

AFRICAN CONTINENTAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (ACQF) PROJECT



HANDBOOK

A Brief Handbook on the African Continental Qualifications Framework

This brief Handbook on the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is elaborated in 2022 within the project AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability/Skills Initiative for Africa, Technical Cooperation – Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework (further: “the project”).

The ten Synthesis Guidelines are an integral part of the ACQF Policy and Technical Document. The Synthesis Guidelines are high-level summaries of the respective Technical Guidelines. The ten ACQF Guidelines are the technical foundations of the ACQF, and are conceived to support implementation of the goals, principles, functions, and actions of the ACQF.

The ten ACQF Guidelines are accessible at ACQF website.

- Guideline 1: Learning outcomes in the context of NQFs and ACQF
- Guideline 2: Levels and level descriptors in the context of ACQF
- Guideline 3: Referencing to ACQF
- Guideline 4: Validation and recognition of learning
- Guideline 5: Quality assurance in the context of ACQF
- Guideline 6: Registers / databases of qualifications
- Guideline 7: Monitoring and evaluation in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 8: Communication and outreach in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 9: Innovation and technology in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 10: Qualifications and Qualifications Frameworks – the systemic view

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ACRONYMS

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
ACTS	African Credit and Transfer System
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
EAC	East Africa Community
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority for Development
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NQF	national qualifications framework
NQS	national qualifications system
QA	quality assurance
REC	regional economic communities
RPL	recognition of prior learning
RQF	regional qualifications framework
TVET	technical vocational education and training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization





1 AFRICAN CONTINENTAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK: POLICY UNDERPINNINGS

- **Skills and qualifications at the heart of African Renaissance**

Education, skills, and qualifications are at the heart of the African Renaissance. Therefore, the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is a vital policy initiative to achieve this ambitious goal.

- **ACQF: contributing to demographic dividend and connecting qualifications frameworks**

The accomplishment of the potentialities of the African demographic dividend in the post-Covid-19-pandemic economic recovery will depend on the development of the right mix of skills within the population and the quality and comparability of qualifications of all levels and sectors of education and training systems across countries. Learning must be lifelong and life-wide, to enable transitions to new jobs, especially in high productivity and innovation sectors, and adaptation to new skills requirements in the green and digital economies. Moreover, access to learning and qualifications should support inclusion in decent work and in the formal economy of small artisans and the self-employed, and of the population with limited formal schooling but with practical professional and life experience, especially women and young people.

A substantial number of African Union member states is developing, consolidating, and implementing national qualifications frameworks (NQF). The lessons and achievements of these experiences can be shared with other members states and regions at the initial stage of NQF development and promote policy learning across the continent. In this propitious context referencing national qualifications frameworks to ACQF has a realistic perspective. The existing methodological and technical basis laid down by the ACQF project will encourage and support countries and regions to engage with referencing, as the most important function of the ACQF.

- **ACQF: underpinned by key strategic commitments and policies of the African Union (AU).**

The ACQF responds to objectives set by the African Union's Agenda 2063 and its First Ten Year Implementation Plan (2023). The main AU policies and political initiatives underpinning development of the ACQF are as follows:

- Agenda 2063¹ and its First Ten Year Implementation Plan (2023)²
- Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25)³
- African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)⁴
- Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment⁵

Another initiative mentioning the ACQF is the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework.

1. African Union, Agenda 2063, at: <https://au.int/en/agenda2063>

2. Agenda 2063, First Ten Year Implementation Plan 2023, at: <https://www.nepad.org/agenda-2063/publication/agenda-2063-first-ten-year-implementation-plan-2014-2023-0>

3. CESA 2016–2025, at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/29958-doc-cesa_-_english-v9.pdf; CESA Journal, at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33863-doc-cesa_journal_vol2_final.pdf

4. AfCFTA, at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated_text_on_cfta_-_en.pdf; Factsheet on the AfCFTA, at: <https://www.tralac.org/documents/resources/faqs/2377-african-continental-free-trade-area-faqs-june-2018-update/file.html>

5. Text of the Protocol, at: <https://www.tralac.org/documents/resources/african-union/1965-protocol-to-the-abuja-treaty-free-movement-of-persons-right-of-residence-and-establishment-adopted-29-january-2018/file.html>

Sectoral development strategies, such as the African Tourism Strategic Framework (2019–2028) provide a framework to which the ACQF can contribute.

Moreover, the ACQF responds to [The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, which provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. ACQF is especially relevant for Goals 4 and 8 of the Agenda for Sustainable Development, which target respectively: quality education and decent work and economic growth.⁶

- **Development of the ACQF: policy and technical document**

The ACQF Policy and Technical Document defines the vision, policy objectives and technical features of the ACQF, proposes the set of ACQF implementation modalities and instruments, and is also accompanied by technical annexes, which form an integral part of the document.

The ACQF has been developed through a participative process, including consultation and dialogue with national and regional authorities and stakeholders. It builds on analysis and evidence regarding African qualifications frameworks and systems and takes into consideration lessons and experiences from other meta-qualifications frameworks/regional qualifications frameworks in Africa and globally. The ACQF Feasibility Study (ACQF 2021f)⁷ provides the overview of national qualifications frameworks in Africa at different stages of development and implementation, developed the scenarios of the ACQF, analysed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of each scenario and proposed ten key outputs for the ACQF action plan at horizon 2026.



6. United Nations, *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

7. ACQF feasibility study was presented and discussed with ACQF Advisory Group on 28/07/2021. <https://acaf.africa/resources/policy-guidelines/feasibility-study/acqf-feasibility-study>



2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ACQF

The essence of the ACQF

- ACQF is conceived as a policy and instrument of continental scope to deliver on the objectives of enhanced transparency and comparability of qualifications and mutual trust between qualifications frameworks and systems for lifelong learning in Africa.
- The ACQF is defined as an overarching reference qualifications framework of ten levels, serving as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks or systems and their levels.
- Governance of the ACQF builds on the political support and steering of the African Union, the participation of all AU countries and regions, partnerships with stakeholders from the world of education, training, qualifications and work and sustainable implementation capacity.
- The ACQF is a holistic and indivisible policy instrument.
- ACQF cooperates with national and regional qualifications frameworks and systems and is not intended to change or supersede existing national or regional legal-regulatory frameworks, guidelines, and practices, but to complement and contribute to development and implementation of qualifications frameworks and to relevant innovations.
- The ACQF will contribute to new horizons for African integration through its continental scope, its function as a connector of Africa's national qualifications frameworks and systems, and as a promoter of pan-African trust and international transparency of skills and qualifications.

2.1 The ACQF: Objectives and principles

The objectives of the ACQF are:

- to support comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications and lifelong learning.
- to facilitate validation of learning from different contexts, contribute to recognition of diplomas and certificates and support mobility (of learners, workers, services);
- to work in cooperation and complementarity with national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and systems and regional qualifications frameworks (RQFs), support NQF development and the creation of a common African education and qualifications space; and
- to promote cooperation, trust and mutual understanding, by means of referencing with qualifications frameworks in Africa and worldwide.

The principles of the ACQF are:

- **inclusiveness:** encompass all levels and types of qualifications, all forms and stages of learning and modalities of certification;
- **innovation:** support new developments related to emerging skills, roles and occupations, new technologies and societal demands, and digital and micro-credentials for learning; and
- **openness:** to participation of all stakeholders and AU member countries, to learn from experience and good practice from Africa and other regions and continents.



2.2 Scope of the ACQF

The ACQF is a comprehensive and inclusive meta-referencing qualifications framework, designed to support a holistic and systemic vision of learning, qualifications, and credentials. The ACQF is oriented to lifelong learning and supports parity of esteem of learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, and all levels of education and training.

The ACQF is open to cooperate and undertake referencing activities with all countries and qualifications frameworks and systems, and to compare with other regional qualifications frameworks globally, following transparent and fair criteria and processes.

The ACQF will establish a continental platform open for publication and dissemination of information on national qualifications and credentials of NQFs referenced to the ACQF, and on other qualifications, profiles and standards relevant for African Union integration policies, in accordance with guidelines and decisions of the ACQF governing structure.

ACQF processes will be based on quality-assurance principles, supported by a set of guidelines, and a monitoring and evaluation system.

For more information and technical elaboration, refer to chapter 4 and to ACQF Guidelines 1, 2, 3 and 5.

2.3 Conceptual-technical design

The ACQF is defined as an overarching reference qualifications framework of ten levels, serving as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks or systems and their levels.

Level descriptors

The levels of the ACQF are defined by three domains of learning: knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility. The full set of level descriptors are presented in chapter 4.2 of this document.

ACQF level descriptors are fundamental in referencing with NQFs and contain useful information and concepts for NQFs at stages of development and review. As a policy instrument open to innovation, ACQF level descriptors contain transformative concepts, such as new skills related with the green and digital transitions.

Learning outcomes orientation

The ACQF levels and learning outcomes-based descriptors contribute to improving transparency and comparability of qualifications of different national systems. ACQF levels support a general application of learning outcomes in different sectors and contexts of education and training systems.

Recognition of prior learning

The learning-outcomes orientation contributes to enhancing the transparency and credibility of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and validation of learning outcomes from experience, for purposes of further study, employment, and acquisition of a full or part qualification. The ACQF supports quality and accessible RPL, as a key component of lifelong learning policies and mechanisms, and social inclusion and equity of the population.

Support transparency and relevance of digital certification and micro-credentials

Lifelong learning, portability of skills and qualifications and mobility are in rapid transformation, under the impact of digitisation. ACQF in cooperation with the regional and national qualifications frameworks and stakeholders will





support common understanding of the requirements for trusted promotion of the potentialities of new types and technologies of certification and credentials, their quality assurance and recognition.

Credit accumulation and transfer

The learning-outcomes approach supports the application of credit transfer and credit accumulation and transfer systems, which are intended to improve flexible learning pathways. Credit transfer and accumulation and transfer systems support learning progression and contribute to lifelong learning. When designing and developing qualifications, the use of a learning-outcomes approach can facilitate the transfer of components of qualifications and progression in learning. The ACQF supports credit transfer and credit accumulation and transfer systems in different academic and vocational pathways. This will contribute to developing a future African credit accumulation and transfer system (ACTS), working in cooperation with other relevant continental projects and initiatives specifically working on the future ACTS.

Contribution to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications

The transparency, information-sharing and mutual trust resulting from referencing levels of NQFs to ACQF levels contribute to transparency of recognition of foreign qualifications in the context of Africa and other continents. The ACQF and national information bodies involved in the recognition of qualifications will share information on learning outcomes, levels and other characteristics of qualifications frameworks referenced to the ACQF.

