# Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

## Concept document

May 2008

COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING
*Learning for Development*

SAQA

This work has been created as a part of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth initiative. For more information on this initiative, please consult: http://www.col.org/vussc.

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# Foreword

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) was conceived by Education Ministers from the small states during their triennial meeting in Halifax, Canada, in 2000. The concept was developed on behalf of the Ministers by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) at their request, and at their next triennial meeting in Edinburgh in 2003 they approved the initiative unanimously. COL was then asked to lead the process of establishing the VUSSC. In giving their approval, ministers stipulated that the VUSSC should not become a formal institution, nor should it compete with any of their existing institutions. The focus of the VUSSC would be the support of human capacity development within institutions, the introduction of new programmes of study, and the transfer of courses, qualifications and qualified learners between countries.

After conducting initial meetings about policy with ministry interlocutors to clarify countries' national needs, the VUSSC (through COL) then embarked on a number of multinational training workshops, sometimes affectionately called "boot camps", to immerse professional educators in the practical use of ICT in education, develop course materials and learn how to continue to collaborate online using the emerging "web2" technologies. During the training workshops participants learned about each other's countries, cultures and education systems by working in multinational teams, simulating working at a distance and becoming comfortable in the emerging online world. These educators have since trained colleagues within their countries, thereby expanding the number of ICT-skilled professionals who are able to support the Ministries of Education in the participating small states.

While very varied in population, culture and geography, small states face many similar challenges. Through the VUSSC, cross-border linkages have been established that enable small states to assist one other in informal ways. "Brain-drain" is an often-cited challenge for small states. The development of the VUSSC has shown that the challenge of a brain drain in small states involves not only the loss of skilled people, but also trying to ensure that citizens' qualifications are recognised when they work in other countries. Similarly, when foreign qualifications are presented for local recognition in small states, an extra burden is added to ministry systems that are already under multiple pressures. It became clear that the development of a Transnational Qualifications Framework would add great value to VUSSC developments.

After considering possible facilitators to guide the process, COL requested the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which has extensive experience in qualifications framework development and implementation, to review the existing qualification systems that exist in small states and to formulate a concept for a Transnational Qualifications Framework – with

the important prerequisite that the framework would support but not impose on existing national systems in small states. This report is the outcome of the investigation that was concluded in February 2008, when senior officials from participating small states met in Singapore.

COL is indebted to SAQA, the research team and everyone who contributed to the development of the proposed transnational qualifications framework for the VUSSC. In particular, COL acknowledges the positive and constructive approach taken by senior officials, who refined the concept and appointed a management committee that is now charged with working alongside COL to implement the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

Sir John Daniel
President and CEO
Commonwealth of Learning
April 2008

# Executive Summary

## Background and rationale

1. The idea of a VUSSC was first mooted at the 2000 triennial meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in Canada. At present 29 small states in the Commonwealth participate in the VUSSC initiative[1].

2. This report proposes a transnational qualifications framework (TQF) for the recognition of qualifications offered through participating VUSSC countries.

3. The concept document is based on a literature review of available materials relating to qualifications framework development internationally, as well as an analysis of information on qualifications systems in participating small states.

## Qualifications frameworks as a global phenomenon

4. On a generic level a qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression, comparability and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

5. Since the first qualifications frameworks were introduced in the UK in the mid-1980s, more and more countries have developed their own frameworks.

6. At present there is increasing activity from international agencies in the area of qualifications frameworks, including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Office (ILO), the World Bank and the European Union (EU).

7. Even though the nomenclature associated with qualifications frameworks is varied and country-specific, it is possible to identify common definitions for terms such as *qualifications, learning outcomes, skills, competence, level, learning programme, quality assurance, validation* and *accreditation*.

8. Although the purposes of qualifications frameworks may range from enabling and communicative to regulatory and

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[1]Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cyprus, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, The Comoros (non-Commonwealth), The Gambia, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

transformational, a number of common purposes also exist, such as to establish national standards, to promote quality and to provide a system of coordination for comparing qualifications.

9. The scope of qualifications frameworks can be defined on three levels: unified, linked and tracked. Countries with unified frameworks have encountered the most difficulties, while most countries are considering linked models.

10. Incremental and phased approaches to qualifications framework implementation seem to be more successful, although more rapid and comprehensive approaches are warranted in certain contexts.

11. A qualifications framework may be ineffective if not complemented by measures to develop the surrounding institutional logic (e.g. institutional credit agreements), as well as the intrinsic logic (the inherent design features) of the framework.

12. Three main models of national qualifications framework implementation agencies exist: strong (one national body with overall responsibility), central (a central oversight body that collaborates with sectoral and/or other awarding bodies), and coordinating (the national body has mainly administrative powers).

