



# Implementing a National Qualifications Framework: Early Lessons, Challenges and Lessons Learnt



## Introduction

Development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) has become a world-wide phenomenon and a major global trend in reforming national education and training systems. The reasons for adoption and implementation of NQFs are many and varied. Most of the countries that have adopted a NQF are concerned with the poor articulation between qualifications and actual skills needs in the workplace; need to rectify the poor credibility and quality of existing qualifications and training Programmes and lack of coherence and the rather fragmented nature of the qualifications system. The need to improve transparency of qualification systems, creating possibilities for credit accumulation and transfer, developing quality assurance systems, provision for recognition of non-formally acquired skills and facilitating integration of such skills into the formal system - where a large part of the population is evidently excluded from the formal education system or where there is a high number of school dropouts also creates an impetus for adoption of National Qualifications Framework.



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Countries are therefore overwhelmingly embracing qualifications frameworks as a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally, and importantly as a policy tool for reform. Generally, a qualifications framework is intended to improve understanding of qualifications (degrees, certificates, or recognition of experiential-based learning and capabilities) in terms of the information they convey to an employer about prospective workers' competencies. Frameworks are also intended to explain how qualifications relate to each other and thus can be combined to build pathways within education systems hence promote portability of skills and mobility of labour.



## Continental Outlook of the Qualifications Landscape

Since early 2000s, African intergovernmental bodies at the continental and sub-regional levels have developed a wide array of policy documents that address relevance and quality of qualifications as well as mobility of labour and skills towards promoting economic, social and cultural development and integration of African economy. At the highest level, the 50 - year African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 and specifically its first 10 - year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) called for the establishment of a continental qualifications' framework for Africa. This was geared towards integration and prosperity on the continent.

Further, the Protocol to the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment (AU Free Movement Protocol), and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 (CESA 16–25) explicitly include the continental qualifications framework among their goals. The agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in its Protocol on Trade in Services, sets the frame for mutual recognition of education. The protocol requires all state parties to individually, or through bilateral, multilateral or regional arrangements, mutually recognize academic, professional and technical qualifications of their nationals and establish a continental qualifications framework in order to promote the movement of persons among member states.

Development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) begun in 2019 and to date commendable progress has been made, putting the continent in the global map as a trail blazer in establishment of continental qualifications frameworks. ACQF is one of the concrete outcomes of the envisaged transparency and mutual trust in the qualifications landscape across the continent. The framework supports comparability and portability of qualifications, as well as lifelong learning; facilitates recognition of qualifications at different levels and supports mobility of learners, workers and services; works in cooperation and complementarity with NQFs and regional frameworks and support creation of an African education and qualifications space; and promotes cooperation, alignment/referencing between qualifications frameworks (national and regional) in Africa and worldwide.

A recent mapping study indicated that the continent has a higher number of qualifications frameworks (approved, implementation started or implementation advanced) than other larger regions had, for instance, when compared with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) which was established in 2008. Although thirteen years separate the advent of the EQF and the development of the ACQF, it is paramount to note that when the legal base of the EQF was approved (2008), only three countries had NQFs in place and operational, that is France, Ireland and the United Kingdom. More than 41 out of 55 countries in Africa have introduced or are at different stages of development and implementation of a national qualifications' framework with the confidence that NQFs shall ensure that qualifications

produced shall meet national economic and social needs, are of good quality, provide flexibility and progression for learners, and enjoy international recognition.

Existence of Regional Qualifications Frameworks is an important feature that has bolstered the fast pace of development of the continental framework in Africa. The South African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) for instance was established in 2011 as a reference for full qualifications, credit transfers, and creation of regional standards and facilitation of quality assurance of qualifications. The East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE) was developed and adopted in 2015 as a reference tool to compare qualifications levels of education systems across the six member states and promote lifelong learning. Ultimately, ACQF will be the largest RQF, bringing together national qualifications from 55 countries and 8 regional communities all leading to enhanced mobility.

### **The Kenya National Qualifications Framework**

In Kenya, the National Qualifications Framework was developed in 2015 through enactment of the Kenya Qualifications Framework Act No. 22 of 2014 to provide a system for the articulation, classification, registration, quality assurance, and monitoring and evaluation of national qualifications. It is underpinned by several national documents such as the Kenya Vision 2030, Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019, Medium Term Plans among others - all of which underscore the need for quality, relevant and globally competitive qualifications for national development. Implementation of the KNQF is a timely intervention that is aimed at addressing a couple of ills that have previously be-devilled the national education system including poor articulation between qualifications and actual skills needs in the workplace; lack of consistency in qualifications (even among institutions offering same level qualifications), bottlenecks and dead ends in the education system, absence of a system for comparing qualifications to each other as well as unclear and ambiguous pathways of progression between qualifications.

The KNQF addresses these challenges by establishing a common regulatory system for the development, assessment, and awarding of qualifications. A central database for registering national and foreign qualifications has been developed and implementation is underway. This will provide a one-stop-shop and access point for all credible qualifications. The KNQF consists of levels, where each level is identified by a unique set of level descriptors.

