Project "Supporting Implementation of the African Continental Qualifications Framework" (ACQF-II)

Referencing to ACQF

Launching the pilot phase – at 2nd NQF Forum in Luanda, 05-06/September 2024
Methodology and Template for a streamlined approach (version 1 – 08/08/2024)

1. Introduction

The ACQF Policy Document, validated at the ACQF Addis Conference on 11-13 July 2023, defines the purposes and scope of the ACQF, its seven main areas of activity and the ACQF level descriptors (Annex 1 of this document).

Referencing is the first of these areas, to drive comparison, transparency, mutual understanding between frameworks and facilitate recognition and fair mobility of people. As a meta- and referencing qualifications framework for the African continent, the ACQF aims at connecting the national (and regional) qualifications frameworks of the community of African Union (AU) member states. This core function is based on the process of referencing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) or systems to the ACQF, following agreed criteria and procedures and peer review by the member countries.

The ACQF referencing approach, criteria and procedures are described in ACQF Guideline 3 (and the related Training Module 3). ACQF referencing has been a topic on the agenda of several multi-country and country-specific workshops, notably at the 1st NQF Forum (Kinshasa, 18-20 June 2024, see presentation).
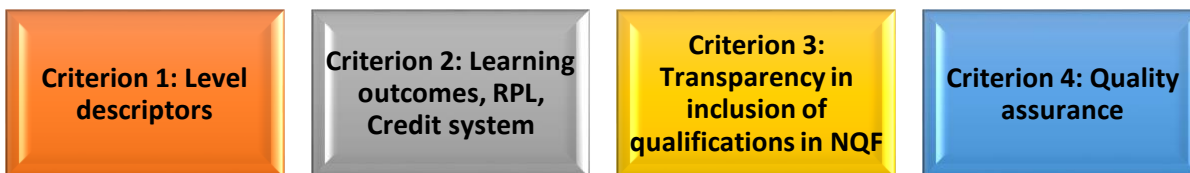
2. Referencing

Referencing of national (and regional) qualifications frameworks and systems to the ACQF is the core function of the ACQF as a meta qualifications framework for the African continent. Referencing to the ACQF is guided by four *Referencing Criteria* (Table 1) and a set of procedures and follow-up steps defined in the *Governance, procedures and follow-up step*s (Table 2). Moreover, it is important to note the Quality principles associated to referencing criterion 4 (Table 3).

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

The referencing process determines **correspondence level to level** between NQF and the ACQF. By this process, national qualifications included in the referenced NQF are in turn referenced to the ACQF. This is a key outcome of the process.

NQFs and their associated quality assurance arrangements are the key instruments for referencing to ACQF. Referencing 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.

Fig. 1: Referencing criteria – the essential topics

Criterion 1: Level descriptors	Criterion 2: Learning outcomes, RPL, Credit system	Criterion 3: Transparency in inclusion of qualifications in NQF	Criterion 4: Quality assurance

Table 1: ACQF referencing criteria

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

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

Governance procedures and follow-up
1. 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.
2. The relevant national quality assurance bodies state their agreement with the referencing outcome and referencing report.
3. 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.
4. Competent national bodies certify the referencing to the ACQF and publish one comprehensive, evidence-based referencing report, which addresses all referencing criteria.
5. 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.
6. 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.

Quality assurance guidelines of referencing to ACQF

The purpose of referencing criterion 4 is to establish: a) trust in the Quality assurance of the qualifications of ACQF Member countries, and b) a link between the Quality assurance of member states and the Quality assurance instruments available on the continent. The relevant ACQF guideline is Guideline 5: Quality assurance.

