

► Development of the South Asia regional qualifications framework: Technical Meeting#1

28 February 2022



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First published 2022

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Title of publication: Development of the South Asia regional qualifications framework:
Technical Meeting#1 [2022]

ISBN: 9789220377345 (web PDF)

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Acknowledgements

This report is being produced under the initiative of the Governance of Labour Migration in South and South - East Asia (GOALS) Programme, which is convened as a UN Joint Programme between International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Under the auspices of GOALS programme, ILO is assisting the South Asian member states, through consultative process, to develop and implement Regional Qualifications Framework. As part of this process, first Regional Technical Meeting of the initiative was organized on 15 and 16 February 2022. This report is a documentation of the proceedings and outcomes of the first Technical Meeting.

This report is prepared by Ms Andrea Bateman, ILO Consultant and education expert. Ms Bateman is assisting the South Asian member states in development of the regional qualifications framework.

Technical inputs and contribution to the report was made by ILO officials Mr Gabriel Bordado, Skills and Employability Specialist for South Asia, and Mr Amish Karki, Technical Officer, GOALS programme. Publishing support was provided by Ms Akriti Paracer and Ms Shubha Gupta from ILO DWT/CO – New Delhi.

The ILO extends its acknowledgement to Mensa Design Private Limited for their contribution to editing and designing of this report.

List of acronyms

| | |
|-----------|---|
| ADD | Abu Dhabi Dialogue |
| AQRF | ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework |
| AQAF | ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| EQF | European Qualifications Framework |
| EU | European Union |
| HE | Higher Education |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| QF | Qualifications Framework |
| RQF | Regional Qualifications Framework |
| SAARC | South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation |
| SAARC QRF | South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Qualifications Reference Framework |
| SAQRF | South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |



Background

The project aims to develop a regional qualifications framework, sometimes referred to as a common reference framework for South Asian countries.¹ It is envisaged that the framework will provide the basis for recognition of mobility of labour and strengthen common understanding and cooperation in the region. The development process of the regional qualifications framework is being supported by the Governance of Labour Migration in South and South East Asia (GOALS) programme.²

The Technical Meeting#1 is part of a series of five technical meetings over approximately 18 months to develop and refine a regional qualifications framework ready for endorsement.

Technical Meeting#1

Purpose

The purpose of the meeting was to:

1. Provide an update by representatives of member states (MS) on the status of their national qualification frameworks (NQFs) (or systems).
2. Enhance MS understanding of regional qualifications frameworks and the strategic purpose of referencing.
3. Introduce the various components of a regional qualifications' framework.
4. Introduce the first draft of the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF).

The meeting was held (virtually) on 15 and 16 February 2022, with each day being a 3-hour session. The agenda is included in Appendix 1.

Attendance

The Technical Meeting had strong attendance across all participating MS and ILO representatives. In total, there were 45 participants on the first day and 35 participants on the second. Of these, there were 25 MS representatives registered to attend over the two days, but a greater number than those registered were in attendance. Representatives from the MS were mainly from technical vocational and educational training (TVET) and higher education competent bodies (e.g. quality assurance agencies, peak policy or funding bodies) with additional representatives from agencies responsible for migration or labour. There was one representative from an education and training provider. A list of participants is included in Annexure 5.

MS are reminded that additional MS representatives may attend the succeeding technical meetings.

¹ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is noted that given the current situation in Afghanistan, there were no invitees or attendees.

² GOALS is a Joint Regional Programme between the International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). The programme is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Summary of Day 1

The Technical Meeting was opened by Ms Dagmar Walter, Director, ILO DWT/CO-New Delhi. Ms Walter welcomed participants and noted that there will be a series of five technical meetings to develop the regional qualifications framework. Ms Walter noted that it was an extremely important initiative to recognize qualifications and to facilitate and improve labour mobility. She acknowledged that this initiative has been mentioned across a range of fora, including SAARC and other policy dialogues, but has been initiated primarily from MS, and that the ILO had recently undertaken research into the viability of such a regional qualifications framework.

Mr Shabarinath Nair, Labour Migration Specialist, ILO, provided further context and background to this project, including a focus on how to develop skills and link them to qualifications and labour migration. He underscored the number of workers involved in labour mobility initiatives in South Asia, given the size of the region, which makes the topic a priority for many MS.

Each member state was invited to make preliminary comments and also to provide a brief overview of the status of their NQFs. In doing so, they were asked to provide the following:

If NQF in place:

1. Overview and scope of the NQF
2. Status (level of implementation) of NQF, including what has worked well or not so well
3. Plans for NQF implementation

OR if there was no NQF in place:

1. Status (level of implementation/progress in drafting) of NQF
 2. Proposed scope of the NQF
 3. Plans for NQF implementation
-

The presenters for each member state were as follows:

- ▶ Bangladesh: Dr Omar Faruque
 - ▶ Bhutan: Ms Sangye Choden and Ms Yeshey Khandu
 - ▶ India: Dr Gopu Kumar and Mr Sushil Aggarwal
 - ▶ Maldives: Dr Abdul Hannan Waheed
 - ▶ Nepal: Mr Hari Lamsal
 - ▶ Pakistan: Mr Sulaiman Ahmad
 - ▶ Sri Lanka: Dr Janaka Jayalath and Mr G M R D Aponso.
-

| Member States | Notes |
|---------------|--|
| Bangladesh | Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework was approved in June 2021; this is an eight-level framework, scoping schools, Madrasas, TVET and higher education. |
| Bhutan | The Bhutan Qualifications Framework established in 2010 is now under review. It is an eight-level framework, with the scope addressing school, vocational, university and monastic education. Issues with implementation included rigid system of credit transfer, RPL, complexities of monastic education, compartmentalization across different levels of education and lack of strong legal framework. There is consideration of one quality assurance agency. Full implementation of reviewed BQF in 2022–2023. The Bhutan Vocational Qualification Framework comprises five vocational qualification levels (three National Certificate levels and two National Diploma levels) embedded within the Bhutan Qualifications Framework and the TVET system and competency standards were explained. Within this system, accreditation of institutions has not been implemented. |
| India | An overview of the National Skill Qualifications Framework and the National Higher Education Qualification Framework was provided. |
| Maldives | The Maldives National Qualifications Framework has been in place since 2001 and has been reviewed in 2011 and 2017. |
| Nepal | An overview of the National Qualifications Framework for Nepal was provided showing the linkages between sectors and alignment to the levels. The framework was approved in 2020. |
| Pakistan | In 2009, work was started on an NQF, and it was implemented in 2015. It is an eight-level framework. Higher education is level five and above, and up to four levels are schools and TVET. |
| Sri Lanka | The presentation provided the status of the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework and the National Vocational Framework of Sri Lanka. |

Following these preliminary sessions, Ms Andrea Bateman provided an overview of key terms related to qualifications framework (e.g. qualifications system, quality assurance, national qualifications frameworks and regional qualifications frameworks, referencing), which aimed to provide a common basis of understanding prior to the second day's discussions.

Summary of Day 2

Opened by Mr Gabriel Bordado, Skills and Employability Specialist, ILO.

Focussed on two key documents:

- ▶ Draft SAQRF
- ▶ Draft a joint media release

Prior to the meeting, participants were provided with these two documents for comment. The Project Consultant talked the participants through the document, focusing on explaining key features and decisions made in the initial design. Although the timelines between the circulation of the documents and the meeting was quite short, the participants did provide significant comments and inputs on the technical aspects of the draft RQF and the joint media release.

Throughout the two days, eight polls were conducted to ascertain opinions from within the group in regard to key aspects of the regional qualifications framework. It was clarified by the ILO Project Consultant that the polls were only used as indications, and the refinement of the regional qualifications framework would continue until April–May 2023.

Draft South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework

The draft SAQRF was presented to the participants and key questions were posed throughout. The draft SAQRF with guiding questions is included in Appendix 2.

The areas for discussion and reflection included:

- ▶ title
- ▶ purpose
- ▶ scope
- ▶ principles
- ▶ structure: learning outcomes, eight levels (and their order), three domains
- ▶ referencing process: criteria and obligations, quality assurance criteria
- ▶ credit approach
- ▶ glossary
- ▶ governance

The ILO Project Consultant utilized the time to discuss each aspect of the draft RQF and also explained in some areas why a decision was made, e.g. proposed eight levels.

The polls during this session indicated the following:

1. The key aim of the RQF was to not only create a common group but also to link externally the region to other RQFs and NQFs.
2. The title as proposed was the preferred option.
3. The purposes were varied but included:
 - ▶ improving transparency of NQFs and their qualifications
 - ▶ improving recognition of qualifications
 - ▶ harmonizing education/qualification across the region
 - ▶ facilitating labour mobility
 - ▶ supporting and linking to other regional initiatives
 - ▶ facilitating student mobility

4. An eight-level framework was preferred over 10 levels, and level 1 should be at the bottom of the table.
5. Three domains were preferred, namely, knowledge, skills and autonomy and responsibility.

These were only preliminary findings but do give some guidance to further reflection and consideration.

Draft joint media release

The participants were provided with the draft of the joint media release, and it was refined during the meeting. The document as agreed to at the end of the meeting is included Appendix 3.

Discussions focused on the key objectives of the proposed regional qualifications framework. The key objectives were noted as follows:

- ▶ To facilitate regional cooperation and recognition of qualifications.
- ▶ To facilitate worker and learner mobility within and outside the region through transparency and trust in NQFs.
- ▶ To promote the strengthening of the quality and effectiveness of MS's national qualifications systems.³

The draft statement was to be circulated by the ILO following the meeting for any additional comments and suggestions.

Closing session

Mr Gabriel Bordado, NQF Specialist, ILO closed the meeting highlighting that there is time over the duration of the project to finalize the RQF design, and that all key documents will need to be approved by the MS. He also noted that this is the start of consideration for labour mobility within and external to the region.

Outcomes

The first Technical Meeting provided a valuable basis for collaboration among MS, and there was support for continuing the development of the RQF.

Comments for future meetings

It is suggested that we ensure a whole of government approach to ensure that all relevant parties within a MS are involved. This will 'smooth' acceptance of the framework especially at the endorsement stage. The ILO should also encourage quality assurance/qualifications authorities to include additional staff in the technical meetings as a form of professional development for them.

³ Including the NQF and quality assurance arrangements.