Underpinned by quality assurance

The ACQF as an overarching qualifications framework and a catalyst for NQF development is underpinned by quality assurance. Quality assurance is fundamental for trust in qualifications, and for their currency and mobility.

Quality assurance is the subject of Criterion 4 of referencing to the ACQF, which states that 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 ACQF. 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; 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.

Transparency and trust in qualifications is key in a context of widespread international learner and labour mobility, and rapid transformation of types of qualifications and credentials for different needs and contexts of lifelong learning.

Quality assurance – as part of a range of measures by governments and institutions – increases transparency and should contribute to trust in the relevance and quality of learning outcomes (that is, learners' knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility, as certified by qualifications). Such trust in learning outcomes is, in turn, based on trust in the quality of the institutions and providers of education and training at all levels and in all subsectors.

International cooperation and continuous improvement

To strengthen its technical capacity, performance, and visibility the ACQF will cooperate and interact with regional qualifications frameworks from parts of the world (e.g.: Europe, America, Asia-Pacific) and with international partners and relevant international specialised organisations. This will eventually contribute to global transparency of skills and qualifications.

For more information and technical elaboration, refer to chapter 4, the annexes, and the Guidelines 1, 2, 4, 5 and 10.



2.4 Main areas of activity of the ACQF

By virtue of its objectives, principles, and conceptual-technical design, the ACQF will deliver on the following main areas:⁸

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: by means of development of common guidelines and approaches, updated inventory of RPL systems on the continent, a wide information campaign and support to countries, and support to digitalisation of credentials.
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: this area encompasses 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 in specific economic sectors, notably in sustainable agriculture, sustainable transport, sustainable energy, and services which are poised to be major contributors 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, and specialised bodies active in certification, recognition, and research in this domain.
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.

For more information and technical elaboration, refer to [ACQF Feasibility Study \(2021\)](#).

⁸ These areas are developed in the *ACQF Feasibility Study (ACQF, 2021d)*, presented to ACQF Advisory Group meeting of 28 July 2021.





3 SYNTHESIS GUIDELINES SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACQF

The ten Synthesis Guidelines are an integral part of the ACQF Policy and Technical Document. The Synthesis Guidelines are high-level summaries of the respective Technical Guidelines, listed below. The ten ACQF Guidelines are the technical foundations of the ACQF, and are conceived to support implementation of the goals, principles, functions, and actions of the ACQF.

Moreover, the 10 ACQF Guidelines and the supporting Training Modules provide all African countries, institutions and stakeholders with a comprehensive and practical reference and methodological framework useful for development, implementation, improvement, and review of national qualifications frameworks (in a systemic view) including the key dimensions, components and instruments listed below.

The ten ACQF Guidelines are:

- Guideline 1: Learning outcomes in the context of NQFs and ACQF
- Guideline 2: Levels and level descriptors in the context of ACQF
- Guideline 3: Referencing to ACQF
- Guideline 4: Validation and recognition of learning
- Guideline 5: Quality assurance in the context of ACQF
- Guideline 6: Registers / databases of qualifications
- Guideline 7: Monitoring and evaluation in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 8: Communication and outreach in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 9: Innovation and technology in the context of NQF and ACQF
- Guideline 10: Qualifications and Qualifications Frameworks – the systemic view

The ACQF Guidelines are directed to various stakeholders at continental, regional and national levels in Africa, and is especially relevant in the context of ACQF. Target users are the ACQF implementation team, ACQF Advisory Group and other ACQF instances; national qualifications and recognition authorities; quality assurance agencies; competent authorities involved in curriculum development; education and training providers; assessment and certification entities; sector qualifications / skills committees / councils; career guidance, employment agencies; and other stakeholders involved in the management of qualifications.

3.1 Learning outcomes in the context of NQF and ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 1

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 1 on learning outcomes in the context of NQF and ACQF.

The Guideline 1 is conceived as a reference document on learning outcomes. The Guideline elaborates on the key concepts and applications of learning outcomes and their role and place in education and training and in qualifications frameworks; and recalls the general rules for writing learning outcomes and addressing known challenges.



Purpose and scope of learning outcomes in the context of qualifications frameworks

Learning outcomes are explicit statements about the results of learning - what a learner is expected to know, understand, and do after a learning process. Learning outcomes are the essential building blocks or “glue” for transparent education systems and present a common language for describing learning. They can be thought of as a common currency that enhances transparency at both national and international levels. They are expressed through a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes that an individual is expected to achieve after successfully engaging in various learning experiences. Learning outcomes approaches contribute to learner-centred education and training and to the lifelong learning objectives of the ACQF.

Most qualifications frameworks are underpinned by learning outcomes approaches. Qualifications described in terms of learning outcomes will strengthen transparency of learning and trust in qualifications levels of member countries. The increased transparency will benefit the country stakeholders as well as those outside the country who are interested in understanding the qualification systems. Application of the learning outcomes approach contributes to greater transparency and comparability of qualifications between countries about what holders of qualifications know and can do, and to identification, documentation and recognition/ certification of learning outcomes irrespective of the context of the learning and acquisition of the learning outcome (formal, non-formal, informal, hybrid, online and distance learning).

Learning outcomes are verb-driven statements that encourage a systematic approach to qualifications design, promote overall transparency, coherence and quality assurance and assist in clarifying the intentions of learning. However, learning outcomes do not entirely replace considerations on inputs to the learning process but rather adds value, supplements, enhances, and complements the existing input-oriented approaches.

Describing and formulating learning outcomes must be followed by implementation i.e., there must be a synergy between statements of learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activity, assessment and certification, and feedback from the labour market. This synergy and continuous improvement will enhance the movement from statements of expected learning outcomes to achieved outcomes and support open and active learning that encourages learners to reach their full potential.

Learning outcomes in the specific context of ACQF

The learning outcomes principles are important backbones of the ACQF, and this is expressed in at least three ways:

- in the level descriptors of the ACQF,
- in the ACQF referencing criteria, and
- in the principle that all learning is valuable and validation and recognition of learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning, from work and social experience is fundamental for lifelong learning and needs to be supported by NQFs and ACQF.

Most importantly, criterion 2 of referencing to the ACQF is focused on the principle of learning outcomes: “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.” More information on referencing to ACQF is available in ACQF Guideline 3.

Learning outcomes applications

Learning outcomes have applications in various contexts: in qualifications frameworks, curricula and learning modules in different sectors (higher education, general education and TVET), quality assurance systems, credit accumulation and transfer systems, validation and recognition of prior learning (including non-formal; and informal learning), and





recognition of foreign qualifications. These contexts are important as they will affect the way the learning outcomes are defined and formulated.

In the education and training context, learning outcomes are applied in different situations including

- level descriptors
- competence-based training/ approche par compétences
- developing common profiles of qualifications
- qualification descriptors, qualification standards,
- diplomas, certificates, and related supplements
- levelling and classification of qualifications in the NQF
- quality assurance of education and training
- coherence in the qualifications' quality chain, from standards underpinning qualifications, to curricula and units / modules, assessment, and certification
- credit accumulation and transfer
- evaluation of foreign qualifications
- career guidance
- recognition of prior learning (RPL)

In validation and recognition of learning from experience, non-formal and informal learning

Learning outcomes are essential for transparent and fair processes of validation and recognition of peoples' knowledge, skills and competences acquired in different contexts of work and social experience in a lifelong learning continuum (non-formal and informal learning). By focusing on learning outcomes and not on training duration and training institutions, RPL gives all people new opportunities for social inclusion, to access decent work and to further education and training.

In the work context, learning outcomes principles are used in:

- Definition of the skills / competencies in occupational / professional standards
- Recruitment, job vacancies / advertisements
- Supporting matching of job seekers' curricula vitae (CVs) to vacancies
- Job descriptions
- Performance appraisals

In a personal context, learning outcomes are useful and applied in:

- learning outcomes in qualifications documents, passports of lifelong learning experiences
- writing curricula vitae (CVs)
- descriptions of professional experience
- applications for jobs
- RPL process, notably in the identification and documentation of the individuals' experiences, and acquired competences, and in the assessment process.



Challenges in formulating learning outcomes and ways to address them

Learning outcomes should be fit-for-purpose and orient a learning process and not restrict it. Too detailed and prescriptive statements can undermine and lead to a “dumbing down” of the learning and assessment process. To prevent and minimise these challenges, learning outcomes should:

- Be written as threshold / minimum statements that do not prevent learners to go beyond these thresholds / minimum expectations
- Be defined and written in a way which allows for local adaptation and interpretation by teachers and learners
- Assist teachers in identifying and combining teaching and assessment methods
- Find the balance between prescriptive and descriptive learning outcomes.

3.2 Levels and level descriptors in the context of ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 2

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 2 on levels and level descriptors in the context of NQF and ACQF.

This Guideline is conceived as a reference and methodological document on level descriptors. Most importantly, the ACQF level descriptors are defined in this Guideline. It elaborates on concepts, application, rules to write level descriptors and on their purpose and role in qualifications frameworks.

Main concepts

Level descriptors are statements describing learning achievement at a particular level of a qualifications framework. Level descriptors provide a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level.

Learning outcomes-based level descriptors are essential to any qualifications framework, whether sectoral, national, or regional. These level descriptors relate to a specific level and signal the learning outcomes orientation of the qualifications framework.

Level descriptors of the African Continental Qualifications Framework

Each of the ten ACQF levels represents learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at that level. The ACQF level descriptors capture how the three domains of knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility (A&R) increase in breadth, depth and complexity when moving from lower to higher levels and are supported by a glossary explaining the terms.