To clarify the interplay between quality assurance and referencing, the principles defined in Table 3 are recommended:

Table 3: Quality assurance guidelines of referencing to ACQF

> **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:
>
> 1. addresses the qualifications quality chain, from design of standards underpinning qualifications to learning, assessment, and certification;
>
> 2. addresses the application of the learning outcomes approach;
>
> 3. includes feedback instruments and processes supporting continuous quality improvement;
>
> 4. addresses internal and external quality assurance, and the regular review of quality assurance agencies;
>
> 5. is based on measurable objectives, standards, and guidelines for quality assurance;
>
> 6. is supported by resources; and
>
> 7. provides transparent information-sharing on results of evaluation.
>
> 8. takes account of African Union policy orientations such as African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (for higher education), to which both internal and external quality assurance adhere.

One objective of the ACQF is to foster trust in the quality of qualifications of the Member States. The referencing report needs to describe and explain the key national Quality assurance systems that operate in the country. Given that there may be several Quality assurance systems operating in one country, the referencing process is an opportunity to bring coherence to the system. It also presents an opportunity to present the country's response to the quality assurance of the learning outcomes approach used in the country.

Benefits of referencing

Referencing is a process aimed at comparing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the ACQF, thereby building on national ownership, collaboration between relevant institutions and stakeholders, provision of evidence for transparency of the analysis and reporting on all referencing criteria and procedures.

Referencing to ACQF is good for the countries, (and regions) 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.

At national level, referencing contributes to self-assessment of the status of the national qualifications framework and system to identify areas for reform and improvement and to draw attention to the NQF among national policy institutions and stakeholders. At continental level and between countries, referencing to the ACQF of a significant and increasing number of national qualifications or systems leads to the creation of a common area of trusted qualifications and enables the transformative potential of the ACQF for the continent.

Qualifications and Credentials Platform

The ACQF is a framework of national qualifications frameworks. National qualifications are not to be registered in the ACQF because they are quality assured and registered in the respective NQFs. Without prejudice to this attribute, African Union member states are encouraged to make use of the ACQF Qualifications and Credentials Platform (database) to publish information on their NQF and their national qualifications. Thanks to its scale and international outreach, the ACQF database holds multiple benefits for the national qualifications institutions.

Post-referencing use of ACQF levels on qualifications documents

Further to the referencing process, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications framework or system (certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent qualifications authorities should contain a clear reference to the appropriate ACQF level.

Internationalisation and comparison / referencing to other frameworks

As the ACQF develops, comparison with other meta-frameworks and referencing with African regional frameworks can be planned and conducted. The ACQF aims to enhance information sharing on qualifications and NQFs in Africa and globally, building on referencing outcomes, the ACQF website and other transparency tools. The ACQF will cooperate with the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (Addis Convention)[1] and with the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education[2].

3. Piloting referencing to ACQF: a streamlined template and process

ACQF-II project is mandated to support the pilot referencing of NQFs (and RQFs) to ACQF. This process is based on the above-mentioned Guideline 3, but is conducted through a streamlined approach, based on group work and peer learning between the interested countries.

This first pilot phase is conducted in a period of 4 months – September-December 2024 – guided by the indicated sources, this template, presential meetings at ACQF-II workshops and webinars.

Overall Plan of the Pilot Referencing Process

- Luanda: 05/09/2024. Launch the pilot referencing process. First round of pilot presentations. Debate.
- Nairobi: 04/10/2024: Second round of pilot referencing presentations. Debate.
- Seychelles: 07/11/2024: Third round of pilot referencing presentations. Debate
- Webinar 1: 19/11/2024 (indicative): Feedback. Recommendations.
- Webinar 2: 28/11/2024 (indicative): Review final pilot reports.
- Webinar 3: 10/12/2024 (indicative): Feedback. Conclusions. Roadmap.

4. Template

This is the proposed template for your pilot referencing exercise and brief report.