Appendix 1: Agenda



Meeting Agenda for Technical Meeting #1 South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF)

15 – 16 FEBRUARY 2022

09:00 am – 12:00 pm (PKT & MVT)

09:30 am – 12:30 pm (IST & SLST)

09:45 am – 12:45 pm (NPT)

10:00 am – 01:00 pm (BST)

| Description | Technical Meeting #1: Developing an internationally robust regional qualifications framework for South Asia |
|--------------------|--|
| Objective | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Update MS on status of their NQFs (or systems) 2. Enhance MS understanding of regional qualifications frameworks and the strategic purpose of referencing 3. Introduce the various components of a regional qualifications' framework 4. Introduce the first draft of the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework. |
| Participants | South Asia member representatives including those NQF (or sector) technical experts, those involved in the quality assurance of qualifications systems (or sub systems), those involved in bilateral or regional labour or student migration or trade agreements. |
| Link | Zoom Meeting Link – https://bit.ly/3rrJHP5 |
| Meeting start time | Maldives and Pakistan 9.00am |
| | India and Sri Lanka 9.30am |
| | Nepal 9.45am |
| | Bhutan and Bangladesh 10.00am |



► Day 1: 15 Feb 2022

| Date/Time (IST time) | Session | Speakers | Chair |
|----------------------|---|---|----------------|
| 09:30 – 09:40 | Opening session: ► Welcome by Ms Dagmar Walter | Director, ILO DWT/CO-New Delhi | |
| 09:40 – 9:50 | ► Background to the Project | Labour Migration Specialist, ILO Mr Shabarinath Nair | |
| 9:50 – 11:00 | ► Opening remarks from each MS providing an overview of the status of/progress to an NQF | MS representatives | |
| 11:00 – 11:10 | Break 10 minutes | | |
| 11:10 – 11:30 | Session 1: Setting the scene of NQFs and RQFs ► Setting the scene ► NQFs vs RQFs | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | |
| 11:30 – 11:40 | Q&A | ALL | Mr Amish Karki |
| 11:40 – 12:00 | Session 2: Key Components of an RQF ► What are the key components of an RQF? | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | |
| 12:00 – 12:10 | Q&A | ALL | Mr Amish Karki |
| Closing | | | |
| 12:20 – 12:30 | ► Summary up of outcomes of Day 1, and preparation for Day 2 | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | |



► Day 2: 16 February 2022

| Date/Time (IST time) | Session | Speakers | Chair |
|-------------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| 09.30 – 09.50 | Opening session: ► Welcome and focus for today | Skills and Employability Specialist, ILO Mr Gabriel Bordado | |
| 09.50 – 11.00 | Session 3: Draft SAQRF and guiding questions ► Draft SAQRF – walk through the draft and guiding questions | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | Mr Gabriel Bordado |
| 11.00 – 11.10 | Q&A | ALL | Mr Gabriel Bordado |
| 11.10 – 11.20 | Break 10 minutes | | |
| 11.20 – 11.50 | Session 4: Draft Joint Statement ► Draft Joint Statement – with inputs and suggestions from MS | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | Mr Shabarinath Nair |
| 11.50 – 12.10 | Session 5: Way Forward Interim tasks and plans for next Forum: ► SAQRF Task Force members ► MS feedback on Draft RQF questions – led by SAQRF Task Force ► Country overviews & PPTs (and preparation for Forum #2) ► Update on Repository for RQF documents | ILO RQF Project Consultant Ms Andrea Bateman | Mr Amish Karki |
| 12.10 – 12.20 | Q&A | ALL | Mr Amish Karki |
| Closing | | | |
| 12.20 – 12.30 | ► Summary up of outcomes of Day 2 | Skills and Employability Specialist, ILO Mr Gabriel Bordado | |
| 12.30 – 12.45 | ► Closing comments and remarks from MS representatives and ILO | MS representatives and ILO representatives | Mr Gabriel Bordado |

Appendix 2: Draft South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework

1. Background

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. SAARC comprises of eight MS: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on 17 January 1987.

The objectives of the Association outlined in the SAARC Charter are to:

- ▶ promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life; accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potential;
- ▶ promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia;
- ▶ contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems;
- ▶ promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields;
- ▶ strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- ▶ strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests;
- ▶ cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

The New Delhi Declaration on Education (31 October 2014) resolved to foster quality education and expand the scope of cooperation, which would involve the formulation of a *SAARC Framework for Action for Education 2030*. The Declaration resolved to focus on, among others, the following:

- ▶ Enhancing the availability, accessibility and quality of secondary education.
- ▶ Expanding opportunities for skill development including technical and vocational education and training.
- ▶ Revitalizing higher education, including facilitating mutual recognition of qualification and mobility of students.

At the Heads of State or Government 18th Meeting (Kathmandu, November 2014), the leaders expressed their strong determination to deepen regional integration for peace, stability and prosperity in South Asia by intensifying cooperation. The leaders also renewed their commitment to achieve a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a phased and planned manner through a Free Trade Area, a Customs Union, a Common Market and a Common Economic and Monetary Union. The leaders also expressed their

resolve of education for all and ensuring quality education. The leaders also agreed to “collaborate and cooperate on safe, orderly and responsible management of labour migration from South Asia to ensure safety, security and well-being of their migrant workers in the destination countries outside the region.”

The *SAARC Plan of Action for Cooperation on Matters Related to Migration* (adopted in Kathmandu, May 2016) endorses the development of a South Asian Qualifications Reference Framework:

Developing a South Asian qualifications reference framework...would facilitate harmonization of skills qualifications at the regional level and also facilitate enhanced recognition of skills of migrant workers from South Asia in the destination countries.