ACQF Level descriptors

Level	Domains of learning		
	Knowledge	Skills	Autonomy and responsibility
Definition of the domains of learning	In the context of ACQF “Knowledge” includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles, and theories in various areas	In the context of ACQF “Skills” refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.	In the context of ACQF “Autonomy and responsibility” refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility
Level 1: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	simple knowledge, literacy and numeracy	simple communication, cognitive and practical skills required to follow simple instructions, and use simple, repetitive solutions to address simple problems	highly structured, repetitive contexts under close supervision and guidance taking minimal responsibility for self
Level 2: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	basic knowledge incorporating comprehension and recall of factual and operational knowledge in some areas	basic communication, cognitive and practical skills required to use concrete information, ideas and known solutions to address straight forward problems	structured contexts under limited supervision and guidance taking limited responsibility for self and group outcomes
Level 3: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	factual and operational knowledge incorporating some theoretical aspects in some areas	a range of communication, cognitive, practical and technical skills required to interpret and communicate ideas and detailed information and select and use known solutions to address familiar problems	predictable contexts under routine supervision and guidance, with initiative for self-responsibility and some responsibility for group outcomes
Level 4: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly factual, operational or technical knowledge incorporating theoretical aspects in one or more areas	well-developed technical skills required to analyse information and new ideas, make informed judgements, communicate outcomes and apply varied solutions to varied (familiar and unfamiliar) problems	varied (predictable and unpredictable) contexts with adaptability and initiative for self-direction under general guidance, taking full responsibility for self, some planning and responsibility for group outcomes and initiative for responsibility for others
Level 5: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mainly technical or theoretical knowledge with substantial depth in a discipline/ area	a range of well-developed technical skills, with some specialisation, required to analyse information and new ideas, construct and communicate a coherent argument, and apply a range of solutions, often in combination, to address unfamiliar problems	unpredictable contexts with full autonomy and full responsibility for self and group outcomes, and some responsibility for others
Level 6: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly technical or theoretical knowledge, with specialisation in a discipline/ area	highly technical and specialised skills required to collate, analyse, synthesise and communicate a range of information and new ideas, and formulate or adapt different solutions to address complex and sometimes abstract problems	highly variable contexts with well-developed autonomy and responsibility for self and group outcomes and responsibility for resources and processes

Level	Domains of learning		
	Knowledge	Skills	Autonomy and responsibility
Level 7: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	advanced analytical and/ or specialised knowledge of a discipline/ area	advanced, specialised skills required to demonstrate advanced analysis and initiative for new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate advanced solutions to address complex and abstract problems	complex and variable contexts with advanced autonomy and responsibility
Level 8: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	highly advanced, complex knowledge of a discipline/ area	highly advanced, complex skills required to demonstrate highly advanced analysis, communicate new insights and ideas in research and/ or innovation, and formulate highly advanced solutions to address highly complex and abstract problems	highly complex contexts with some specialisation demonstrating highly advanced autonomy and responsibility
Level 9: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	mastery of a complex body of knowledge at the forefront of a discipline/ area	skills mastery required to demonstrate originality and new insights in research and/ or innovation and formulate and test theories to show mastery of highly complex, abstract problems	highly specialised contexts demonstrating mastery in autonomy and responsibility
Level 10: the learning outcomes related to formal, non-formal and informal learning at this level include:	substantial and original knowledge contribution that extends the forefront of a discipline/ area and/ or at the interface between disciplines/ areas	expert skills and techniques that demonstrate innovation, interpretation and creation of new ideas required to critically evaluate, formulate and test theories to address emergent, new and critical problems	emergent new contexts demonstrating expertise in management of new ideas





Definition and scope of the three domains of learning of ACQF level descriptors

Knowledge

Includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles, and theories in various areas. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The knowledge domain comprises two sub-domains or elements:

- Type of knowledge
- Scope of knowledge

Skills

Refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems/ issues. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The skills domain comprises three sub-domains:

- Type of skills required
- How the skills are used to respond to information
- How skills are used to address types of problems

Autonomy and responsibility

Refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility. The learning outcomes at all ten ACQF levels relate to formal, non-formal and informal learning. The autonomy and responsibility domain comprises 3 sub-domains:

- the context in which autonomy and responsibility is applied
- the extent to which autonomy is applied
- the extent to which responsibility is applied.

Responsibility has three elements: self, group outcomes and resources.

Objectives and application of level descriptors in the ACQF

Level descriptors enable the comparison and linking of national level descriptors or qualifications levels to the ACQF levels. The first referencing criterion, as proposed in the ACQF Guideline 3 stipulates: *“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”*. Understanding the logic of the national level descriptors is fundamental in demonstrating the link with the ACQF.

The ACQF is intended as an overarching framework for referencing and comparison. As such the ACQF level descriptors are a common translation instrument that may be used to compare the levels of qualification frameworks in Africa, and beyond.

Level descriptors of the ACQF serve complementary purposes: i) basis for referencing of levels of national qualifications frameworks or systems to the ACQF; ii) orientation towards common minimum benchmarks for outcomes of learning on the continent; iii) orientation for countries / regions in developing their qualifications frameworks or systems.

The importance of the level descriptors is further strengthened when compared to the level descriptors in another framework and the ensuing rich information and insights are worth analysing and sharing with the wider community of countries. The referencing of NQF and ACQF will emphasise the importance of level descriptors in understanding the national qualifications. The ACQF level descriptors become an important tool for African relations and dialogue with other RQFs especially in realising the ACQF strategic priorities including those linked to Agenda 2063, CESA-25 and AfCFTA.



The ACQF is defined as a comprehensive common reference qualifications framework of ten levels expressed as learning outcomes. The level descriptors provide transparent descriptions of the complexities of learning at a specific ACQF level, regardless of how or where this learning was obtained. The ACQF level descriptors will facilitate lifelong learning, recognise learning outcomes from all contexts (formal, non-formal and informal), demonstrate innovation-readiness and include aspects that the ACQF wishes to encourage in NQF/ NQs of member countries.

The ACQF is not intended to interfere or replace national qualifications frameworks, but to cooperate, compare and work in complementarity with national systems and policies. By its very nature, ACQF encourages dialogue, reflection, and improvements in the community of involved countries. As a future-oriented policy instrument, the ACQF and its level descriptors respond to innovation in a context of fast transformation of learning and promote awareness and ways to address the mega transitions (green, digital, automation, social). The ACQF is intended as a catalyst for better NQFs / NQs across the continent.

Steps and principles in the development of the ACQF level descriptors

The ACQF level descriptors were developed based on transparent principles and steps including:

- Reference to global knowledge and practice
- Reference to the African context
- Methodological Guidance
- Practical method for conceptualisation, drafting, review of the ACQF level descriptors.

Certain key principles describing the following aspects were considered in the design and coherence of the level descriptors:

- Components of transparency
- Learning outcomes orientation
- Future orientation
- Generic scope and formulation
- Developmental and cumulative aspects
- Conceptual and technical clarity, based on a defined development method.

3.3 Referencing to ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 3

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 3 on referencing of national qualifications frameworks (or national qualifications systems) to ACQF.

This Guideline is conceived as the core conceptual and methodological document to be applied by all countries and regions in referencing to ACQF. The Guideline defines the goals, criteria, and practical steps to prepare, carry out and follow-up the process of referencing to ACQF. Referencing is a process of self-assessment, comparison, and transparency. The methodology is streamlined and flexible to encompass the wide diversity of qualifications and qualifications frameworks and systems on the continent and encourage stakeholders at national and regional levels to engage with referencing to ACQF, as the major process supporting mutual trust and is a main area of work of the ACQF.

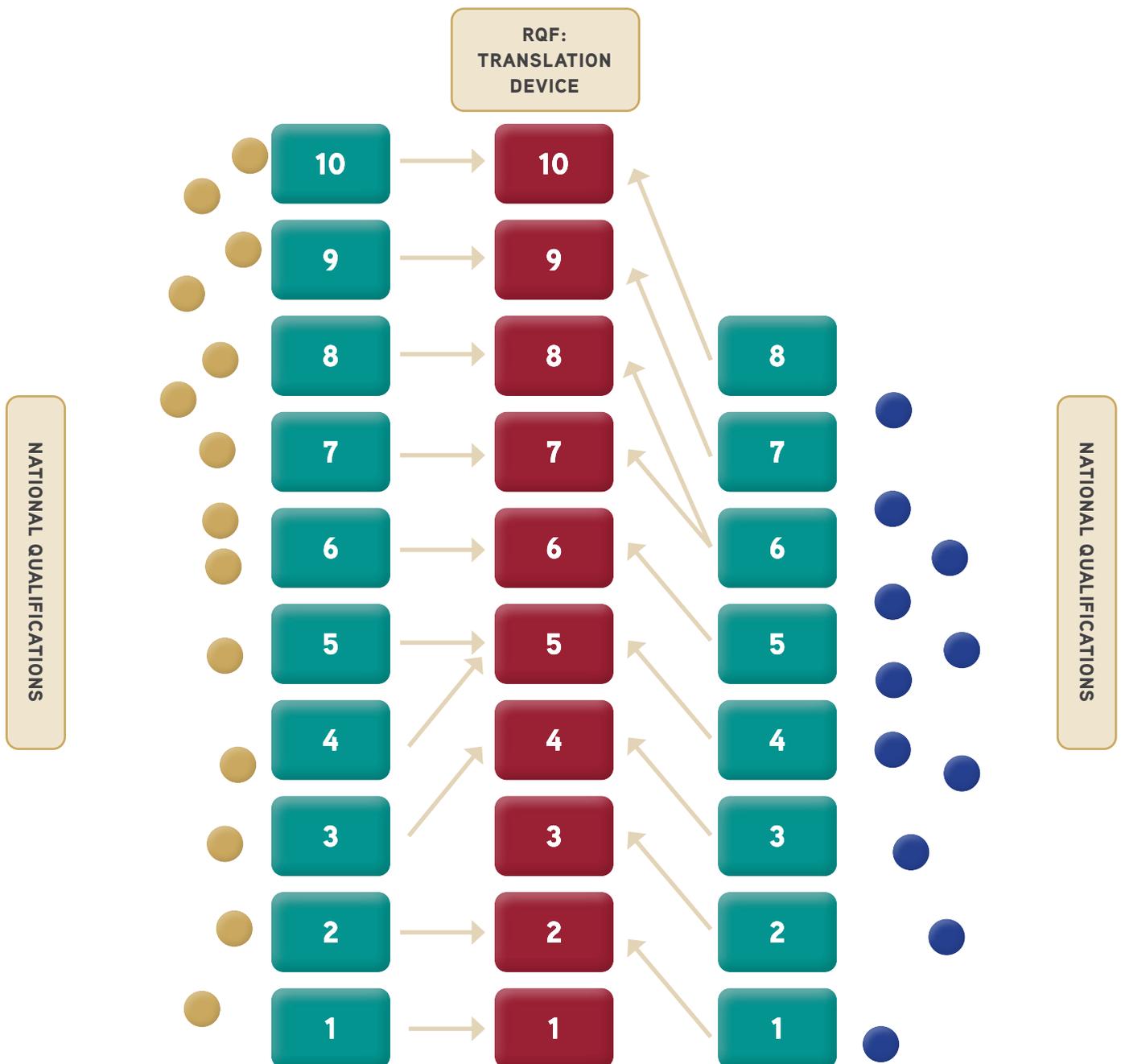
The Guideline takes into consideration the approaches and lessons from referencing / alignment to overarching qualifications frameworks with substantial experience in other large regional blocks and communities.



Regional qualifications frameworks (RQF)

This Thematic brief provides an overview of Regional Qualifications Frameworks based on 3 practical examples from different continents: SADC Qualifications Framework (Africa), ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (Southeast Asia) and European Qualifications Framework (Europe)

Version 2, 19/08/2022





Purpose, benefits, and scope of referencing

The ACQF is envisaged as an overarching 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. As a common point of comparison, the ACQF will serve as a translation device between the NQF/ NQS on the African continent.

