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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA  
**Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC**  
Focal Point Employment and Income (e+i)

## *What to do when engaging in National Vocational Qualifications Frameworks projects or debates?*

### *SDC Tool for Practitioners*

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## *What to do when engaging in National (Vocational) Qualifications Frameworks projects or debates?*

This short tool was developed to help SDC practitioners and SDC partners in dealing with national (vocational) qualifications frameworks, a mega-trend spreading around the world. It is a small first-aid kit, not a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the topic. It

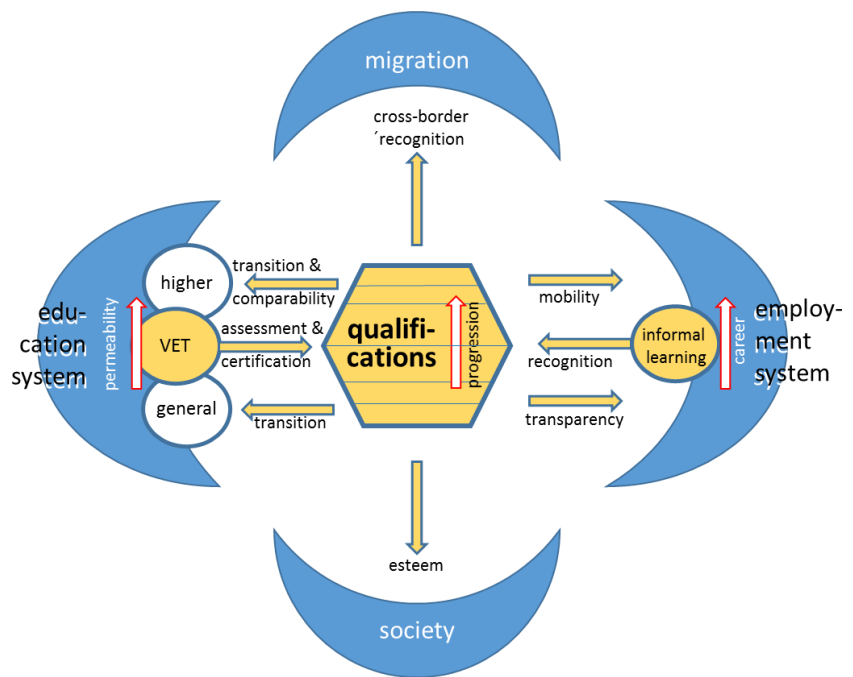
- puts together the basic ideas of NQFs
- provides you with key analytical questions to be asked and key features to be supported
- identifies typical vested interests, weaknesses and pitfalls of NQFs,
- suggests strategies to follow when engaged in concrete situations, and
- provides ideas on further reading.

### *What do National (Vocational) Qualifications Frameworks aim at or promise?*

QF provide **transparency** on learning outcomes and therefore support the communication between the education system and the labour market.

QF provide **comparability** of qualifications by a “level of competence” (often facilitated by a grid of generic level descriptors) and equating awards across different occupations.

QF support the **mobility of learners** in that they open up pathways to next levels of education and other educational systems (e.g. a simple transition between general and technical education and vice versa, or –in general terms- the permeability of entire educational systems, where no dead ends exist, and time-consuming repetitions can be avoided).



NVQF elements and promises

QF support the **mobility of workers** as they can acquire qualifications within the employment system (on-the-job, so-called experiential learning). This is facilitated by **recognition of prior learning** – which is invariably a key instrument in vocational QFs. Mobility could be horizontal (e.g. through multi-skilling within an occupational cluster) or vertical (through climbing up to the next higher level of competence within a given occupation).

QF enhance the **esteem of vocational qualifications** (and –subsequently of vocational careers) as they can be ranked like programmes of general or higher education. Also –as an impact caused by improved mobility- workers’ status in society is assumed as rising. This could have a repercussion on society’s perception of VET programmes and qualifications.

