the whole education and training system, including adult learning, literacy and basic skills, continuing training; pathways for learners; quality assurance; main institutions and stakeholders and their roles in the system; main legislative acts, regulatory texts.
- The NQF: goals, principles, legal and regulatory acts, levels and descriptors, governance, registers / databases of qualifications. Status of implementation. Main challenges and plans for further development.
- Brief overview of the referencing process, stakeholders' involvement, endorsement of the report by the national competence bodies, and follow-up measures.
- The fundamental component of the report: a chapter dedicated to demonstrate how the NQF / NQS meets the ACQF referencing criteria. Each referencing criterion is addressed separately. To avoid duplication and ensure coherence, the analysis in this chapter should build (refer to) on the chapters describing the education and training system and the NQF. The use of examples and references to sources contributes to the robustness and credibility of the argumentation in this chapter, and is strongly recommended.
- Sources: relevant legislative-regulatory framework, guidelines and standards, important databases / registers.

To ensure that the report is easy to read and understand, the report should be structured in a comprehensive, and integrated way, make use of cross-referencing between chapters, use examples, and have an attractive layout. The readability of the report is an important requirement, given the international nature of its target readers / users.

3.4 Referencing workflow: indicative overview

In the ACQF, referencing is important as a process of transparency and mutual learning. Referencing is a process that can last up to approximately 1-1,5 years depending on the maturity of the NQF, existing national capacity and efficiency of the organisation.

The ACQF referencing process will be supported by a digital referencing tool. Many parts of the process can be done via virtual meetings and using the ACQF digital referencing tool. Five steps are proposed (Figure 2).

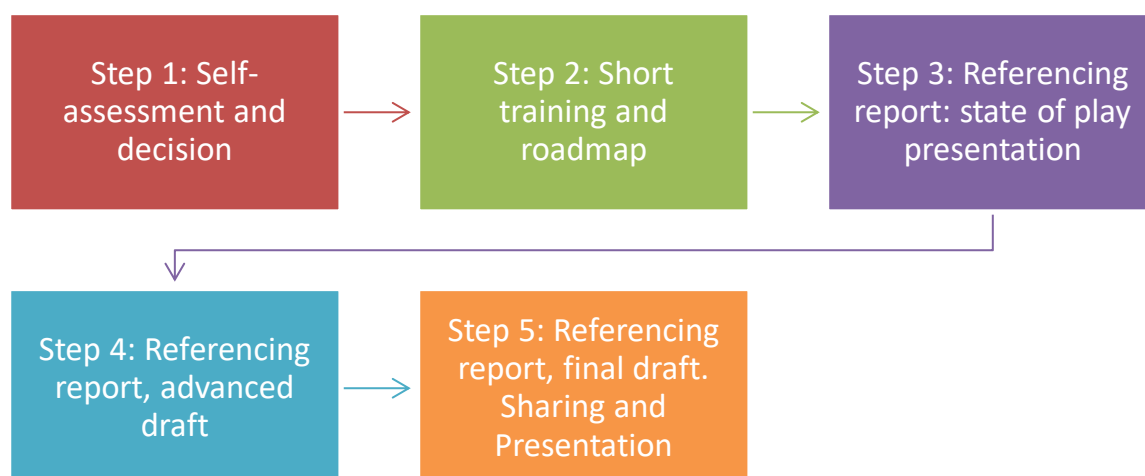


Figure 2: Indicative five-step referencing process - recommendation

Step 1: Self –assessment and decision to start process

The country signals its interest by requesting access to the digitalised referencing tool and conducts a self-assessment to gauge how close it is to meeting the referencing criteria. The country makes a decision to start the process and informs the ACQF governance structure.

Step 2: Roadmap Plan and short training

A short virtual training on ACQF referencing and Introduction to a Referencing Intranet will be provided to the country Referencing Team.