The *SAARC Framework for Action for Education 2030* was endorsed in September 2016 at the Third Technical Meeting of senior officials on education in South Asia. The senior officials identified 12 priority areas which included, among others, the following:

- ▶ improving learning outcomes and promoting quality education;
 - ▶ promoting acquisition of skills for life and for work;
 - ▶ improving education governance;
 - ▶ ensuring lifelong learning opportunities;
 - ▶ strengthening partnership and collaboration.
-

At the ILO-MSDE Inter-Regional Expert Forum on Skills and Migration in the South Asia – Middle East Corridor in New Delhi (July 2017), one of the key recommendations was to

“Work with the SAARC Secretariat, and through the existing SAARC frameworks on education and on migration, to endorse the development of a South Asian Qualification Reference Framework. The Framework would function as a mechanism to enable comparisons of qualifications across SAARC Member States, also facilitate enhanced recognition of skills of migrant workers from South Asia in countries of destination.”

The Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) has identified skills recognition as one of four priority areas. In the strategy proposed for cooperating on skills certification in the Asia-GCC migration corridors (June 2017), the ADD puts forward two important steps that countries of origin can take:

“Countries without a qualifications framework which maps to international standards should accelerate the development of the framework without which MoUs of mutual recognition of skills cannot happen.”

“Countries of origin that have a qualifications framework in place may want to proactively engage in MoUs with GCC countries to recognize equivalences (and other third-party countries). The recognized mapping of their qualifications framework to third party countries can then be shared with GCC countries transparently so GCC countries can consider recognizing the same mapping through their existing partners.”

The zero-draft of the Global Compact on Migration (February 2018) contains a dedicated section on skills:

“We commit to invest in innovative solutions that facilitate recognition of skills, qualifications and competences of migrant workers at all skills levels, and promote skills development for the full employability of migrants in labour markets of countries of origin and destination.”

The initial development of the SAQRF was supported by the ILO and began in mid to late 2020 with a survey and interviews of representatives culminating in a background report (Bateman 2020a). The report was followed by consultations on a concept proposal (Bateman 2020b), with a final draft Concept Design for the regional qualifications framework and a roadmap for finalization/endorsement and implementation (December 2020, Bateman 2020c).

*Insert here a chronological timeline for development and endorsement.**

The QRF was endorsed by the XXXX.

The South Asia MS acknowledge the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) as being benchmarks for the development of the SAQRF.

Taking into account the above-mentioned political and legal contexts and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the SAQRF is established as a policy and instrument of regional scope to deliver on the objectives of enhanced transparency of qualifications and mutual trust between qualifications frameworks and systems for lifelong learning in South Asia. It supports and supplements activities of MS and should be implemented in accordance with national law and practice.

-
1. **Is the title of the RQF appropriate?**
 2. **Other options:**
 - ▶ **South Asia Regional Qualifications Framework**
 - ▶ **South Asia Qualifications Framework**
 - ▶ **SAARC Qualifications Framework**
 - ▶ **SAARC Qualifications Reference Framework**
-

*The qualifications referencing framework once endorsed by member states will be added to this section.

2. Purpose

The main purpose of the SAQRF is to enable the referencing of national qualifications frameworks or systems, and therefore enable comparisons of all types and levels of qualifications within participating member states' national qualifications framework or system, focusing on referencing their qualification levels to the levels of the SAQRF.

These comparisons of qualifications across the South Asia MS aim to:

- ▶ improve the recognition of qualifications;
- ▶ improve student and labour mobility;
- ▶ improve transparency of qualifications, qualification systems and quality assurance arrangements;
- ▶ improve recognition of learning achieved outside formal education;
- ▶ support national qualifications frameworks that facilitate lifelong learning;
- ▶ strengthen regional identity and support other regional initiatives;
- ▶ provide a link to other regional qualifications framework internationally.

3. Are these purposes appropriate? Any more to add, or to delete?

4. Is the order appropriate?

3. Scope

The SAQRF is a common reference framework and functions as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across the South Asia MS.

The SAQRF acknowledges all forms of learning (non-formal, informal and formal) across all education and training sectors.

5. Is the scope appropriate?

6. Should the scope refer to linkages with other South Asia regional developments in qualifications recognition and common skills standards?

4. Principles

The SAQRF:

1. is based on agreed understandings between MS;
2. aims to be a neutral influence on qualifications frameworks in MS;

3. does not replace or define qualifications frameworks in MS and does not describe specific qualifications; in addition, specific qualifications should only be referenced to the SAQRF by way of the relevant qualifications framework (or qualifications system).
4. is based on a hierarchy of learning outcomes with increasing levels of complexity and proficiency. These learning outcomes will contribute to the shift to learning outcomes in each member state's education and training system, and serve as a translation device to better understand different qualifications systems and their qualifications.
5. supports the transparency, comparability and transportability of its people's qualifications;
6. supports lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning and credit transfer systems;
7. allows for voluntary engagement and for its MS to determine when they will undertake the referencing process. The SAQRF and referencing process should be implemented in accordance with each member state's laws and practices.
8. allows for MS to revise and update their referencing reports through a new referencing activity as their national qualifications framework (or systems) change over time;
9. shall be reviewed and evaluated in consultation with MS and relevant regional stakeholders and updated, if necessary.

-
7. **Are these principles appropriate? Is the order of these principles appropriate?**
 8. **Is it clear that the Regional Qualifications Framework aims to NOT impinge upon national QFs/systems? Refer to Principle 2.**
 9. **Is it clear that those Member States without a sectoral QF or NQF can still reference key qualification types? Refer to Principle 3. Would the last part of this statement be best included in the Referencing section?**
-

5. Structure

The main features of the SAQRF include its learning outcomes approach, the specification of the eight level descriptors and the referencing criteria.