QF may improve the **benefit of migrating workers** as they may lead to a cross-border standardisation of qualifications and thus enhance workers’ status and income. The efforts of creating regional QFs or referencing national QFs to a common “meta-framework”, or bilateral mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) fall in this context. There is also a link to the General Agreement on the Trade in Services (GATS) as workers’ migration appears as a case of “presence of natural persons of a Member in the territory of any other Member” (mode 4 of GATS).

## Key questions and main features to be developed

Based on these general promises of QFs, we might consider the following key questions and main features to develop:

Key questions when an SDC program or project is confronted with, or engaged in a National (Vocational) Qualifications Framework	Which features should SDC wish to develop and maintain?
Are today's <b>main challenges</b> of the current VET system and VET provision identified, analysed and adequately addressed?	Solve concrete existing problems with a focus on keeping it simple and lean.
Is there provision and provision capacity for our <b>target groups</b> ? Is it reflected in the NQF?	Provision / fast delivery: develop or support VET delivery for our target groups.
Is there an easy <b>access</b> point for disadvantaged persons?	Open access: Offer free SD entry level short courses with certification.
Are the "ladders" to higher skill levels working?	<b>No dead ends</b> in education: Offer SD progression courses to levels 2 and 3.
Do VET-specific qualifications emerge on the levels of higher TVET (i.e. beyond a technician level)?	Life-long learning: Create <b>higher TVET</b> qualifications.
Are there " <b>bridges</b> " from TVET into higher education (and general education)? Do these bridges provide real and realistic opportunities?	Best of two worlds: interconnect TVET and higher education. E.g.: How to open up universities and colleges for skilled workers and technicians? Where and how to close the gaps of general education? Or: Could there be "dual" higher education programs (combination of degree and skilled worker certificate), which are feasible for workers?
Is <b>recognition of informal learning</b> fair?	Inclusion: Treat RPL candidates fair and assist them. Remove unnecessary admission obstacles. Offer diagnostic RPL, in order to enhance chances.
Are <b>certificates honoured</b> in the labour market?	Market value: Ensure assessment quality and validity of SD certificates

## *Conflicting interests and typical pitfalls and weaknesses*

**When working in NQF projects, it is important to understand motivations of actors involved. Problematic interests might play a role here**

- Empire building (jobs and power) of national regulators, developers of standardisation , classification and assessment resources, professional assessors and certifiers, the state as a whole – an elaborate system that often relegates the private sector into the back seat instead of allowing them to be the system drivers.
- Higher education supremacy (preserving the inherited value pyramid) defended by higher education ministries and institutions and by the society as a whole.
- An Anglo-Saxon approach to TVET, marketed strongly all over the world, where occupations are broken down into unit-qualifications, which could be acquired, assessed and certified independently; the aim of an all-round expert in his/her trade (berufliche Handlungskompetenz) is here substituted by fragmented qualifications. This might be perceived as a return to Taylor's idea of job-usefulness of the 30s. Such a system also defeats the idea of transparency, as individualised collection of units replace clear cut occupational competence.
- Profit (selling systems and tools) for 1<sup>st</sup> world framework agencies, international awarding bodies, business interest as a whole.

**This might lead to typical pitfalls and weaknesses of NQFs**

- Complicated total integration of general education, vocational education and higher education (rendering the system virtually unmanageable).
- Many upper levels to reflect higher education diversity (leading to an implicit devaluation of TVET-specific qualifications which populate the lower levels).
- VET qualifications absent on higher levels (aggravating intended progression).
- Access and progression based on credits (instead on demonstrated competence)
- Few credits assigned for informal learning (implicit devaluation of work experience).
- Jargon and elaborated specifications (alienating employers and workers).
- Complex design and massive controls (detering TVET providers),
- Framework just a chart – not delivering on the promises (no impact).
- All in all: High level of bureaucracy, time consuming procedures (awful cost-benefit ratio).