Referencing of national qualifications frameworks and systems to the ACQF is the core function of the ACQF and this is encapsulated under the main areas of activity as defined in the ACQF policy document: “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”.

Referencing to ACQF is good for the countries and good for the continent, as it is a process of self-assessment contributing to improvement, to renew stakeholders’ dialogue, enhance visibility and understanding of the NQF at national level, and to improve mutual trust and transparency between different national and regional qualifications frameworks across the continent.

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 systematise and share updated information on qualifications and the referenced NQFs.

The ACQF is a framework of NQFs. 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. The referencing process determines the level-to-level correspondence between the NQF and the ACQF. This is a key outcome of the referencing process.

Referencing is a social, collaborative process that is based on a nationally agreed roadmap and objectives. It involves an inter-stakeholder group at national level, led by a relevant body that ensures the quality and reliability of the referencing process and is the interface between the national process and the ACQF Governance Structure.

The ACQF Governance Structure and implementation support team will have the mandate and technical capacity to encourage countries to initiate referencing, provide technical and methodological support, advance referencing processes, endorse and publish referencing reports.

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. 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.

While it is important to communicate the purpose and benefit of referencing, it is also important to communicate what it is not.

Results of referencing and the related information-sharing do contribute to facilitate recognition of qualifications, but referencing does not provide automatic recognition of qualifications between countries. 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)⁹ and the UNESCO’s Global Recognition Convention¹⁰ (not yet entered into force as of May 2022), and it is not intended to standardise systems and practices, nor to interfere or replace national recognition legislation and mechanisms. Referencing is not intended for competitive ranking between countries.

ACQF referencing criteria

Referencing to the ACQF is guided by four Criteria (Table 1) and a set of governance procedures and follow-up steps defined in Table 2. To ensure consistency and transparency in the process, 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.

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. The process will also support member countries to develop, consolidate or review their NQFs.

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).

9. 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

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



Table 2: 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.

Referencing principles

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 where the country is the major beneficiary.

Referencing steps and compiling the referencing report

Referencing is important as a process of transparency and mutual learning 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. Many parts of the referencing process can be done via virtual meetings and digital tools. Indicatively, five steps are proposed:

- Step 1: Self –assessment and decision to start process
- Step 2: Referencing roadmap and short training
- Step 3: Referencing report Part 1- State of play presentation via remote meeting to ACQF Governing structure
- Step 4: Referencing report Part 2 – advanced draft



- Step 5: Referencing report Part 3:
 - o Final national consultation meeting (workshop, conference), validation by key institutions.
 - o Final report submitted to ACQF Governing structure.
 - o Presentation via remote meeting to ACQF Governing structure – wider representation of all AU member states
 - o Upon validation and acceptance - publication of report.

Follow-up upon successful referencing:

- Publication of the endorsed referencing report on ACQF website
- Use of ACQF levels on qualifications documents and qualifications databases of the NQF referenced to ACQF.

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

- Description of the education and training system
- The NQF (or NQS)
- Country response to the ACQF referencing criteria – sections elaborated by criterion
- Sources

The report should be structured in a comprehensive, and integrated way, refer to examples, and be presented in a user-friendly layout.

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.

Understanding the referencing criteria is therefore an essential premise for effective referencing processes. Therefore, 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.





3.4 Validation and recognition of learning

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 4

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 4 on validation and recognition of learning.

The Guideline 4 is conceived as a reference document on validation and recognition of qualifications. It provides Member States with a common language and concepts, and a framework for fair and transparent validation and recognition of learning, thereby facilitating mobility of persons from one country to another to study, research, teach or work.

The objective and scope of the ACQF Guideline 4 on validation and recognition of learning encompass:

- To facilitate the recognition of qualifications among African States
- To facilitate the recognition of prior learning within and among African States
- To facilitate the implementation of credit accumulation and transfer systems in Africa; and
- To facilitate for the systematic exchange of information between ACQF, NQFs and qualifications recognition structures.

Essential concepts and benefits of validation and recognition of learning

Validation and recognition of learning encompasses the formal acknowledgment by a competent recognition authority of the validity of an education qualification, of credits, of partial studies, or of prior learning. This can be achieved using three modes namely: recognition of qualifications; credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS) and recognition of prior learning (RPL)/ validation of acquired experience (VAE).

Recognition of qualifications is a formal acknowledgement by a competent recognition authority regarding the validity and academic level of a foreign education qualification, partial studies or prior learning/ acquired experience.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer System involves a systematic way of describing an educational programme by attaching credits to its components. It is used to validate formal learning through the recognition of credits. Using the accumulated credits, the system allows mobility of learners from one programme to another within or across institutions without having to duplicate learning thereby facilitating lifelong learning and access to the workplace.

Recognition of prior learning / validation of learning outputs of experience aims at allowing individuals who may have not been able to attend formal education but have managed to gain significant experience in a particular field to be given an opportunity to earn a qualification or to upgrade an existing qualification. RPL/VAE is a vital tool in facilitating lifelong learning and is especially important in a context of rapid transformation of work, jobs, and technologies, requiring individuals to learn in all contexts.

The benefits of validation and recognition of learning are visible at level of the individuals and at level of systems, and are fundamental for the agenda of closer cooperation between national, regional, and continental policies and systems:

- Surety to stakeholders that an individual holds a genuine qualification
- Affirmation that an individual has been trained and possesses the appropriate competencies expected from the learning programme
- Confirmation that, in the case of RPL/VAE, an individual possesses the appropriate knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in informal and non-formal contexts and leading to award of a part or full qualification following a quality-assured process of identification, documentation, assessment and certification
- Facilitates mobility of individuals for purposes of further studies or work – between institutions, countries, regions
- Contributes to social inclusion, equity, fair mobility and labour migration and to enhance the right to access education, training and employment
- Indication of the level at which a qualification is recognised on the NQF/ RQF



- Promotes international understanding of education systems, and to internationalisation of African education and training systems and qualifications
- Contributes to the quality of education, institutions, and qualifications; and to promote and improve lifelong learning
- Contributes to identify and address issues that affect credibility of the qualifications system, such as diploma and accreditation mills.

Main principles of the Guideline

The processes of validation and recognition of learning are premised on reliable information on National Qualifications Frameworks, National Qualifications Systems, qualifications, quality assurance systems and education systems. Therefore, Member States should put in place mechanisms to ensure the availability and timely provision of such information whenever required by other Member States.

Member States are encouraged to put in place policies, guidelines, and systems to facilitate the validation and recognition of all forms of learning. In the recognition of qualifications, Member States should put in place mechanisms for establishing the legal status of the awarding body, ascertaining the authenticity of the qualification, and assessing the comparability of the qualification. Policies on RPL/VAE should encompass all forms of learning regardless of how the learning was achieved, be it in a formal, non-formal or informal setting. Generally, the RPL/VAE process involves four stages namely: identification; documentation; assessment, and certification.

The credit accumulation and transfer system provides a systematic way of describing an educational programme by attaching credits to its components, which is appropriate in validating and recognising learning acquired in a formal setting. The computation of credits will comprise all the learning activities of the student, inclusive of contact time, private study, research, assignment writing and assessment.

Important issues, linkages with key aspects of NQF policies and instruments

This Guideline is a recommendation and orientation on the validation and recognition of learning for AU Member States. The Guideline does not have a legally binding force, regulatory function nor does it replace or supersede national policies. It recommends common principles, steps, tools, and sources for further reference to help countries and regions in developing, consolidating, reviewing and implementing systems related to the validation and recognition of learning. Member States are encouraged to refer to and use of this guideline for development of national policies and guidelines on validation and recognition of learning.

Aspects specific to ACQF in the Guideline

This Guideline on validation and recognition of learning is one of the ten ACQF guidelines which has been developed to underpin implementation of the ACQF, and to support awareness, information and buy-in of all stakeholders and relevant institutions. The Guideline is to be used as a tool supporting implementation of the ACQF as a policy and an overarching qualifications framework for the mutual trust between NQFs and transparency of qualifications.



3.5 Quality assurance in the context of ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 5

This Synthesis Guideline is a summary of the Technical Guideline 5 on quality assurance in the context of ACQF.

This Guideline is conceived as a reference document on quality assurance of qualifications, with emphasis on application in the context of implementation of ACQF. To this end, the Guideline provides the explanatory elements on the application of criterion 4 (on quality assurance) of referencing to ACQF. Moreover, the Guideline provides an initial proposal for a common continental quality assurance framework for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in a lifelong learning perspective.

Purpose and concepts

Quality assurance

Quality assurance within the context of a qualifications system aims to build trust in, and transparency of, qualifications. 'Quality assurance includes the processes and procedures for ensuring that qualifications, assessment and programme delivery meet certain standards.' Source: Tuck 2007

Transparency and trust in qualifications is key in a context of widespread international learner and labour mobility, and rapid transformation of types of qualifications and credentials for different needs and contexts of lifelong learning.

Quality assurance – as part of a range of measures by governments and institutions – increases transparency and should underpin trust in the relevance and quality of learning outcomes (that is, learners' knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility, as certified by qualifications). Such trust in learning outcomes is, in turn, based on trust in the quality of the institutions and providers of education and training at all levels and in all subsectors.

Referencing to the ACQF is a process of transparency, self-assessment and continuous improvement. The referencing criteria provide the framework for comparability between countries, of the analytical process and results, and the robustness of the final report.



Quality assurance is the subject of Criterion 4 of referencing to the ACQF

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).





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.

Synergy and complementarity between quality assurance and NQFs

The intersection between quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks (continental, regional, national) holds promise in a number of areas, especially with regard to improving governance and holistic approaches for renewal of the ecosystem of education, training and qualifications.

Synergy and coherence with AU policies, standards and guidelines related to quality assurance in education and training

In the context of the African Union policies, quality of education and training is an important priority. References and orientations concerning quality of education and training and quality assurance are integrated in several strategic objectives of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025).

The African Union’s Plan of Action for the African Decade for Technical, Professional, Entrepreneurial Training and Youth (2019–2028) sets nine focus areas for action, the second of which is focused on ‘improving quality and relevance of TVET in Africa for an ever-changing world of work’.

The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education have been developed to ‘support higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Africa in implementing good quality assurance practices by guiding them in the application of standards and guidelines in higher education’ (ASG-QA: 10). The ASG-QA is thus a major reference for this ACQF Guideline (and Training Module) on quality assurance, especially with regard to the application of the criteria for referencing of national qualifications or systems to the ACQF. The ASG-QA is the composite of three interconnected parts addressing (a) internal quality assurance, (b) external quality assurance and (c) internal quality assurance for quality assurance agencies. Each part is composed of standards and each standard is composed of guidelines.