- A plan for the referencing process is elaborated, with support of the ACQF implementation unit if needed, and agreed by all involved national bodies and stakeholders including the type of referencing approach: (full or phased referencing); detailed information on the process and milestones, the number of months required to complete the process/ phases, and details of a focal point person(s) at country level for all information and communication related with the referencing process.
- Training – delivered by ACQF experts’ team: At least 1 day, according to a flexible schedule depending on the country team availability and readiness
- Training materials: Guideline 3 and related training module, templates and examples, video recording
- Practical exercises on the referencing criteria, adjusted to the country / NQF context
- Use of the digital referencing tool to support and ease the process

Step 3: Referencing report Part 1- State of play presentation via remote meeting to ACQF Governing structure and Q&A

The country makes a state-of-play initial presentation to the ACQF governance structure including:

- Main features of the NQF / NQS and the stage of implementation / operationalisation
- Main issues identified
- Key Information sources, important evidence
- Revised roadmap/ milestones of the referencing process
- Any needs in technical support or other support to the national referencing team
- Inputs into the quality/ reliability of the referencing process and final report
- Questions and answers session

This session is very useful: to provide initial information to both the referencing country and the ACQF governance structure, share views, organise complementary information or support to the process, and start the dialogue.

Step 4: Referencing report - advanced draft

Capacity: indicative orientation

- 2 drafters + 1 co-ordinator
- Up to 5 referencing team members (from all education and training sub-sectors) for consultation and discussion
- 1-2 wider meetings / workshops with stakeholders
- External expert for review and opinion

The country sends brief updates to the ACQF governance structure, via the digital platform, building on the initial position. The national referencing team will manage the drafting process, decide on version control and coordination of roles and responsibilities.

Step 5: Referencing report - final

- Final national consultation meeting (workshop, conference), validation by key institutions.
- Final report submitted to ACQF Governing structure.
- Presentation via remote meeting to ACQF Governing structure.
- Upon validation and acceptance - publication of report.

Capacity: 1 coordinator and 1 drafter

In case of important comments and requests for clarification by the ACQF governing structure, the comments are addressed and the report is amended. If needed, additional time is given for corrective actions, for introduction of additional evidence collected, or plan of action on main problem points.

The country presents the amended report addressing the comments.

After successful referencing, the country undertakes any relevant post-referencing, such as publication on ACQF website for dissemination, and use of ACQF levels on newly issued national qualifications documents (diplomas, certificates, supplements) and on qualifications databases / registers.

3.5 ACQF referencing capacity and arrangements

⇒ **Referencing contributes to continuous improvement of the NQF / NQS and to mutual understanding between countries.**

The referencing process will be open to all countries that have operational NQFs or whose NQFs are at an advanced stage of development/ approved. However, the referencing process should not be seen as a competitive process or a ranking between countries. Referencing is a process of transparency and mutual learning and is conceived, structured, and conducted as a gradual process that can take longer in certain countries than in others. Where countries are unable to meet all the referencing criteria, they can engage in a phased referencing.

⇒ **Support to countries to plan and carry out efficient and streamlined referencing processes**

The ACQF governance structure and Support Team will have the capacity to: encourage countries to initiate referencing, provide technical and methodological support to countries to support the ACQF and NQFs, advance referencing processes and endorse and publish referencing reports.

Specific country projects can be supported by ACQF to assist national referencing teams in organising efficient, streamlined and good quality referencing processes.

Referencing will be encouraged and advanced through regular referencing briefs from the ACQF governance structure, including full use of various platforms and communication methods including: ACQF Website; Digital tool to support the referencing process, ensure good documentation and ease the coordination and monitoring process; Dissemination of ACQF Guidelines and training modules; Established principles, templates and digital tools; Training sessions (mostly virtual) in relevant languages; Peer-sharing and Coaching, online communication and e-meetings.

The needed robustness of referencing should not be the result of overly complex and time-consuming activities, but of dialogue, peer review, analysis, franc self-assessment, and an evidence-based report. The country is the major beneficiary.

The implementation of the ACQF will require a programme to prepare various stakeholders to implement the ACQF at national, regional and continental levels. The sustainability of the referencing component of the ACQF should be built into its implementation plan. Communication about the potential benefits and capacity (political, human, technical, financial) to support the ACQF and NQFs and related operations should be embedded within the capacity development plan and programmes. Support for referencing will be enhanced through a comprehensive training and capacity development programme for the ACQF Implementation Unit (which will include all involved staff).

ACQF referencing will be coordinated, managed and quality assured by the ACQF governance structure, acting in full respect for the following principles:

- The ACQF is a public policy and instrument
- The ACQF is holistic, integral and unified
- Referencing between NQFs and the ACQF is based on:
 - trust and integrity of the process,
 - coordination, support and continuous improvement of the process and outcomes
 - establishing and maintaining the zone of trust by providing transparency to the process

Support will be provided through dissemination of a full set of support materials available on the ACQF website <https://acqf.africa/>

The referencing criteria remains a living working document that can be further refined as the AU MS gain further experience and strengthen their understanding of the process.