The core element of the KNQF is a set of 10 reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do - their learning outcomes - regardless of the system where a particular qualification was acquired. The KNQF reference levels therefore shift the focus away from the traditional approach, which emphasises learning inputs (length of a learning

experience, type of institution) and instead embraces learning outcomes; supports a better match between the needs of the labour market (knowledge, skills and competences) and education and training provisions; facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning; and facilitates the transfer and use of qualifications across different countries and education and training systems.

Actual implementation of the KNQF begun in 2018 when the founding Director General of the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA) was hired and a year later when the Board of Directors (the Council) was constituted. Three years down the line, the Authority has made substantive progress towards bringing harmony in the education sector and assuring quality of national qualifications. Key among the outstanding achievements include development of a National Qualifications Management Information System and the ongoing implementation of the Kenya National Learners Records Database (KNLRD) that facilitates verification of qualifications and helps fight the menace of fake certificates. KNLRD is a comprehensive relational database that acts as a central repository for credible qualifications awarding institutions, their respective programmes (qualifications) and records of learners who successfully complete a given qualification.

Another notable achievement has been development of key policy documents such the Kenya Credits Accumulation and Transfers System (CATS) and a policy framework for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Credit Systems and Qualifications Frameworks are interwoven. They both play critical roles in the qualifications landscape such as enhancing mobility, transferability, comparability of qualifications and contributing to lifelong learning and development of human resources. KCATS policy is designed to be used to monitor, record and reward passage through modular, certificate, diploma and degree courses and to ensure that credits earned are comparable and recognized as meeting part of the requirements for that qualification. Expected learning outcomes, volume of learning and units of competence covered are the common denominators for transferring credits.

On the other hand, the purpose of the RPL policy framework is to provide opportunities for lifelong learning by promoting acquisition and visibility of knowledge and skill that contribute to the nation's development. This will lead to creation of a competent, relevant and adaptable workforce that can meet the challenges of a fast-changing labour market, address skills shortages and gaps, promote mobility and allow holistic development of an individual. Recognition of prior acquired learning and skills is beneficial for both workers' employability and labour market competitiveness.

Lifelong learning is gaining increasing focus nationally and internationally, with a young dynamic and flexible; as well as an ageing workforce and the need for flexibility in the career paths. Employers want high quality upskilling courses that employees can fit around the day



job, and often they want more than attendance - they want validation that their employee has absorbed the knowledge and skills effectively. Likewise, learners on these courses want to have some tangible evidence of achievement, and something that is both portable to other employers and careers, and potentially stackable into a more substantial award.

RPL has the potential to provide a cost-effective, complementary learning pathway to formal education and training and to facilitate multi entry–exit between the education system and the labour market. It seeks to reshape fundamental values, beliefs and paradigms for change in education, in that knowledge and learning are no longer restricted to an academic or formal learning pathway only, but that every individual can have adequate opportunities to learn throughout life. Of primary interest here are the individual’s learning potential, capacity and flexibility, supporting self-awareness, an understanding of individual autonomy and a sense of dignity and responsibility as a citizen.

It is paramount to consider other emerging issues in the qualifications landscape such as Micro and Digital credentialing as important tools to leverage as part of the larger strategy to forge skill and competency connections to labour market needs and drive success to the future of work.

## Lessons learnt

All countries implementing national qualifications frameworks (NQF) have faced challenges amidst the significant progress achieved. Most of them relate, in one way or another, to the failure of governments to recognize the radical implications of the changes that they seek to introduce and to realign the legislative frameworks and other supportive mechanisms accordingly. This failure may be expressed in a lack of political will or adequate resources for the Agency with the specific responsibility of implementing the NQF. It may also be that initial expectations are too high in terms of both what can be achieved and how quickly the benefits of introducing an NQF are likely to become apparent.

Secondly, NQFs are relevant , popular yet challenging to scale up especially if key building blocks are missed. These include failure to recognise that a National Qualifications Framework plays a vital role in supporting reforms, but if is not part of a wider strategy – or if it exists in isolation, it may achieve very little. The key to successful NQF implementation is to develop a broad strategy that takes account of all factors that influence its success. These include policy and legal frameworks coherence across different Ministries and Agencies and an enabling funding system. The most important thing is to develop genuine support and trust for the NQF among stakeholders.



Other common challenges include lack of awareness and misinterpretation of the mandates of a NQF; late involvement of key stakeholders as well as starting too fast too soon – like any other system, a NQF takes time to grow, mature and become well established. Finally, qualifications frameworks are instruments not only for collating and comparing qualifications, but also for activating them as enablers of systemic and societal diversity and development.

### **About the Author**

*Dr. Juma Mukhwana is the founding Director General and CEO of the Kenya National Qualifications Authority where he is instrumental in operationalizing and implementing the Kenya National Qualifications Framework (KNQF). He is actively involved as an expert in development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and is supporting several countries in development of policies for implementation of national qualifications frameworks. Dr. Juma has worked with the Government of Lesotho in development of national policies for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) and the national Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS). He is also supporting development of the IGAD Regional Qualifications Framework. His leadership and Management experience spans across Agriculture and Education sectors. He was previously a deputy CEO at the Commission for University Education, Kenya. Dr. Mukhwana is an accomplished leader and researcher in Higher Education in Africa and has received many national and international awards for his contribution in Agriculture and Higher Education in Africa. He holds a PhD in Soil Science from the University of Wyoming in the United States.*

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