Quality assurance of qualifications

Qualifications are the outcome of learning assessed by competent entities against given standards. Quality assurance of qualifications needs to address all dimensions that determine the trustworthiness (quality) of different forms and types of awards certifying achieved learning outcomes.

Quality assurance of qualifications is concerned with four dimensions: a) quality qualifications: concepts and characteristics, quality cycle; b) minimum criteria for the quality of qualifications; c) quality assurance elements from a qualification system perspective: qualification standards, assessment and certification; d) qualifications quality chain: from standards to awards.

Micro-credentials

Globally the number and diversity of micro-credential offerings have expanded substantially in recent years, accelerated by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Micro-credentials hold promises and challenges. Trust and quality are fundamental requirements of policymakers, qualifications bodies and end-users towards micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes following a small learning experience (a short course or training). They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development. A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards.

On quality assurance of Micro-credentials: they are subject to internal and external quality assurance by the system producing them (the education, training or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). Quality assurance processes must be fit for purpose, be clearly documented, accessible, and meet the needs of learners and stakeholders.

Towards a quality assurance framework for TVET and adult learning at continental level

This overview of a framework for TVET quality assurance complements the existing African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA), whose scope is delimited to one subsector of education – higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies.

Proposed principles:

1. Holistic and systemic view
 - The quality assurance system contributes to the lifelong learning and articulation purposes of the national qualifications framework, that is, the transparency of learning outcomes, mutual trust between the subsectors of education and training, vertical and horizontal mobility of learners, and recognition of prior learning and qualifications.
 - Intersections and complementarities: The holistic approach clarifies and strengthens the complementarities and intersections between the NQF, quality assurance, recognition of prior learning and recognition of qualifications to support lifelong learning, progression, and mobility.
 - Culture of continuous quality improvement: Quality assurance of qualifications should enable a culture of continuous quality improvement, not limited to quality control mechanisms.
2. Quality assurance for quality qualifications consists of two broad processes:
 - ensuring that qualifications are relevant and have value; and
 - ensuring that the people who are certified meet the requirements of the qualification.





The processes, or steps, in the qualifications quality chain target these aspects more closely. The qualifications quality chain encompasses a) standards behind qualifications; b) inclusion of the qualification in the NQF; c) learning pathways; d) assessment; e) certification.

3. Quality must be assured and maintained

Achieving and sustaining quality in TVET requires a systemic and holistic quality assurance approach, which combines measures at various levels: policy and system; providers and awarding bodies; governance; qualifications standards; teachers and trainers; assessment, validation, and certification; and eventually, data and knowledge creation. Quality assurance system requires a set of processes, procedures, tools, and capacities, and monitor them to ensure that the outcomes of TVET meet expectations and demand.

In addition, quality assurance systems need to consider and adapt to specificities of different models and structures of TVET systems.

4. Qualification standards are:

- underpinned by reliable evidence defining the skills needs;
- based on learning outcomes;
- developed in partnership by state and social-economic partners, professional sectors, teachers and trainers;
- monitored and reviewed regularly; and
- used to underpin quality-assured programmes, curricula, and assessment.

5. Quality assurance processes and mechanisms can be aided by digital tools and new data sources to monitor indicators and inter-operate with other relevant national and continental databases and analytical systems. National, regional, and continental qualifications databases and registers can be harnessed to provide relevant data.

6. The role of certification in safeguarding confidence and trust is crucial. A transparent and quality-assured certification process has become even more important nowadays, with qualification systems increasingly allowing qualifications to be acquired through different learning pathways and assessment modes.

For the critical stage of assessment, validation, and certification of qualifications:

- The place of certification in the quality assurance of qualifications is not always explicit, holistic, and articulated in many qualifications systems. Certification must be clearly included in quality assurance of qualifications.
- To this end, it is important to foster a common understanding of certification among stakeholders and involve them in quality assurance processes.
- The use of appropriate and reliable standards and instruments of certification contributes to enhance quality of certification.

7. Quality cycle and stages: in defining and building the quality assurance framework and tools for TVET system and TVET providers, the specificities of each stage and the links between stages must be taken into account. The stages are: 1. Plan; 2. Implement; 3. Evaluate/monitor; 4. Review and renew.

- Planning stage: Set up clear, appropriate and measurable goals and objectives in terms of policies, procedures, tasks and human resources.
- Implementation stage: Establish procedures to ensure the achievement of goals and objectives, such as the development of partnerships, involvement of stakeholders, allocation of resources, and organisational and operational procedures.
- Evaluation phase: Design mechanisms for the evaluation of achievement and outcomes by collecting and processing data in order to make informed assessment.



- Review phase: Develop procedures in order to achieve the targeted outcomes and/or new objectives, after processing feedback and analysis.
- 8. Minimum quality criteria: Develop a common approach to minimum quality criteria covering the key components of the TVET system (formal, non-formal), the qualifications quality chain and the national qualifications framework.
- 9. Indicators: Develop a set of indicators to measure and monitor quality and support quality assurance, articulated, and coordinated with the main performance indicators of the TVET system.
- 10. Capacity development, networking, and mutual learning: Establish and support networking and collaboration involving all TVET providers and key stakeholders. Supported by online platform, to organise joint activities, disseminate good practice, and strengthen a culture of peer learning.
- 11. Align the national quality assurance framework (all subsectors) with other relevant regional frameworks (qualifications, recognition).
- 12. Anticipate the future – how changing and emerging roles, tasks, occupations, and new skills will affect qualifications profiles, and the supply and demand for qualifications.

Quality assurance in TVET at system and providers' level

Quality assurance policies and mechanisms are central to the effective functioning of education and training systems, as they include the processes that ensure that education and training institutions are acting as per the identified standardised procedures and general principles as established by quality assurance authorities or agencies. Quality assurance activities are conducted with the goal of ensuring that processes are consistent and effective at producing their desired outcome. The quality assurance system adopted by the NQF is to safeguard the integrity of the framework and the registered qualifications.

Quality Assurance in TVET and qualifications systems should address several levels:

- a) The system level: Underpinning the TVET policy cycle, supporting the culture of continuous improvement, contributing to policy monitoring and review, and engaging the stakeholders.
- b) The providers' level:
 - Internal quality assurance
 - External quality assurance

Internal and external quality assurance policies and procedures are complementary.

All education and training providers must take primary responsibility for the quality of education and training, suitability of their education and training programmes, qualification level of staff recruited, learning infrastructure and other services provided, thus ensuring their internal quality assurance system. Quality assurance is essential for all education and training providers, and the overall objective is to establish a quality system for systematic self-evaluation and follow-up at provider level.

External agencies can ensure quality of the education and training provider through external quality assurance measures, and evaluations conducted on site.



Quality assurance of work-based learning

Work-based learning programmes are designed and developed in partnership with employers, learners, and other stakeholders (where appropriate) and contain learning outcomes that are relevant to work objectives. They are meant to enable learners to apply and integrate areas of subject and professional knowledge, skills, and behaviours to enable them to meet education and training programme learning outcomes. Work-based learning programmes are designed, monitored, evaluated, and reviewed in partnership with employers.

To quality assure the work-based learning system, the following criteria need to be met at the organisation site: focus on learners, characteristics and conditions for work-based learning, monitoring and assessment, work-based learning trainers/teachers, resources, and communication and agreements between the employers and education and training providers.

3.6 Registers of qualifications

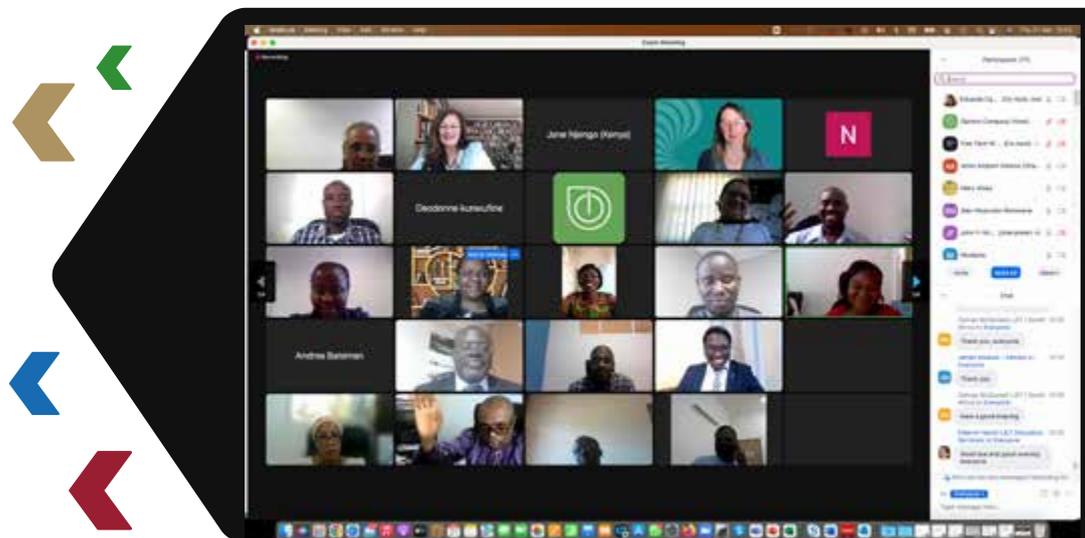
Objectives and scope of the Guideline 6

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 6 on registers / databases of qualifications.

The **Guideline 6** is conceived as a reference document on registration and registers of qualifications, which can be used by national and regional entities / authorities tasked with functions of management and registration of qualifications of different levels and sectors of education and training. The Guideline is not binding and does not interfere with national practice and regulations concerning qualifications registers / databases.

The Guideline defines the essential conceptual and technical features for the future ACQF Qualifications Platform (database), including minimum fields of information on qualifications for electronic publication in digital and online qualifications databases.

The Guideline recommends the main features of a platform/database of qualifications, and highlights the elements of data fields for electronic publication of qualifications, the possible uses of ACQF levels in qualifications registers and databases; and identifies the potential uses of the ACQF Qualifications platform (database).





Key concepts, benefits, and goals of registers of qualifications

The goal of registration and databases of qualifications is to enhance transparency, mutual understanding, acceptability and recognition of qualifications amongst Member States across the African Continent. This will promote mobility and portability of qualifications hence creating opportunities for access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learning among Member States nationals.

Registration of qualifications is an important measure that enhances quality and regulation of qualifications. It provides greater protection for the public and employers as key information required for recognition purposes is made available on the platform/database.