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5 Annexes

Annex 5.1: Glossary/ concepts

The terms proposed by this Referencing guideline (indicated by the words *NEW Referencing guideline*) are proposals only and are subject to change pending endorsement and approval. All the other terms in this glossary, unless otherwise stated, can be found in Thematic Brief 1. Concepts and definitions on qualifications and qualifications frameworks available on the ACQF website:

<https://acqf.africa/capacity-development-programme/thematic-briefs/acqf-thematic-brief-1-concepts-and-definitions>

African Continental Qualifications Framework: The ACQF is a policy initiative of the African Union and its development process is underway (2019-2022). The current vision for the ACQF is: to enhance comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications from all sub-sectors and levels of education and training; facilitate recognition of diplomas and certificates; work in cooperation and complementarity with national and regional qualifications frameworks; promote cooperation and alignment between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa and worldwide.

ACQF Governance structure: At the continental level, the ACQF Governance structure is participative and transparent, and has an oversight responsibility for the referencing process. It has the mandate and technical capacity to provide guidance and support to national referencing processes, to promote a participative and efficient model of referencing, to support information-sharing with all African Union countries, to endorse the completed countries' referencing reports, and ensure their publication on the ACQF website. **NEW Referencing guideline*

Competence: The proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development.

Credit means confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g. credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes.

Credit transfer means the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit in one context to have it valued and recognised in another context.

Education: The process by which societies deliberately transmit their accumulated information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies and behaviours across generations. It involves communication designed to bring about learning.

E-learning: E-learning is an umbrella term that refers to the use of any digital device for teaching and learning, especially for delivery or accessing of content.

Formal learning: Education or training provided in educational institutions, such as schools, universities, colleges, or off-the-job in a workplace, usually involving direction from a teacher, trainer or instructor. Also known as formal education and training

General education (primary and secondary education): See basic education.

Higher education: All programmes of study, or sets of courses of study, training, or training for research at the post-secondary level which are recognized by the relevant authorities of a State Party as belonging to its higher education system. *Source: Addis Convention*

- Tertiary education that is of a higher academic level than secondary education, usually requiring a minimum level of admission and successful completion of secondary education.

Informal learning: Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning in most cases is unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.

Knowledge: Knowledge is central to any discussion of learning and may be understood as the way in which individuals and societies apply meaning to experience. It can therefore be seen broadly as the information, understanding, skills, values and attitudes acquired through learning. As such, knowledge is linked inextricably to the cultural, social, environmental and institutional contexts in which it is created and reproduced.

Learning outcomes:

- Results of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do upon completion of a learning process. *Source: Addis Convention*
- Statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.

Level descriptor: 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.

Lifelong learning:

- Education through experience and formal or informal studies covering the entire span of one's life. *Source: Addis Convention*
- Ongoing learning, for personal growth and development, that takes place in all contexts in life – formally, non-formally and informally. It includes learning behaviours and obtaining knowledge; understanding; attitudes; values and competencies for personal growth, social and economic wellbeing, democratic citizenship, cultural identity and employability.

National Qualifications Framework:

- A policy and instrument for the 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 the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.
- An instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is 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 line of progression (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).

National Qualifications System: This includes all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, QA processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition

and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.

Non-formal learning: Planned learning activities, not explicitly designated as learning, towards the achievement of a qualification or part-qualification; often associated with learning that results in improved workplace practice

Prior learning: Learning and/ or experience that have already been acquired in different ways either formal or informal. *Source: Addis Convention*

Qualification:

- Means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards
- The formal result of an evaluation and validation process obtained when the learning results are achieved according to previously defined requirements.
- A registered national qualification consisting of a planned combination of learning outcomes which has a defined purpose or purposes, intended to provide qualifying learners with applied competence and a basis for further learning and which has been assessed in terms of exit level outcomes, registered on the NQF and certified and awarded by a recognised body.
- Planned combination of learning outcomes with a defined purpose or purposes, including defined, applied and demonstrated competence and a basis for further learning.