13. Highly prescriptive qualifications frameworks require legislative authority and have an overt regulatory role. Less prescriptive frameworks rely on voluntary participation, and are generally more successful in building trust between stakeholders.

14. The architecture of qualifications frameworks differs, but includes common aspects such as levels with level descriptors, quality assurance systems, a description of learning outcomes, assessment methods, the division of learning into components and credit systems.

15. Lessons drawn from the experiences of established qualifications frameworks suggested the following broad principles: avoid extreme standardisation by allowing for sectoral differences; facilitate and build communication, trust and credibility; and develop enabling and "home-grown" quality assurance systems.

## Qualifications frameworks in small states of the Commonwealth

16. The coordination of education and training is underdeveloped in most small states. As a result, most small states are presently involved in initiatives to improve coordination and international comparability, mainly through the development of national and/or sectoral qualifications frameworks, in many cases within the broader context of a regional qualifications framework.

17. A strong reliance on regional qualifications framework developments was reported, notably in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Asia-Pacific, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the EU.

18. The majority of small states prefer a centralised regulatory approach to the coordination of education and training.

19. Most small states reported high, in some cases unrealistically high, expectations of the extent to which a qualifications framework would be able to address challenges of progression, comparability, transparency and portability.
20. The development of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems, including TVET qualifications frameworks, has been prioritised in most small states, accompanied by a move towards competency-based standards and the establishment of training authorities.
21. Although qualifications nomenclature is not uniform across small states, there exists sufficient common understanding of most terms including *accreditation, certification, providers, quality assurance, registration, recognition of prior learning* and *comparability*.
22. Most qualifications frameworks in small states (59%) are or intend to be linked, while only a few have opted for unified (10%) or tracked (17%) systems.
23. The majority of small states starting out with NQF development (59%) are opting for rapid and comprehensive implementation, while countries that have more experience are opting for a more gradual and phased approach.
24. In terms of governance, most small states prefer a strong or central national quality assurance body, while the less regulatory and more coordinating option was only reported by one country. Funding challenges, specifically direct funding and an overreliance on donor funding, were also reported.
25. Most small states (83%) are in the process of implementing regulatory (tight) frameworks, while only a few are considering looser options. As a result most small states reported being at some stage of developing NQF-related legislation.
26. The architecture of the qualifications frameworks in small states has similar components, such as levels (ranging from 4 to 10), level descriptors, credits (determined in a variety of ways), fields and divisions of learning into units or modules (also varied).
27. Progress made in small countries towards NQF development, based on a seven-stage scale, and as self-reported by 13 countries, shows that on average countries are between Stage 3 (initial development) and Stage 4 (draft legislation formulated and some structures in place). Most countries are at Stage 2 (background work under way).

## Transnational qualifications framework

28. The unique characteristics of the VUSSC require the proposed TQF to be much more limited in scope than national and/or regional qualifications frameworks. It should be:
    - only for a very specific grouping of qualifications
    - non-regulatory
    - does not replace sectoral, national or regional qualifications frameworks
    - based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement

- aimed at supporting the transfer of credits achieved in different countries.

29. The TQF can relate to all other levels, i.e. to a sectoral, national and regional qualifications framework.

30. The TQF is based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement.

31. The TQF is defined as a translation instrument for the classification of qualifications between countries participating in the VUSSC, according to set criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, to improve credit transfer and promote common accreditation mechanisms between participating VUSSC countries.



32. The purpose of the TQF is to facilitate the development and effective delivery of relevant and quality-assured VUSSC qualifications.

33. The TQF is a unified qualifications framework that includes higher education qualifications and post-secondary technical and vocational qualifications offered through the VUSSC.

34. The TQF should be implemented using a phased and incremental approach.

35. The TQF should not infringe in any way on national and regional developments, yet should still be able to provide mechanisms for coordination, credit transfer and common accreditation. In contrast to national qualifications frameworks that are often prescriptive and comprehensive, the TQF will not demand alignment.

36. A "virtual" TQF Secretariat (as a subcommittee of the VUSSC Interlocutors' Group) is proposed to provide an oversight function.

37. A web portal that can house a TQF website and provide an interactive platform for the development of qualifications criteria and related activities is proposed.

38. Allocation of seed money for at least the first three years of development is also proposed.

39. The TQF is designed as a loose framework that provides broad and non-prescriptive criteria for the registration of qualifications on the TQF and the quality assurance of providers offering TQF qualifications.