The following are the *benefits of registration and databases of qualifications* at national, regional, and continental levels:

- Transparency of information on qualifications for different uses (comparison, career information for learners, study choices);
- Enhances quality and recognition of qualifications;
- Facilitates mobility of learners and workers from one country to another as well as across regions and continents;
- Protecting learners, employers and the public from misrepresented qualifications;
- Deepens integration and harmonisation of qualifications among states;
- Eases recognition and transfer of credits; and
- Facilitates for smooth verification and evaluation of qualifications.

Main principles of the Guideline

Databases / registers of qualifications are important instruments for transparency about the panorama of qualifications of different countries. The quality, completeness and accessibility to this information is fundamental for the end-users (learners, training providers, employers, and workers) at national level, but also for qualifications and recognition bodies globally.

The authorities and departments managing qualifications at national level in many countries across the globe are taking steps to improve and modernise the tools, technology and methods used to structure, manage, and visualise information and data on qualifications.

In order to facilitate the registration of qualifications on the ACQF database, Member States are encouraged to establish digitalised national databases of qualifications. These national registers and databases of qualifications should comply with the main features of digital databases which are: security, accessibility, usability, stability, interoperability, dependability, flexibility, and recoverability.

Further, Member States should ensure that their respective national databases encompass the following minimum fields of information on qualifications for electronic publication in digital ACQF Qualifications Platform: title of qualification; field of education and training; country code; type of qualification; level (NQF, RQF, ACQF); awarding body or competent authority; description of the qualification; short statements on the learning outcomes; credit points/notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes; expiry date and link to qualifications database (if available).

Important issues, linkages with key aspects of NQF policies and instruments

Following agreed quality assurance procedures, the ACQF Qualifications platform (database) will share: information provided by national qualifications frameworks or systems, international qualifications, common continental qualifications profiles, qualifications from sectoral organisations and other institutions awarding micro-credentials.





The ACQF Qualifications Platform (database) complements, supports, and can interoperate with national and regional databases, and does not aim at replacing or changing existing national qualifications databases. The ACQF platform/database of qualifications will provide information on registered qualifications in African Member States, together with their respective NQF levels and how they compare to the ACQF levels. As a transparent instrument for users' information and guidance, the ACQF Qualifications platform (database) will serve and support the national qualifications authorities and the awarding bodies, the population (e.g.: learners, employers, providers of education and training), the regions and the continent.

Aspects specific to ACQF in the Guideline

The ACQF is a meta framework for referencing with national qualifications frameworks and systems and supports the development of operational instruments contributing to comparability qualifications and to transparency of qualifications frameworks.

3.7 Monitoring and evaluation in the context of qualifications frameworks and ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 7

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the ACQF Technical Guideline 7 on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the context of NQF and ACQF.

The ACQF Technical Guideline 7 is conceived as a reference and methodological document useful for planning, organisation and use of M&E systems and instruments, supporting continuous improvement, evidence-based decision-making, and transparency on the effectiveness of qualifications frameworks.

The Synthesis Guideline includes a synopsis of key concepts, processes and considerations and is contextualised for the development and implementation of both national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and regional qualifications frameworks (RQFs) including the ACQF. It relates to the other ACQF guidelines and outlines what is needed (resources and capacities) to undertake M&E and use the data collected and the findings generated to inform the successful implementation of NQFs and RQFs.

Main target users of this specific Guideline are policy and decision-makers who may have responsibility for managing the implementation of NQFs or RQFs, using M&E data or making decisions based on what M&E data demonstrates about implementation, progress towards results and the quality or merit of NQFs and RQFs in relation to implementation efforts and results that have been achieved.

Why is monitoring and evaluation important in the context of national and regional qualifications frameworks?

Understanding progress, identifying obstacles and areas that may require reconsideration are crucial to being able to develop and implement a national or regional qualifications framework that is fit-for-purpose and able to achieve its objectives.

The M&E guideline has relevance to all other guidelines, in particular to the integrative guideline (guideline 10) which addresses all the transversal themes of NQF development. As each of the guidelines contribute to the development and implementation of an NQF / RQF, the activities and outputs proposed by each need to be monitored and evaluated. On this basis, this synthesis guideline can be reviewed alongside each of the others.

Monitoring and evaluation are two distinct activities that inform each other in the design and implementation of a project, programme, or policy. Undertaking monitoring and evaluation regarding the development, implementation, and results of an NQF or RQF can only be done effectively and meaningfully if the information required to do



so is available, can be analysed and conclusions drawn as to the progress of the NQF / RQF towards delivering on its intended goals and objectives.

Key concepts of M&E

Monitoring entails project monitoring (operational processes) and monitoring progress towards results (results monitoring). It should be done on an ongoing basis by individuals who have designated responsibilities and have sufficient knowledge and skills. This includes the collection of raw data (primary data) from individuals involved in developing and implementing NQFs / RQFs and can include the collation and analysis of data that has already been collected (secondary data). Relevant secondary data can include information collected by national statistical agencies and data collected via national management information systems (MIS) related to levels of education, qualifications, or employment.

Quality assurance (QA) is one of the eleven transversal themes that inform NQF development, and is related to, but distinct from monitoring. It is an operational process that ensures all processes and outputs contributing to the development and implementation of NQFs/RQFs meet a set of minimum standards. In comparison to QA, M&E moves beyond operational activities to undertaking analysis of what has been achieved. On this basis, QA activities should be monitored as part of routine M&E and do not take the place of monitoring.

Evaluation is a periodic assessment which aims to answer specific questions regarding the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (or other evaluative criteria) of a project, programme or policy (also referred to as an evaluand). It can consider implementation (process evaluation), the achievement results (outcome evaluation) and/or assess the extent to which the evaluand contributed to results or the results can be attributed to the evaluand (impact). The way that evaluation is undertaken can depend on the resources and time available and the capacity within an organisation to undertake it. Evaluations can be undertaken internally, externally or using both internal and external resources (hybrid). Evaluation findings can be used by decision-makers and to establish whether changes need to be made and make recommendations regarding these.

There are a range of data collection methods (interviews, focus group discussions, observation, surveys, assessments) that can be undertaken as M&E activities. These may be utilised to collect data at different levels. It is most useful when various types of data from different sources are combined via mixed methods to develop a more comprehensive understanding of development and implementation of NQFs and RQFs. These data collection methods can be considered when undertaking monitoring and evaluation and evaluations can draw on monitoring data.

M&E of NQF and ACQF should be planned and established from the outset

M&E should be able to support an NQF / RQF to meet its intended goals and objectives. This requires that an M&E system is in place from the outset. Guideline 7 outlines the core components and key considerations for an M&E system and presents a step-by-step guide for how to undertake this for an NQF or RQF, from the point of planning and developing to implementing and reviewing an NQF / RQF. This begins with establishing the need and demand for M&E, determining institutional arrangements and identifying individuals involved in collecting and using M&E information.

A results framework, which describes the steps to be taken (activities and outputs) to achieve the desired long-term goals and objectives (outcomes and impact) of an NQF or RQF, provides an important reference point for M&E. Indicators are then identified to measure progress with respect to key aspects of the results framework and how this information will be collected (data collection methods, instruments and sources) is elaborated. Thereafter institutional arrangements need to be put in place to collect, quality assure, analyse and report. This will be informed by the organisational context and culture, available capacity and resources to implement M&E activities and how M&E information will be used and by who. Identifying who will use M&E data and for what purpose will assist with ensur-





ing that the M&E system is fit for purpose, not overly onerous and there is no duplication of or unnecessary effort. It is important to ensure that people understand the value and importance of undertaking M&E and that a culture is created which supports the use of M&E data for decision making; the guideline elaborates on practical things which can be done to support and enhance this.

Concurrent to developing a monitoring system and processes, evaluation and learning questions should be identified and documented in an evaluation plan. Identifying these questions early on will help ensure that information is collected to support evaluation from the outset.

An M&E system should be documented in the form of an M&E framework or plan. This includes the results framework, indicators, data collection instruments, evaluation questions and strategies for dissemination and use. The M&E plan is a key reference document for people involved in the process of developing, implementing or overseeing an NQF / RQF.

Capacities and preparation of the M&E system

The successful implementation of an M&E system for an NQF/RQF will be influenced by whether the purpose of M&E is well understood, buy-in exists for M&E, whether sufficient organisational capacity exists to generate data that can be analysed and used to inform decision-making, whether there are feedback loops/mechanisms in place that provide timely M&E information for decision making. If these are not in place, it will be much more difficult to ensure that the M&E plan is implemented and M&E data is used. Organisational capacity is also needed to undertake and oversee evaluation and facilitate learning. Capacity can be built over time, but if it does not exist, it poses significant risk to the effective implementation and credibility of the M&E system and the data generated.

It is imperative that sufficient consideration is given to the preparatory work required to develop an M&E system, support its consistent and effective implementation, and ensure that the information generated can be used to establish the extent to which the design and implementation of an NQF or RQF are contributing to achieving the overall goal and objectives of an NQF or RQF.

3.8 Communication and Outreach in the context of NQFs and ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 8

This Synthesis Guideline is a high-level summary of the Technical Guideline 8 on communication and outreach in the context of NQF and ACQF.

This Guideline is conceived as a reference and methodological document useful for planning and organisation of the functions and actions contributing to the visibility, transparency, and use of the NQF among stakeholders, institutions, and sectors of the lifelong learning and qualifications system. The value and benefits of the NQF, its linkages to the wider qualifications system need to be communicated in ways that are fit for purpose and adapted to the target groups and build on accessible and effective technologies and digital tools.

Purpose of communication and outreach in the context of NQFs and the ACQF

Information, communication, and outreach need to be seen as integral parts of the governance of NQFs as well as the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF). Communication and outreach enable the social nature of NQFs, the engagement with stakeholders and end-users, and contribute to fulfil the frameworks' promise towards individuals, economic actors, and society. Communication not only raises visibility and creates awareness, but also ensures that useful feedback and information is available to drive policy and decision-making.



Credible and consistent information on the value and benefits of the NQFs, involvement of stakeholders, networking, and use of feedback are some of the ways that support continuous improvement of NQFs and the ACQF. The benefits of the NQF (and ACQF) will only truly materialise when all stakeholders, end-users, institutions have access to open and reliable information on the existing and new qualifications, different credentials, learning pathways, meaning of qualifications levels, recognition of learning and experience, and on their value for employment, active life, personal and professional development, for labour mobility, investment, and economic and social development.

However, the limited visibility and understanding of NQFs' benefits and services among stakeholders and end-users is a big challenge that needs to be recognised and addressed in a systematic manner in many countries. Mutual trust between qualifications frameworks and systems of countries and regions depends on reliable, accessible, and free information on the different aspects that contribute to comparability of qualifications of all levels and types, and to validation of learning of individuals across the lifelong learning continuum.