Outline of the brief referencing report

1. Summary (*indicatively: 1 page*)
2. Structure of education and training system. Overview of NQF – stage of development and implementation (*indicatively: 2 pages*)
3. Referencing criterion 1 (*indicatively: 2 pages + annexes*)
4. Referencing criterion 2 (*indicatively: 3 pages*)
5. Referencing criterion 3 (*indicatively: 2 pages*)
6. Referencing criterion 4 (*indicatively: 3 pages*)
7. Governance procedures and follow-up of referencing (*indicatively: 1 page*)
8. Issues to be addressed. Conclusions. (*indicatively: 1 page*)

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[1] UNESCO, Addis Convention, at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49282&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html#STATE_PARTIES. Adopted on 12 December 2014 and entered into force on 15 December 2019.
[2] UNESCO, Global Convention, at: https://www.unesco.org/en/education/higher-education/global-convention. Adopted in November 2019.

9. Sources: national legal basis, guidelines, analyses, statistics; international (regional, continental, global) sources as adequate

Brief referencing report - Total: indicatively – 15 pages + annexes

Chapters 3 to 6 address each of the 4 referencing criteria. Therefore, they are the most important for the pilot referencing presentations. National referencing teams draft these very brief chapters, focusing on the fundamental features and evidence demonstrating the extent to which the NQF meets the requirements of the 4 criteria. The guiding themes proposed in Table 4 are useful to structure content and maintain the focus on

Table 4: Guiding themes by referencing criterion

Criterion 1: level descriptors	Criterion 2: learning outcomes, RPL, Credit system	Criterion 3: transparent procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the NQF; register of qualifications	Criterion 4: Quality assurance
1. Level structure of the NQF.	1. Learning outcomes: supported and promoted by NQF?	1. Scope of NQF: levels, sub-sectors; formal, non-formal, informal learning. Micro-credentials. Qualifications not included in NQF.	1. National Quality assurance framework refers to NQF and is compatible with Quality assurance guidelines of referencing.
2. Domains of descriptors. Definition of the domains.	2. Application in all sub-sectors? Which sub-sectors more advanced (TVET, general education, Higher education, adult learning)	2. Policy, procedures for development of new qualifications; renewal of existing qualifications: brief description. Role of qualifications authority, regulators.	2. Quality assurance of NQF and register of qualifications: brief description.
3. Qualifications map	3. RPL: policy, guidelines in place? RPL professionals? Status of implementation (starting, advanced) – by sub-sectors.	3. Policy, procedures for registration of qualifications. Role of qualifications authority, regulators.	3.Transparency, dissemination of Quality assurance regulations; support to application, capacity development.
4. Comparison to ACQF level descriptors	4. Credit accumulation and transfer system: policy, guidelines in place? Status of implementation (starting, advanced) – by sub-sectors.	4. Information on qualifications accessible in register / database of qualifications. Management of register / database.	4. Data, analysis on quality and effectiveness of qualifications for users, labour market and society.

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5. Pilot Referencing Report

Country:

National qualifications institution responsible and leading the pilot referencing exercise:

Drafting team:

Date of report:

1. Summary (*indicatively: 1 page*)

2. Structure of education and training system. Overview of NQF – stage of development and implementation (*indicatively: 2 pages*)

3. Referencing criterion 1 (*indicatively: 2 pages + annexes*)

4. Referencing criterion 2 (*indicatively: 3 pages*)

5. Referencing criterion 3 (*indicatively: 2 pages*)

6. Referencing criterion 4 (*indicatively: 3 pages*)

7. Governance procedures and follow-up of referencing (*indicatively: 1 page*)

8. Issues to be addressed. Conclusions. (*indicatively: 1 page*)

9. Sources: national legal basis, guidelines, handbooks, academic articles, analyses, news, statistics; international (regional, continental, global) sources as adequate

Annex 1: 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*
<u>Level 1:</u> 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
<u>Level 2:</u> 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
<u>Level 3:</u> 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
<u>Level 4:</u> 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
<u>Level 5:</u> 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
<u>Level 6:</u> 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 as a domain of level descriptors has three elements: self, group outcomes and resources.

Annex 2: Level descriptors of the NQF