## Recommended strategies in dealing with NQFs

	NVQF Situation	Objectives	Reasoning	Recommended Strategy
1	<b>Blue Print Stage</b> (principles decided, details open to discussion and stakeholder involvement)	Target fast delivery and significant volume of services with special emphasis on disadvantaged target groups (learners and workers); emphasis on TVET strand in case of articulated frameworks; prioritise objectives;	Avoid a design that leads time consuming and costly implementation; consider stress on adapting or revamping instead of fundamentally reforming the TVET system; inject the aspect of special target groups; concentrate inputs on TVET rather than GE and HE; rank transparency as top objective so that performance of VET programs is evident	Lean design and participation, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• user friendly- terminology,</li> <li>• emphasis on access to and progression within TVET strand,</li> <li>• strong relation to occupations &amp; functions that actually exist in the employment system;</li> <li>• based on whole occupations &amp; occupational specialisations rather than on a unitised system of qualifications.</li> </ul>
2	<b>Framework design complete awaiting implementation</b> (e.g. after adopting another country's model (e.g. English NVQs) or a regional meta-blue-print, such (e.g. ASEAN))	Avoid typical traps of over-designed systems; ensure credibility of certificates in labour market; accommodate dual training concepts in framework; the framework must deliver (be more than just a chart). Occupational standards industry-relevant (knowledge-worker)	Focus on those economic sectors in which effective TVET can be started while an overall implementation appears as not feasible, unreasonable or too expensive; seek alliances with selected and dynamic industry sectors; exhaust framework options in order to implement best practices; standards development must be driven by industries and include important meta-skills, essential for modern industries.	Introduce, demonstrate and maintain good instruments in the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occupational standards development &amp; endorsement</li> <li>• Level descriptors grid (to include items which can only or best be acquired on-the-job)</li> <li>• Test item databases</li> <li>• Recognition of prior Learning</li> <li>• Curriculum design</li> <li>• Certification and assessment procedures and security</li> <li>• Quality and equality of informal learning</li> </ul>
3	<b>Framework in operation with performance problems</b>	Ensure relevance and practicability of occupational standards; ensure validity of assessment services; generate ownership of the world of work	Ill-designed, over-specified and jargonised occupational standards hamper dialogue with employers; too diverse unit qualifications hamper transparency in the labour market; Assessment without industry practitioners in a leading role likely to remain unaccepted;	Engage and support industry in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• design of occupational standards,</li> <li>• development of assessment items and procedures,</li> <li>• execution of assessment services;</li> <li>• associations in adopting the role of awarding bodies;</li> </ul>
4	<b>Framework stalling; failing to go to scale; collapsing</b>	Take off (assuming that the design of the framework is sound)	Remove obstacles, attack weaknesses (requires a specific diagnosis of causes and effects); options: specific rescue measures or abandoning the framework	Possible intervention areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulatory agency's structure and performance</li> <li>• Assessment tools &amp; procedures</li> <li>• Industry ownership</li> <li>• Public perception</li> </ul>
5	<b>Framework working all right</b>	TVET system more inclusive, affordable and relevant; workforce better qualified with better employment and income	collaborate with responsible bodies; fill framework with life; expand system as a whole with acknowledgement of learning on-the-job;	Use framework to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• design &amp; offer equitable TVET with poverty reduction goal;</li> <li>• ensure that cooperative training efforts are well embedded in the framework;</li> <li>• focus on sectors with high employment growth.</li> </ul>

## *Further Sources*

SDC e+i web → National Qualifications Frameworks

<https://www.shareweb.ch/site/EI/Pages/VSD/Qualifications-Frameworks.aspx>

The Challenges of Policy Transfer in Vocational Skills Development, Maurer & Gonon (editors), Bern 2014, especially the contributions of Stephanie Allais and Markus Maurer

Author

Dr. Gunter Kohlheyer

with contributions from

Prof. Dr. Markus Maurer, Dr. Wolfgang Schlegel, Franz Kehl

**Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation  
employment and income network**

Freiburgstrasse 130

3003 Bern

Switzerland