One of the important messages from the last decade is that NQFs are changing, evolving, and gradually trying to adapt and respond to new demands and calls for action. Changing socio-economic and technological contexts and other mega-drivers of change such as the impact of Covid-19 and the climate and environmental emergency have created new demands, opportunities and paradigms impacting on work, skills, modalities of lifelong and life wide learning and types of qualifications and credentials. The vast and fast transformation of work and skills, the urgency of the digital and green transition drive the need for NQFs (and the ACQF) to evolve. The policies, instruments, and governance arrangements of NQF / ACQF ought to adapt to different stages of development, and the modalities and means of information and communication should respond and fit with the evolving nature and priorities of the NQF / ACQF. Key principles, means and technologies for effective communication and outreach should take account of the transformation of NQFs, and contribute to the adaptation, openness and responsiveness of NQFs to the future of work and skills.

Communication and outreach in the context of ACQF

Communication and outreach to stakeholders and end-users at regional and national levels has been embedded in the ACQF project from the start and is relevant to ACQF as well as NQF development. From the start of the confinement related with the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the activities of the ACQF project were swiftly shifted to online and digital modalities, permitting a much wider outreach in terms of countries, institutions, and individuals. The peer learning activities around the themes of national and regional qualifications frameworks, quality assurance, recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials and qualifications management systems gathered approximately a thousand participants in 15 peer learning webinars. The mechanism of peer learning webinars blended the goal of communication and outreach, with the goal of capacity development and dissemination of African and international developments in the named thematic areas. The digital and online activities contributed to boost networking and to build trust between organisations and individuals.

A substantial number of outputs of ACQF activities (guidelines, training modules, thematic briefs, presentations, video learning materials, snapshots, mapping study and other research) have high communication potential and contribute to *quick wins* and longer-term outcomes for stakeholders. These materials and publications are organised in specific webpages on the [ACQF website](#) and in the ACQF Intranet (focused on members of ACQF governance platform).

Communication efforts have also identified and highlighted project results, outcomes, successes, challenges and sharing of experiences from countries within Africa and beyond. The ACQF communication items are available for use by all countries in all stages of NQF development.





Applying communication and outreach

Communication and outreach are not only about marketing, but more importantly about information for stakeholders and end-users as part of the NQF strategy for results and impact, that is effectiveness over the short, medium and longer term. The value and benefits of the NQF should be adequately communicated to attract stakeholders and get them involved.

A variety of tools can be used to explain the NQF including leaflets, short booklets, websites, social media (of all stakeholders), NQF helplines, videos, photos and infographics, events, email correspondence, publications and media coverage.

User outreach and communication is an important dimension / component of the NQF and should be purposefully planned and organised to:

- Inform, clarify, and enable services related with the NQF as a policy instrument
- Build capacity and generate buy-in, increase stakeholders' participation
- Collect information and feedback for monitoring, react to users' feedback
- Improve and strengthen the linkages within the dimensions, instruments and institutions related with the NQF

NQFs in Africa are at different stages of development and implementation. The [ACQF Mapping study](#) (2020) and more specifically the [ACQF feasibility study](#) (2021) identified 41 countries in Africa with qualifications frameworks dynamics ranging from a stage of early thinking and initial steps to advanced implementation and review / reform of the NQF. Communication approaches should be adapted to the needs of different NQF development stages and country contexts.

The purpose of any ACQF/ NQF communication strategy and plan is to define the communication requirements and how information will be distributed. It sets out the following aspects: what information will be communicated, how will it be communicated, when it will be communicated, and who is responsible. A plan sets out the objectives / goals, key messages, target audiences, tools, technologies, schedule, risk management, and monitoring.

ACQF/ NQF communication guidelines and principles

The interactions between the ACQF and the national and regional qualifications frameworks (or systems) will contribute towards how the ACQF is perceived by stakeholders and should seek to improve mutual understanding between ACQF and NQF stakeholders. Regular communication will help reduce uncertainty and engage stakeholders at appropriate times. Whether the communication is internal or with the public, it is important that the messages are consistent.

All ACQF / NQF communication focuses on conveying a positive message and provides an opportunity for follow up or questions. Messages should be:

- clear and easily recognisable in terms of its purpose, audience, frequency, most direct way to state it, and action required from the recipient
- succinct and aim to clarify a few points rather than cover an unlimited range of issues
- people-centred: where appropriate, a story-telling approach is used: one that emphasises the impact of the action on individual lives.

ACQF / NQF communication is undertaken, where appropriate, through partnerships with individuals and organisations that can have a potential multiplier effect, build on the local context and language(s) and is consistent with actions in terms of human and financial resources and responsibilities. ACQF / NQF communication is sensitive to the features of the governance setting, requirements concerning communication and other contractual obligations and considers the local context first while being closely co-ordinated with the key partners' fundamental principles. Any standard templates, especially regarding writing styles and graphic identity must be made available to relevant users.

- ACQF: The [ACQF website](#) is the standard ACQF platform and houses all the relevant news, documents, events, video clips, presentations, updates, etc. All the data on the website can be downloaded and is available for sharing. All communications should include the link to the ACQF website.
- NQFs: Similarly, NQF communication is best housed within a website that can be easily accessed by the public. NQF communications should include a link to the NQF website. The [ACQF website](#) can be used as a resource for information for NQFs.

3.9 Innovation and technology in the context of qualifications frameworks and ACQF

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 9

This Synthesis Guideline is a summary of the Technical Guideline 9 on innovation and technology in the context of NQF and ACQF.

This Guideline is conceived as a reference and methodological document useful for conceiving, designing and applying adequate innovation and harnessing technology to support the effectiveness, outreach and evolution of qualifications and qualifications frameworks in a world of work and learning in rapid transformation driven by the green and digital transitions and high demand for lifelong and life wide learning.

Why is innovation and technology important in the context of qualifications frameworks?

Trends such as digitalisation, migration and sustainability have created a demand for innovations in key areas of the development, management, and revision of national and regional qualifications frameworks. Such innovations allow for improvements in labour market intelligence, yield new data sources and analysis methods, improve efficiencies, and allow education systems to respond to the needs of individuals, societies, and the world of work.

At the same time, new types of recognition of learning such as micro-credentials and digital credentials are emerging, non-formal learning and alternative learning pathways are increasingly being recognised, and innovations such as partially automated credential comparison and qualification passports have been introduced to allow greater labour mobility and opportunities for migrants.

In short, a range of innovations and technologies can be applied to national and regional qualifications frameworks, credentials, and the recognition of learning, and ultimately leveraged to enhance government service delivery to constituents. We as a world society are moving from the information age to the innovation age, and as a result new products, services and technologies are available almost every day which can support qualifications frameworks and associated processes, for those with the skills and ambition to leverage them.

One critical capacity which must be built in governments as well as the general population is an understanding of the uses, advantages, and disadvantages of different types of databases. These include relational databases structured like tables and non-relational databases which allow for the storage and retrieval of unstructured text or even media. Databases can be open-source or commercial pay-for-use systems, each with its own advantages – open-source databases are free, but require more expertise; commercial systems require payment, but provide customer support. Databases can be stored locally allowing total control of the data; on distributed networks where multiple actors in multiple office locations can draw from the data; or in the cloud, where it is accessible to anyone with permissions from any location. These sorts of options and their advantages and potential disadvantages can inform both the human and software resourcing of government departments. The ethical collection, storage and use of data is also important, and due deliberation should be given to data-related considerations such as ownership, transparency, the principle of minimum data collection and the control and security of data.

A second important area is the process of innovation itself. How can governments go about co-creating responsible and actionable solutions? One simple innovation process – the ‘double diamond’ of discovering through research, defining the problem, developing possible solutions and then delivering the most appropriate – provides a foundation for responsive innovation design, and a blueprint for how governments can meaningfully engage constituents and experts in crafting contextually-appropriate responses to challenges.

The materials also present a wide range of Innovations and Technologies currently available to support qualifications frameworks and associated processes including: qualification development, comparison and analysis, registration and management, credentials and the recognition of learning, and innovations related to data collection, communication and monitoring and evaluation with particular relevance to information and data useful to qualifications frameworks.

A third tool for government officials is knowledge of what exists. Guideline nine discusses a wide range of enabling structural innovations such as flexible credential pathways, the recognition of prior learning and competency-based assessment which may be well-known to most governments and perhaps already implemented well. We also introduce newer structural concepts such as self-sovereign identity, or the principle that the individuals who generate data should control the use of that data; the technical, operational, legal and human processes which allow interoperability, or the seamless exchange of information between computer systems; and credential fluency, or the means and methods through which all learning – formal, informal and non-formal - can be integrated to provide a more comprehensive system for the recognition of learning and skills. In addition, artificial intelligence is contributing to qualifications frameworks and processes as part of innovations which use big data and/or automation.

Innovations which leverage these structural innovations also contribute to the identification of skills, the development of qualifications, the comparison and analysis of qualifications frameworks, and the registration and management of qualifications frameworks. These include innovations such as qualifications passports, personalized learning, stealth and virtual assessments, digital credentials, micro-credentials, credit banks, learning management systems and advanced labour market intelligence. These innovations each solve at least one common challenge experienced in the recognition of knowledge and are already available for exploration and adaptation to new contexts.

However, while the benefits of innovations and technology in qualifications frameworks are numerous, risks must also be considered. Both physical and cybersecurity require both vigilance and expertise to ensure both government and citizen data are protected from potential exploitation and fraud. Governments must also be careful to ensure that the proper resources, processes, and opportunities are in place to avoid creating new social divides based on access or lack of access to certain innovations or technologies. And finally, governments should concern themselves with the balance between progress and the needs of citizens and ensure that incentives schemes for upskilling and reskilling to facilitate continuous employability of the population are in place.

Together, the ten ACQF guidelines give tangible substance to Output 3 of the ACQF project namely the ACQF policy and technical document. They support the practical application and sustainability of the principles, objectives and milestones defined in the ACQF documents. The principles, concepts and new innovations and technologies outlined in the Innovation and Technology materials, including this Synthesis Guideline, link with the other nine ACQF guidelines to provide new methods or build on existing practices to improve effectiveness and efficiency. For example:

- Innovations such as personalized learning and learning management systems relate to learning outcomes (Guideline 1);
- Automation in the comparison of qualification frameworks related to the ACQF levels and level descriptors (Guideline 2) and referencing criteria (Guideline 3);
- Processes in the recognition of prior learning, competency-based assessment, stealth assessment and virtual assessment relate to the validation of learning (Guideline 4);

- Data collection methodologies such as crowdsourcing can feed into quality assurance processes (Guideline 5);
- Big data analysis processes and skills matching, digital certification and micro-credentials relate to the registration of qualifications (Guideline 6);
- Data collection processes and innovations such as micro-narratives and data exhaust can support government systems of monitoring and evaluation (Guideline 7); and
- Establishing interoperability, relational databases and data visualization can support government-to-government collaboration and innovations in social media can support government-to-citizen communication (Guideline 8).