The level descriptors are based on the notion of competence, using the following:

- ▶ knowledge and skills
- ▶ context
- ▶ application (incorporating responsibility and autonomy).

Knowledge is defined as the body of facts, principles, theories and practices related to a field of work or study. Within the SAQRF, knowledge is described as theoretical, factual or technical.

Skills is defined as the 'ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems'. In the context of the SAQRF, 'skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)'.⁴

⁴ EQF 2017, p. 20.

Context is defined as the types of tasks, problems or issues to be resolved in a field of work or study.

Application is defined as the ability of the learner to apply the knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility.⁵

These descriptors assume that the:

- ▶ level of learning outcomes incorporate those in the lower levels;
- ▶ domains at one level should be interpreted together to provide an understanding of the level.

The level descriptors are included in Annexure 1 and were adapted from the EQF level descriptors.

Knowing that the primary aim of an RQF affects the decision of the number of levels and domains in an RQF, the primary aim of the SAQRF may be to:

- ▶ bring member states' qualifications systems together;
- ▶ link with other RQFs (or NQFs) external to the community (e.g. EQF, AQRF as being the main two RQFs);
- ▶ Or both 1 & 2?

10. Annexure 1 places level 1 at the top of the table. Is this appropriate? What does this say about the SAQRF and lifelong learning?

11. Given the above, what would be the optimum number of levels?

12. Three domains are being used: Knowledge and Skills, Context and Application (Responsibility and Autonomy). What should be the key domains? Should Context and Application be collapsed into one domain? For greatest portability, should the domains be similar to, and align with, the EQF and AQRF?

13. Are the definitions for the current three domains suitable?

6. Referencing Criteria and Obligations

The aim of any referencing activity is to promote understanding and engender trust in a member state's qualifications that are part of a national qualifications framework or system.

The referencing activity culminates in a member state referencing report. To provide for a consistent approach to referencing—the MS have agreed on the referencing criteria and the obligations of the MS and the SAQRF governing body—refer to Governance.

The referencing process also requires some key conditions to be met in terms of process and ensuring that the outcomes of the referencing process are shared with MS' stakeholders and are readily accessible.

The Referencing Criteria and Obligations are outlined in Annexure 2.

⁵ EQF 2017, p. 20.

The referencing process requires that each SA member state establish a National SAQRF Committee (NSC) of key stakeholders to coordinate the referencing process. To strengthen the referencing process, to provide for capacity development and to engender trust in the process, the SA MS have agreed that the referencing process will include an observer from one of the other MS.

EQF has 10 referencing criteria and AQRF has 11. To minimize the referencing burden, it is proposed that some items are treated as obligations and do not need a written response but may need to be included in the report as annexures.

- 14. Does the separation of the Referencing Criteria and Referencing Obligation assist in minimizing the referencing report burden?**
 - 15. How will we treat Referencing Obligation 3? Referencing Obligation 3 logically appears as an obligation in the first cycle of referencing but would be more appropriate as Referencing Criteria in subsequent referencing cycles.**
 - 16. Should any Referencing Obligations be moved to a Referencing Criteria?**
-

7. Quality Assurance

Trust in a member state's qualifications that are part of an NQF or system is essential for supporting the mobility of learners and workers within the region and external to the region. Quality assurance of qualifications and the provision of the qualifications through education and training providers is critical to engendering trust.

Quality assurance is 'focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled'. In relation to training and educational services, 'quality assurance refers to planned and systematic processes that provide confidence in educational services provided by training providers under the remit of relevant authorities or bodies. It is a set of activities established by these relevant authorities or bodies to ensure that educational services satisfy customer requirements in a systematic, reliable fashion'.⁶

Quality assurance of qualifications is a member state's responsibility and should provide for transparency of process and outcomes.

The SA region does not have a common agreement or set of principles for a quality assurance framework at a regional level. However, the SAQRF could support and link with such a regional quality assurance framework.

The referencing process requires the MS to not only reference their NQF (or system), but also to describe the quality assurance processes linked to their qualifications. In the absence of a regional quality assurance framework or principles, the SAQRF draws on the experience of the EQF and has agreed to a set of Quality Assurance Criteria.

The Quality Assurance Criteria, agreed to by MS to be considered in the referencing process, is included in Annexure 2.

⁶ Bateman et al., 2009, p. 8.

The EQF uses quality assurance criteria similar to that included in Annexure 2. AQRF uses international or regional quality assurance frameworks as its basis for comparability. South Asia does not have an agreed regional quality assurance framework, and therefore criteria are used in Annexure 3.

17. Are these criteria clear?

18. Is there anything more that needs to be added?

8. Credit Systems

Credit systems assist learners to progress in their learning and assist in transfer across qualifications, qualifications systems and countries. Credit systems allow learners to accumulate and transfer credit related to learning outcomes.

Credit systems operate at institutional, national and regional levels. The SAQRF does not include any structures related to credit or a credit system. However, it encourages MS to develop credit systems within their own context, and it supports a link with a future regional credit transfer system.

19. Are these credit transfer statements sufficient at this stage in the development of regional initiatives? And do they accommodate the possibility that the region will implement a regional credit transfer system?

9. Glossary

The agreed terms and understandings are included in Annexure 4.

The agreed terms and understandings do not impinge on agreed terms and understandings within the qualifications system of MS, but are used to come to a common understanding of practices.

The terms included in the Glossary are not mandatory but assist with explaining the qualifications system and its quality assurance arrangements. Terms vary across MS and internationally. These terms can assist in drafting referencing reports.