40. The architecture of the NQF includes:
- 10 levels – only Levels 4 and 5 are developed initially
- level descriptors modelled on the EQF descriptors
- two qualification types: Certificate (Level 4) and Diploma (Level 5)
- a credit system that will equate 10 notional hours of learning to one credit.
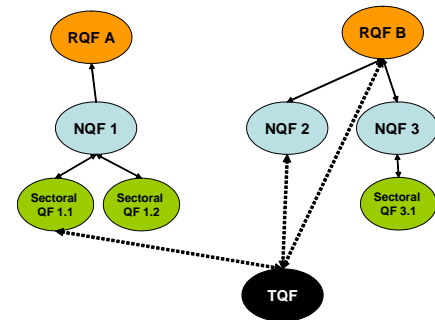
## Recommendations and concluding comments

41. The TQF concept provides a broad outline that senior officials can use to design a system best suited to facilitate the development and delivery of VUSSC qualifications, while also exploring ways in which credit transfer and common accreditation mechanisms can be developed among small Commonwealth countries.

42. The following recommendations are suggested for consideration by senior officials of small states of the Commonwealth.

1. A Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) is established for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC).
2. The TQF is primarily a "translation instrument" that allows for the transnational classification of qualifications offered by countries participating in the VUSSC initiative that may already be registered on other sectoral, national and/or regional qualifications frameworks.
3. The TQF does not replace sectoral, national and/or regional qualifications frameworks.
4. The TQF promotes credit transfer and common accreditation mechanisms between participating VUSSC countries through the development of transnational qualifications and quality assurance criteria.
5. Qualifications that meet minimum transnational qualifications criteria are registered on the TQF.
6. Education and training providers that meet minimum transnational quality assurance criteria may offer programmes based on TQF-registered qualifications.
7. The TQF is a unified credit-based ten-level qualifications framework that includes all qualifications offered through the VUSSC initiative.
8. The TQF is to be developed and implemented in a phased and incremental manner. The first phase will include only qualifications offered on Levels 4 and 5 of the framework.
9. A small "virtual" TQF Secretariat, as a subcommittee within the VUSSC structure, is appointed to oversee the development of the TQF.
10. A TQF portal is developed, including a relational database of qualifications, providers and learner achievements, as well as an interactive facility.
11. Seed money is secured for the first three years of the development of the TQF.

43. Potential benefits of a TQF noted by small states include portability of qualifications; improved ease of credit transfer; increased stakeholder confidence; improved networking between quality assurance and qualifications agencies; and the establishment of appropriate benchmark standards for the recognition of overseas distance-education programmes.

44. Potential disadvantages of a TQF include subordination of national qualifications frameworks, possible unsuitability of country-specific standards, and additional costs.

45. Despite the criticism levelled against qualifications frameworks, particularly the first generation, they are an increasing global phenomenon, with more than 60 countries and at least three regions at various stages of development.

46. Qualifications framework development is not limited to specific contexts. Small and large countries, developing and developed countries, specific sectors in a country and whole regions that include a number of countries have opted to follow this route.

47. In this area of globalisation and increased emphasis on education as a commodity, qualifications frameworks play an important role in making skills transferable and enabling the migration of highly skilled people.

The project team thanks the Commonwealth of Learning for the opportunity to participate in this important initiative and looks forward to the many detailed discussions that still need to take place.

# Recommendations of Senior Officials for the establishment of a Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

*The following recommendations were agreed to by senior officials after their meeting in Singapore from 25-29 February 2008.*

**Background**

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a collaborative network building on the support of Education Ministers across the small states of the Commonwealth. It was conceived by Commonwealth Education Ministers when they met in Halifax, Canada in December 2000. The proposal and business plan for VUSSC was endorsed at the 15th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2003.

Today, VUSSC is a growing network committed to the collaborative development of free content resources for education and training. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is facilitating the VUSSC initiative, with funding support from the government of Singapore, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation.

There are currently 29 Commonwealth countries[2] actively participating in VUSSC. Specifically, VUSSC countries have chosen to focus on the development of postsecondary, skills-related courses in areas such as tourism, entrepreneurship, use of information and communications technologies, life skills and disaster management. VUSSC course materials are non-proprietary and readily adaptable to the specific context of each country, and can be used in the offering of credit-bearing qualifications as well as strengthening educational capacity and access in member countries.

Senior officials from 20 small Commonwealth countries met from 25-29 February 2008 in Singapore, to discuss the proposed Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) for the VUSSC based on the draft concept document developed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) as commissioned by COL.