Qualifications Frameworks: Systems for classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality assured qualifications. *Source: Addis Convention*

Quality assurance:

- An ongoing process of evaluating and enhancing the quality of a higher education system, institutes or programs to assure stakeholders that acceptable standards are maintained and enhanced. *Source: Addis Convention*
- Processes and procedures for ensuring that qualifications, assessment and programme delivery meet certain standards

Recognition: A formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of a party of the value of a foreign education qualification or a validated training. *Source: Addis Convention*

Referencing to ACQF: A process to compare national qualifications frameworks/ qualifications levels with those of the overarching qualifications framework (ACQF). Through a structured referencing process, based on agreed and common criteria and procedures a national multi-stakeholder team defines and establishes the relationship/ link between the NQF/ NQS levels and quality assurance with those of the ACQF. The purpose of referencing to ACQF is to contribute to clarity and mutual trust between national qualifications frameworks and systems, to comparability of qualifications of different countries, to transparency and information-sharing on qualifications frameworks and systems. **NEW Referencing guideline*

Regional Qualifications Framework: A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a defined and agreed geographical location. A means of enabling one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for a qualification in one country to be compared to a qualification from another country.

Skills:

- A bundle of knowledge, attributes and capacities that can be learnt and that enable individuals to successfully and consistently perform an activity or task and can be built upon and extended through learning.
- Skills means the ability to apply knowledge and use know how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).
- **Emerging skills:** Abilities for which demand is increasing in existing or new occupations.
- **Green skills:**

- Green skills are conceptualised at different levels of complexity (generic, specific or highly specialised):
 - Generic green skills help develop awareness-raising or implementation of resource-efficient activities, ecocitizenship, etc.;
 - Specific green skills are required to implement standards and processes to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and to reduce energy, materials and water consumption;
 - Highly-specialised green skills are required to develop and implement green technologies such as renewable energies, sewage treatment or recycling.
- Major implications of greening for jobs, education, training and skills include:
 - need to develop environmentally friendly technologies, production processes, products, services, and business models across all sectors of the economy;
 - it changes the way traditional occupations are performed (and taught) and creates new tasks, processes and even new occupations;
 - it creates a demand for new skills and knowledge and the need to upskill and reskill large numbers of people;
 - need to increase environmental awareness in education and training curricula; requires close interaction between education and training systems and their environments to build skills ecosystems in which skills development goes hand in hand with economic, technological and social change.

Stakeholder: A person or organisation with an interest or concern in something. In vocational education and training, stakeholders include government, providers of training, industry, clients and the community.

Technical vocational education and training (TVET): TVET, as a part of lifelong learning, can take place at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels and includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development, which may lead to qualifications. TVET also includes a wide range of skills development opportunities attuned to national and local contexts. Learning to learn, the development of literacy and numeracy skills, transversal skills and citizenship skills are integral components of TVET.

Validation: Procedure by which a competent authority evaluates qualifications in accordance with norms and standards recognized nationally or internationally. *Source: Addis Convention*

Validation of non-formal and informal learning: means the process of confirmation by a competent authority that an individual has acquired learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

- identification through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual,
- documentation to make visible the individual's experiences,
- a formal assessment of those experiences and certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Also known as recognition of prior learning (RPL) - is the confirmation by a competent authority that the learning outcomes, that an individual has acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings, has been measured against a relevant standard.

Annex 5.2: Draft ToRs for a proposed National Referencing Task Team/ Committee

Critical to the referencing process in each country is the establishment of a multi-stakeholder referencing group duly mandated to coordinate, draft, consult, quality assure the process, report to the ACQF Governance Structure and present the report. In this report this group is referred to as the National Referencing Team or Committee. However, countries may call it any other designation that fits their context.

1. The National Referencing Team/ Committee:

- a. is the interface between the ACQF Governance Structure and the country's referencing process

- b. has expertise in the NQF/NQS and related policy positions of the country it represents and is responsible for the referencing process and report
- c. is an *ad hoc* national, multi-stakeholder referencing group operating in the Member State and convening for the sole purpose of ensuring that the AU Member State references to the ACQF, in line with the agreed referencing criteria.