20. Are these terms sufficiently broad to accommodate understandings in MS?

21. Are there any other terms that require explaining within a qualifications system?

10. Governance

The oversight of the SAQRF will be managed by the SAQRF Technical Committee. This committee shall:

1. provide high level technical advice and engage with policy issues arising from the implementation of the SAQRF;

2. foster collaboration amongst the Member States
3. facilitate the resolution of issues with agreements on common approaches and understanding culminating in briefing papers and guidelines;
4. provide for the consideration of referencing reports and confirming whether the submission meets the SAQRF Referencing Criteria;
5. promote the SAQRF and quality assurance of education in all sectors within its Member States;
6. monitor the implementation of the SAQRF and of the Technical Committee's remit;
7. facilitate capacity development of Member States in terms of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance;
8. promote the SAQRF to the international education and training community.

Representation shall be one member per South Asia member state. Election of Chair and Vice Chair shall be determined on an alphabetical basis, appointed for one year, with the Vice Chair continuing as the Chair for one year. Decision-making processes shall be based on consensus. Members may draw on additional expertise for their deliberations. MS may determine the number of observers present from their member state.

Further governance arrangements are stipulated in the decisions made by the Technical Committee.

There are multiple levels of governance:

- ▶ **Overall governance ('home' and secretariat support) for the SAQRF – to be determined at a later date**
- ▶ **Operational governance – through a committee that has responsibility for its management**
- ▶ **National level linkages.**

The operational governance is through a SAQRF Technical Committee. Broad roles and responsibilities are included here.

22. Is there anything that needs to be added? Changed?

23. Should there be a 'terms of reference' developed and added to this document? Or can it be a different document? Is the 'terms of reference' as documented here sufficient?

National representation shall be through a NSC acting as the interface between the SAQRF Technical Committee and the member state. Membership shall be determined by the member state but should include nominated representatives of the relevant competent bodies responsible for the NQF (or system) and other main stakeholder bodies in the country. The NSC should have expertise in the NQF/NQS and related policy positions of the member state it represents.

The NSC is responsible for:

1. updating and reporting to the NSC on changes and progress in qualifications systems within its own country;
2. developing a nationally agreed on roadmap for referencing;
3. steering and guiding the referencing process;
4. ensuring the quality of the referencing milestones and outcomes and producing a validated report.

There are multiple levels of governance:

- ▶ Overall governance (home and secretariat support) for the SAQRF – to be determined at a later date
- ▶ Operational governance – through a committee that is responsible for its management
- ▶ National level linkages.

This section outlines the key roles of the NSC.

24. Is there sufficient information here in the terms of reference?
 25. Is there anything that needs to be added? Changed?
-

Annexure 1: Level descriptors for formal, non-formal and informal learning

| Level | Knowledge and Skills | Context | Application (Responsibility and Autonomy) |
|-------|---|---|--|
| | Learning outcomes include: | Learning outcomes include the ability: | Learning outcomes involve: |
| 1 | Basic general knowledge and skills | To carry out simple tasks | Direct supervision in a structured context |
| 2 | Basic factual knowledge of a field; with basic cognitive and practical skills | To carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools | Supervision with some autonomy |
| 3 | Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field; with a range of cognitive and practical skills | To accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information | Ability to take responsibility for completion of tasks, and to adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems |
| 4 | Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts; with a broad range of cognitive and practical skills | To generate solutions to specific problems in a field | Ability to exercise self-management within guidelines and in contexts that are usually predictable but subject to change |
| 5 | Comprehensive and specialized, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field, and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge; with a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills | To develop creative solutions to abstract problems | Ability to exercise management and supervision in contexts where there is unpredictable change; and to review and develop performance of self and others |
| 6 | Advanced knowledge in a field involving a critical understanding of theories and principles; with advanced skills demonstrating mastery and innovation | To solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialized field | Ability to manage complex technical or professional activities or projects; taking responsibility for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ decision-making in unpredictable contexts ▶ managing professional development of individuals or groups |
| 7 | Highly specialized knowledge (some of which is at the forefront of a field) as the basis for original thinking and/or research and a critical awareness of issues within a field and at the interface between different fields; with specialized problem-solving skills | To develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields in research or innovation | Ability to manage and transform contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; and to take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of others |
| 8 | Knowledge that is at the most advanced frontier or a field and at the interface between fields; with the most advanced and specialized skills and techniques including synthesis and evaluation | To solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice | Ability to demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of a context including research |

Source: Adapted from EQF 2017.

Annexure 2: Referencing criteria and obligations

Referencing Criteria

1. The structure and profile of the broader education and training system is described, including an overview of the national qualifications system and its national qualifications framework (NQF, if relevant).
2. The quality assurance practices are integral to the NQF and/or system and are consistent with the Quality Assurance Criteria in Annexure 3.
3. Qualifications are based on learning outcomes principles and relate to the recognition of all forms of learning⁷ and credit systems (where they exist) within the NQF and/or system.
4. The process for inclusion of qualifications on the NQF (or describing the place within the qualifications system) is clear and transparent.
5. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the levels of the NQF (or system) and the levels of the SAQRF.
6. The legitimacy and responsibilities of all relevant competent bodies involved in the referencing process are clear and transparent.