Innovations and new technologies are already unlocking doors and solving problems related to qualifications frameworks in contexts around the world. It is hoped that the Innovation and Technology materials created for the ACQF can help governments expand good practices as well as develop new ones which are relevant to the diverse contexts of the African continent.

3.10 Qualifications and qualifications frameworks – the systemic view

Objectives and scope of the Guideline 10

This Synthesis Guideline is a summary of the Technical Guideline 10 on the systemic view of qualifications and qualifications frameworks.

The Guideline 10 is conceived as a reference and methodological document that provides a comprehensive overview of key definitions, conceptual overview of qualifications systems, and the important role that NQFs have within the system, and related linkages and strategies within the system.

Main concepts

Qualifications system

Within a country's broader education and training system there is a national qualifications system. 'A national qualifications system 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, quality assurance 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.'

Source: OECD 2006





Qualifications framework

Qualifications frameworks are a construct that aim to describe and classify (for policy makers, implementers, and users, both nationally and internationally) the qualifications issued within a country.

A national qualifications framework (NQF) is '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'. Source: EQF Recommendation 2017.

Qualifications

Generally, there are two interpretations of the term qualifications, but they are not mutually exclusive, and both can exist within the qualifications system.

Qualifications are '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.' Source: EQF 2017

Qualifications are 'a planned combination of learning outcomes with a defined purpose or purposes, including defined, applied and demonstrated 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.' Source: SAQA 2017.

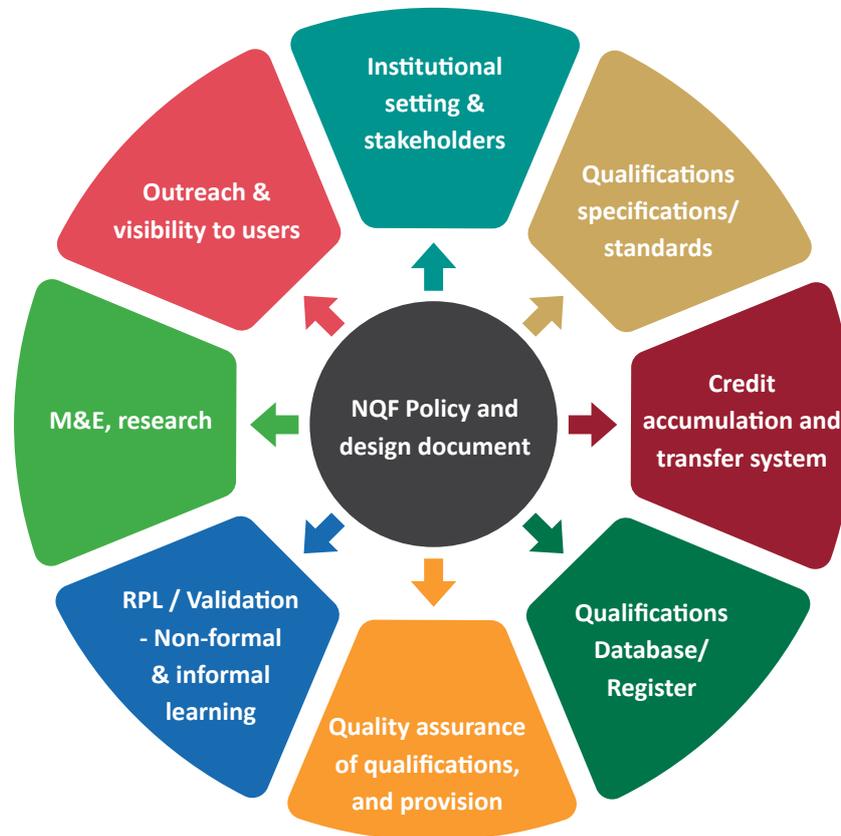
NQFs and the broader eco-system

NQF policy documents generally include its objectives or purposes, level descriptors, a volume of learning measure, and qualification type descriptors. NQFs aim to provide greater transparency of qualifications issued within a country. Qualifications described in terms of learning outcomes will strengthen transparency of learning and trust in qualifications and their outcomes and benefit the country stakeholders as well as those outside the country who are interested in understanding the qualification systems of a given country.

NQFs are the product of, and operate within, complex and everchanging qualifications systems. NQFs are influenced by the domestic historical and current context in which they are designed and are also influenced by regional and international developments. Their strength is derived by their linkages with other initiatives and strategies, such as:

- Quality assurance, e.g., qualifications (utilising qualification quality standards, policies, guidelines) and of provider and their programmes leading to a qualification (utilising quality standards, policies, guidelines)
- National initiatives, e.g., lifelong learning, facilitation of learning pathways, validation of formal learning (credit transfer), validation of nonformal and informal learning (recognition of prior learning)
- Recognition of foreign qualifications
- Registers/databases of qualifications approved onto the NQF
- Micro-credentials.

Figure 1: NQF as part of the national qualifications system



Source: Adapted from ACQF 2022. ACQF Capacity Development Programme. Thematic brief 8: Qualifications Frameworks in a changing world. Author: Castel-Branco, E.

As part of a broader qualifications system, the linkages to other components of the system are described in Figure 1.

Governance of an NQF

Research has shown that to be successful, qualification-system reforms require that all stakeholders are mobilised and involved, and that they are aware of the objectives and take ownership of the necessary changes. The governance arrangements can bring the NQF and the quality assurance arrangements together if there is one overarching agency. However, this is not always the case and there are many examples worldwide of there being different models of governance of the NQF and of the quality assurance arrangements for various sectors.

Involvement of stakeholders at all levels of the qualifications system, including the governance of the NQF is paramount to the success of the system.

Life cycle of an NQF

The ACQF research has indicated that there are 5 key stages of an NQF, that is: not in place, early steps, in development and consultation, approved and started implementation, and operational for some time and reviewed. The Technical Guideline categorises the life cycle of an NQF into 3 phases to identify and explain the actions and functions to be undertaken in each phase. The 3 phases include: design and development phase, implementation phase, monitoring, and review phase.

Development of qualifications

A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training. As such quality assuring the formulation, development and approval of a qualification is critical in ensuring the outcomes of qualifications meet the proposed need. Quality assurance agencies may regulate the development processes through laws, rules or quality standards (and related templates and forms). The development phase will include determining a need for the qualification, extensive research (such as national and international benchmarks, occupational analysis) and stakeholder consultation. Learning outcomes form the basis of qualification specifications. A clear process for locating the qualification on the NQF (i.e., determining its qualification type) is an important step in this process. It is important to be able to explain this process when undertaking alignment or referencing activities related to a regional qualifications framework.

The formulation and development of a qualification specification is separate from the providers ability to develop and provide a programme that leads to a qualification.

Linkages of an NQF to a regional qualifications framework (RQF)

NQFs and their associated quality assurance arrangements are the key instruments for referencing or aligning to a regional qualifications framework. Referencing or aligning a NQF provides for greater transparency and understanding of a country's qualifications and the explanation of the level of implementation of quality assurance arrangements strengthen the trust in the outcomes of these qualifications.



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5 ANNEXES

5.1 Annex 1: Glossary

For the purposes of the ACQF policy and technical document, the following definitions apply. This list of definitions is not exhaustive but is complemented by the specific glossaries annexed to each of the Guidelines and are included in [ACQF Thematic Brief 1. Concepts and definitions](#) (updated in 2022) and in other sources listed in of this document.

Main terms:

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

International qualifications

International qualifications are awarded by a legally established international body (association, organisation, professional sector, or company) or by a national body acting on behalf of an international body, are used in more than one country and include learning outcomes assessed with reference to standards established by an international body.

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.

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, quality assurance 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.

Regional qualifications framework

A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a geographical region. 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.

Credit

'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.





Learning outcomes

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 descriptors

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

Knowledge

In the context of ACQF 'Knowledge' includes various kinds of knowledge such as facts, principles and theories in various areas.

Skills

In the context of ACQF 'Skills' refer to the ability to use knowledge to respond to information and address problems. Skills include cognitive, communication, digital, green, innovation, practical and social skills.

Autonomy and responsibility

In the context of ACQF 'Autonomy and responsibility' refers to the context and extent of the application of autonomy and responsibility.

Informal learning

Learning resulting from daily activities and experiences which is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learners' perspective.

Non-formal learning

Learning which takes place outside formal education and training through planned activities in terms of learning objectives and learning time and where some form of learning support is present.

Recognition of prior learning

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.

Recognition of foreign qualifications

A formal acknowledgment by a competent recognition authority of the validity and academic level of a foreign education qualification, of partial studies, or of prior learning for the purpose of providing an applicant with outcomes including, but not limited to: (a) the right to apply for admission to higher education; and/or (b) the possibility to seek employment opportunities.



5.2 Annex 2: Recommendation on minimum elements in qualifications design and structure

Contribution to enhanced transparency, quality and comparability of qualifications is a major objective of the ACQF. Across the continent, the information described in existing qualifications documents and databases varies in terms of structure, data fields and format of the main learning outcomes. The rich diversity of qualifications systems on the continent is not an impediment on the way towards comparability and readability of qualifications, which can ease recognition of qualifications of all levels, and contribute to improving mobility and to getting employment in jobs matching the acquired qualification.

ACQF countries are invited to consider the following elements in structuring the information on qualifications included in the NQF/NQS referenced to the ACQF. The ACQF implementation structure will provide practical guidance to national qualifications institutions on the implementation of this recommendation.

Elements for structuring the information on qualifications

a) Required

1. Title of qualification
2. Field of education and training (according to ISCED-2013, fields of education and training – ISCED-F 2013)¹¹
3. Country code
4. NQF level – ACQF level
5. Awarding body or competent authority
6. Description of the qualification: short statements on the learning outcomes – what the learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do
7. Credit points/notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (if available)
8. Expiry date (if available)
9. Link to qualifications database (if available)

b) Optional

1. External quality assurance/regulatory body
2. Ways to acquire the qualification
3. Relationship to occupations or occupational classification.

11. ISCED-F 2013, at: <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/isced-fields-of-education-and-training-2013-en.pdf>





5.3 Annex 3: Other reference documents supporting implementation

Other important policy and technical documents to be considered by national, regional and continental authorities:

- a) African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) – updated, validated version.
- b) Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States 2014. Adopted on 12 December 2014 and entered into force on 15 December 2019.
- c) Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education. Adopted on 25 November 2019. Not yet entered into force .

12. African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA), at: <https://haqaa2.obsglob.org/african-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-higher-education-asg-qa/>

13. UNESCO, Addis Convention, at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49282&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html#STATE_PARTIES

14. UNESCO, Global Convention. <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/higher-education/global-convention>

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