2. Composition

Each country may determine:

- a. a lead agency in the Member State to lead and coordinate the process and
- b. agencies/ organisations that may be represented on its Referencing Team/, for example:
 - Government bodies: relevant ministries and agencies
 - Social partners (employers, trade unions)
 - NQF bodies (authorities, coordination units, councils)
 - Relevant Departments dealing with qualifications
 - Quality Assurance Agencies
 - Education and training institutions (different sub-sectors of education and training)
 - Professional bodies
 - Employers, industry (confederations, associations)
 - Research capacities in the relevant domains (e.g: education, training, qualifications, employment policies, labour market trends)
 - Student organisations
 - Civil society organisations
 - Any other authority/ agency/ group that may add value to the process

3. Appointments

- a. The work is undertaken on a voluntary basis.
- b. Each country determines the best way to appoint Task Team/ Committee members.

4. Responsibilities

The Task Team is responsible for coordinating, drafting, consulting, quality assuring the process, reporting to the ACQF Governance Structure and presenting the report. The Referencing process and report require efficient allocation of roles and tasks within the Referencing Team, notably:

- a coordinator who animates and manages the process, communicates with the national stakeholders and with the ACQF Governance Structure, and ensures the integrity and timeliness of the process;
- a core team / person in charge of drafting the report and coordinating its different versions;
- a person who coordinates and follows-up the inputs to the report from the relevant sub-sectors and structures related to the themes of the report

Annex 5.3: Summarised guide to self-assessment and response to the referencing criteria

ACQF Referencing Criterion	Self-assessment	Guide to compiling a response
<p>Criterion 1: There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the ACQF.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The country NQF is adopted and in application • The country LDs are understood and implemented • There is an agreed approach to present the link (ACQF and national) • There is a demonstrable link between the ACQF and national LDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scope of the NQF/ NQS • The contexts in which the LDs are applied/ used • The features and descriptions of the level descriptors • Comparison to show the link between the national levels and ACQF levels
<p>Criterion 2: The national qualifications frameworks or systems are based on learning outcomes principles and related to arrangements for recognition of prior learning (including non-formal and informal) and,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LO approach is agreed and applied and assessment of LOs apply to formal, non-formal and informal learning • RPL is agreed and applied • CAT is implemented • Supporting studies/ analyses are available 	<p>LOs: legislation, agreement, application, features, platforms, supporting tools</p> <p>RPL: legislation, application, assessment</p> <p>CAT: legislation and application</p>

where appropriate, to credit systems.		
<p>Criterion 3: There are transparent processes and procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the NQS and information on qualifications is accessible, trustworthy and verifiable in a national register(s) of qualifications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NQF provides for all levels and types of qualifications • Processes for classifying qualifications are clear, agreed, applied and quality assured • Processes and roles for managing qualifications information/ databases are clear and accessible • Databases are transparent • Supporting studies/ analyses are available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure and scope of the NQF • NQF decision making regarding classification (Legislation, process, institutional arrangements, QA of the classification) • Verifiable, national registers of qualifications information (legislation, description of registers, responsible authorities)
<p>Criterion 4: The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the national qualifications framework or system and is consistent with the principles of quality assurance of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National QA systems are operational • Development, approval and award of qualifications are quality-assured • QA refers to LOs • QA measures include qualification requirements for teachers/ trainers/ assessors/ providers • The national QA system is compatible with the QA guidelines of the ACQF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National QA systems (QA relationships, QA arrangements) • Compatibility with ACQF QA guidelines

ACQF governance procedures and follow-up	Self-assessment	Guide to compiling a response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsibilities and/or legal competence of relevant national bodies involved in the ACQF referencing process are determined and published by the relevant competent authorities - The relevant national QA bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report. - People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in certain aspects and steps of the referencing process. Their role is advisory and supports transparency, improvement and credibility. The national referencing committee informs the ACQF Governance Structure on the involved international experts. - Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria. - The referencing outcome is published by the participating country and the ACQF network upon its final validation by the ACQF Governance Structure, on the dedicated ACQF website. - Following the completion of referencing, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g.: certificates, diplomas, supplements) and qualifications registers issued by the competent national authorities will contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level, based on national legislation and procedures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National bodies have been informed about referencing • National Referencing Task Team/ Committee has been determined and finalised • Communication has been prepared • Roadmap is clear and provides for presentation, consultation, quality reviews and endorsements • There are clear plans for including ACQF levels on qualifications awards (post-endorsement by ACQF) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Referencing Task Team/ Committee (establishment, functioning) • Referencing milestones have been determined • Robustness, quality and peer reviews • Visibility of ACQF levels on qualifications documents