Referencing obligations

1. The referencing report has been prepared with and endorsed by the member state's NSC. In addition, it has been endorsed by relevant competent bodies, such as NQF agencies and quality assurance agencies, as being an accurate representation of the relevant quality assurance arrangements, provision and practice. The referencing report shall include these endorsements.
2. The referencing process involves international expert/s to support and assist the development of trusted outcomes. The referencing report shall include the written statement from the international expert/s from two different countries internal or external to the region.⁸
3. Following the referencing process, the MS commit to a clear reference to the appropriate SAQRF level on new certification documents issued within the NQF or system, e.g. qualifications, certificates, diplomas.⁹
4. There is one comprehensive referencing report, setting out the response to each criterion and includes any supplementary information or evidence.
5. The report shall be readily available and published by the competent body within the member state and by the XXX.¹⁰

⁷ Non-formal, informal and formal

⁸ These international experts are in addition to another member state's representative as an observer of the referencing process.

⁹ Adapted from EQF 2017 and ASEAN 2015.

¹⁰ The body/entity that ultimately is responsible for the SAQRF. To be determined. Non-formal, informal and formal

Annexure 3: Quality assurance criteria

All qualifications should be quality assured to enhance trust in the SAQRF level assigned and their quality in terms of conception, formulation and provision.

In consideration of national context and circumstances, these quality assurance criteria apply to the various sectors of education and training within the qualifications system.

Quality assurance of qualifications assigned a SAQRF level should:

1. ensure that competent bodies operate with clear and transparent governance arrangements;
2. be based on clear and transparent quality standards;
3. address conception and formulation of qualifications, the use of learning outcomes, recognition of all forms of learning¹¹ and certification processes;
4. promote valid and reliable assessments against the agreed transparent learning outcomes, and ensure that barriers to assessment, including for non-formal and informal learning, are minimized.
5. address the evaluation of the quality of provider provision of qualifications, including internal review and external review;
6. involve key stakeholder groups across the key aspects of quality assurance practice;
7. ensure that continuous improvement underpins quality assurance practices and that decisions are informed by data and research;
8. require competent bodies to commit to its own internal evaluation and to cyclical external evaluation, as well as to making public the findings of external evaluations;
9. ensure quality assurance practices remain fit for purpose and are sustainable;
10. ensure quality assurance practices are enhanced through national and international linkages and cooperation.¹²

¹¹ Non-formal, informal and formal

¹² Adapted from UNESCO 2017 and European Commission 2017. EQF 2017, p. 20.

Annexure 4: Glossary of terms

For the purposes of the SAQRF, the following definitions apply:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Competence | Competence is the 'proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development'. ¹³ |
| Competent body | A competent body is any organization that has the legally delegated or invested authority, capacity or power to undertake a specific function. Within qualifications systems, that could include: agencies with the responsibility to approve qualifications against the NQF and which manage qualifications accreditation under national legislation; agencies responsible for approving education and training providers and the provision of services related to approved qualifications. These agencies could be national qualifications agencies, quality assurance agencies, official review boards or other nationally approved bodies or agencies. |
| 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'. ¹⁴ |
| Credit systems | Credit systems are a 'transparency tool for facilitating the recognition of credit(s). These systems can comprise, inter alia, equivalence, exemptions, units/modules that can be accumulated and transferred, the autonomy of providers who can individualise pathways, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning'. ¹⁵ |
| Credit transfer | Credit transfer means 'the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit on one context to have it valued and recognized in another context'. ¹⁶ It may include but is not limited to the following processes known as cross-credit, advanced standing, block credit, specified credit, unspecified credit. |
| Formal learning | Learning that occurs in an organized and structured environment (such as in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification. ¹⁷ |
| Informal learning | Informal learning is learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organized or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. ¹⁸ |
| Learning outcomes | Learning outcomes are statements regarding what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. Within this, RQF learning outcomes are defined in terms of knowledge, skills, context and application (responsibility and autonomy). ¹⁹ |

¹³ EQF 2017, p. 20.

¹⁴ EQF 2017, p. 20.

¹⁵ EQF 2017, p. 21.

¹⁶ EQF 2017, p. 21.

¹⁷ CEDEFOP 2011, p. 75.

¹⁸ CEDEFOP 2011, p. 85.

¹⁹ Adapted from EQF 2017.

| | |
|---|---|
| National qualifications frameworks | National qualifications frameworks are instruments for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved. National qualification frameworks aim 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. ²⁰ |
| Non-formal learning | Non-formal learning is learning that is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification. ²¹ |
| Qualifications | A qualification is the formal outcome of an assessment in recognition that an individual has been assessed as achieving learning outcomes or competencies to the standard specified for the qualification title, usually a type of certificate, diploma or degree. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place through various means, such as workplace experience, or a programme of study, or a blend of both. A qualification is issued by a competent agency, which confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training. ²² |
| Qualifications system | Qualifications system means 'all aspects of a member state's activity related to the recognition of learning and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. That includes the development and implementation of institutional arrangements and processes relating to quality assurance, assessment and the award of qualifications'. ²³ A national qualifications system may be composed of several subsystems and may or may not include an explicit national qualifications framework. |
| Quality assurance | Quality assurance is a component of quality management and is 'focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled'. In relation to training and educational services, 'quality assurance refers to planned and systematic processes that provide confidence in educational services provided by training providers under the remit of relevant authorities or bodies. It is a set of activities established by these relevant authorities or bodies to ensure that educational services satisfy customer requirements in a systematic, reliable fashion'. ²⁴ |
| Formal recognition of learning outcomes | Confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes gained by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of standards, including a qualification or component/s of a qualification. |
| Recognition of prior learning | Recognition of learning outcomes includes the notion of valid and reliable assessment with a formal setting, recognition of prior learning/assessment of prior learning, and also of credit transfer processes or credit transfer systems. ²⁵ Recognition of prior learning relates to recognizing learning gained and currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. It involves the assessment of an individual to make a judgement against specified learning outcomes. It will include the assessment of skills and knowledge obtained through non-formal or informal learning, but it may also involve the evaluation of formal learning previously undertaken. |

²⁰ Adapted from EQF 2017.

²¹ CEDEFOP 2011, p. 113.

²² Adapted from EQF 2017 and from ASEAN 2015.

²³ Adapted from EQF 2017, p. 20

²⁴ Bateman et al., 2009, p. 8.

²⁵ Adapted from EQF 2017, ASEAN 2015, CEDEFOP 2011, p. 125.

Annexure 5: List of participants

| S. No. | Name of the Officer | Designation | Institute |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| Bangladesh | | | |
| 1. | S M Shahjahan | Deputy Director, Course Accreditation | Bangladesh Technical Education Board, Technical and Madrasah Education Division, Ministry of Education, Dhaka |
| 2. | Dr Omar Faruque | Director-General | Directorate of Technical Education (DTE) |
| 3. | Md Nazibul Islam | Additional Secretary | Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Dhaka |
| 4. | Ms Alif Rudaba | Member (Planning & Skills Standard) & Joint Secretary | National Skills Development Authority |
| 5. | Mesbahuddin Ahmed | Chairman | Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC) |
| 6. | Prof Muhammed Alamgir | Member | University Grants Commission (UGC) |
| 7. | Sanjoy Adhikary | Member | Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC) |
| Bhutan | | | |
| 1. | Ms Sangye Choden | Chief Program Officer | Quality Assurance & Accreditation Division, Department of Adult & Higher Education, Ministry of Education |
| 2. | Mr Tandin Dorji | Chief Program Officer | Quality Assurance Division (QAD), Department of Occupational Standards (DOS), MoLHR |
| 3. | Mr Karma Loday | Specialist | Standard & Qualification Division (SQD), Department of Occupational Standards (DOS), MoLHR |
| 4. | Ms Yeshey Khandu | Chief Program Officer | Quality Assurance Division (QAD), Department of Occupational Standards (DOS), MoLHR |
| India | | | |
| 1. | Dr Gopu Kumar | Joint Secretary | University Grant Commission (UGC) |
| 2. | Dr Avichal Kapoor | Joint Secretary | University Grant Commission (UGC) |
| 3. | Mr Sushil Aggarwal | Director | The National Council of Vocational Education and Training (NCVET) |
| 4. | Mr Lav Bharadwaj | Consultant | The National Council of Vocational Education and Training (NCVET) |

| S. No. | Name of the Officer | Designation | Institute |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Maldives | | | |
| 1. | Dr Abdul Hannan Waheed | Chief Executive Officer | Maldives Qualification Authority |
| 2. | Ahmed Nasir | Chief Executive Officer | Maldives Polytechnic |
| Nepal | | | |
| 1. | Mr Tek Bahadur Malla | Director | Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training/National Skill Testing Board |
| 2. | Prof Bhim Prasad Subedi | Chairperson | University Grant Commission (UGC) |
| 3. | Dr Hari Lamsal | Joint Secretary | Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) |
| Pakistan | | | |
| 1. | Mr Sulaiman Ahmad | Director (Quality Assurance) | Faculty Affairs Division, Higher Education Commission (HEC), Islamabad |
| 2. | Mr Shafiq Hussain Khokhar | Director General (SS&C). | National Vocational & Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC), Islamabad |
| Sri Lanka | | | |
| 1. | Dr K A Lalithadeera | Director-General | Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission |
| 2. | Dr Janaka Jayalath | Deputy Director-General | Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission |
| 3. | Mr G M R D Aponsu | Director (Planning) | Strategic Planning and Policy Research Division Higher Education, Ministry of Education |
| 4. | Prof Thilak P D Gamage | Director | Quality Assurance Council |

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Appendix 3: Joint Media Release

South Asia Member States working together to develop a common regional qualifications reference framework

18 February 2022, Friday

The first technical meeting on a South Asia regional qualifications reference framework held virtually on 15 and 16 February 2022 with the participation of member state representatives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka established the following objectives for the framework:

- ▶ To facilitate regional cooperation and recognition of qualifications;
- ▶ To facilitate worker and learner mobility within and outside the region through transparency and trust in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs);
- ▶ To promote the strengthening of the quality and effectiveness of Member States' national qualifications systems.²⁶

The member state representatives acknowledged the existing bilateral and multilateral agreements between the MS to mutually recognize qualifications and common occupational/skill standards.

Furthermore, the member state representatives:

- ▶ **acknowledged** the need for a common regional qualifications reference framework to support recognition of qualifications and skills to facilitate worker and learner mobility within and outside the region;
- ▶ **recognized** the need to improve understanding of other member states' national qualification system and associated quality assurance arrangements;
- ▶ **affirmed** that the regional qualifications reference framework should be enabling and voluntary and not impinge upon other member states' qualifications systems or frameworks;
- ▶ **recognized** that the regional qualifications reference framework will be developed in parallel with processes for strengthening national qualifications frameworks and qualifications systems through dialogue and review processes between the member states.

The member state representatives concluded the meeting by committing to participate in forthcoming dialogues and to convene a joint regional qualifications reference framework Task Force to further the development and management of a regional qualifications reference framework.

²⁶ Including the NQF and quality assurance arrangements.



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