**Recommendations**

Based on a detailed review of the TQF concept document, senior officials reaffirmed the establishment of the VUSSC. Emphasising a strong reliance on collaboration, senior officials recommend:

1. The **establishment of a TQF** for the VUSSC, which may have wider application.
2. The **TQF is a mapping instrument** for the transnational classification of qualifications offered through the VUSSC initiative according to set criteria for specified levels of learning achieved. In addition, the TQF should:
   a. aim to improve credit transfer and facilitate articulation arrangements between member countries;
   b. promote common quality assurance mechanisms agreed to amongst participating VUSSC countries;
   c. not replace sectoral, national and/or regional qualifications frameworks;
   d. be a unified credit-based 10-level qualifications framework;
   e. be developed and implemented in a sectoral and incremental manner, initially focusing on qualifications below Level 6 of the framework.
3. **Transnational qualifications guidelines** should be developed, based on national, and where applicable regional, qualifications criteria. Qualifications developed through the VUSSC initiative should be aligned with the transnational qualifications guidelines.
4. **Transnational quality assurance guidelines** should be developed, based on national, and where applicable regional, qualifications criteria. The guidelines should be implemented as a continuous

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[2] Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cyprus, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Lesotho, The Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, The Comoros (non-Commonwealth), The Gambia, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

improvement system and maintained as appropriate. Education and training providers that offer qualifications developed through the VUSSC initiative should be aligned with the transnational quality assurance guidelines.

5. A **TQF Management Committee** should be established, consisting of expert representatives from the four regions (Africa and the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and Asia Pacific). A permanent administrator appointed by COL should also sit on the committee. External observers and external evaluators may be invited as required. Terms of Reference for the committee should be developed.

6. A **TQF portal** should be developed to include a relational database of qualifications and programmes, providers and as well as an interactive facility.

7. **Level descriptors** should be developed.

8. **Qualifications descriptors** should be developed.

9. **Monitoring and evaluation** processes should be established for the TQF.

10. **Funding** should be secured for the first three years of the development of the TQF.

11. **VUSSC materials development** should include attention to qualifications development, quality assurance and delivery modes.

12. **Implementation** of the above recommendations should proceed without delay, based on the agreed action plan (see Appendix 5).

13. **COL should take a coordinating role** with regards to the implementation of these recommendations.

Senior Officials
Singapore
29 February 2008

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| APQN | Asia-Pacific Quality Network |
| AQF | Australian Qualifications Framework |
| CARICOM | Caribbean Community |
| CAT | Credit Accumulation and Transfer |
| CCEM | Committee of Commonwealth Education Ministers |
| CKLN | Caribbean Knowledge Learning Network |
| COL | Commonwealth of Learning |
| CVQ | Caribbean Vocational Qualification |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| EQF | European Qualifications Framework |
| EU | European Union |
| IEEE | Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers |
| ITU | International Telecommunications Union |
| MoA | Memorandum of Agreement |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualification |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| PRQR | Pacific Regional Qualifications Register |
| RPL | Recognition of Prior Learning |
| SADC | Southern African Development Community |
| SADCQF | Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework |
| SAQA | South African Qualifications Authority |
| SCQF | Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework |
| TQF | Transnational Qualifications Framework |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UCSIS | University Consortium for Small and Island States |
| UIO | University of the Indian Ocean |
| UNISA | University of South Africa |
| USP | University of the South Pacific |
| UWI | University of the West Indies |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |
| VUSSC | Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth |

# 1. Background and rationale

**Chapter summary**
This chapter outlines the developments leading to the decision to prepare a concept document as a first step towards establishing a transnational qualifications framework for the recognition of qualifications offered by the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Although reference is made to the methodology employed in the study, and the responses received from small states, the chapter mainly provides a brief but detailed description of the VUSSC and the extent to which it has addressed the challenges faced by small states in recognising qualifications on a transnational level.

## Introduction

1.1 This report proposes a transnational qualifications framework (TQF) for the recognition of qualifications offered by the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC).

1.2 The report provides its target audience of senior government officials from small states of the Commonwealth with a research-based concept of an envisaged TQF. This description attempts to encourage debate and heighten awareness of the benefits and advantages of this framework within the context of the VUSSC.

1.3 The idea of a VUSSC was first mooted at the 2000 triennial meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in Canada. Progress has subsequently been made on a number of fronts, overseen by the Commonwealth of Learning. An initial meeting of ministers was held in the Seychelles in 2003, a plan for the VUSSC was approved at 15 CCEM in Scotland in October 2003, a number of planning meetings and training and materials development workshops were held – in Singapore (September 2005, April 2006 and March 2007), Mauritius (August 2006), Trinidad & Tobago (June 2007), Samoa (November 2007) – and a high-level business strategy was developed at the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum held in Jamaica (November 2006).

**The VUSSC has been developed since 2000. At present 29 Commonwealth small states are participating.**

1.4 At present 29 Commonwealth small states participate in the VUSSC initiative: Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cyprus, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Lesotho, The Maldives, Malta,

Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, The Comoros (non-Commonwealth), The Gambia, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

1.5 Following a request from the participating VUSSC countries in March 2007 to "create mechanisms to support the accreditation of qualifications and transfer of credits between countries", a process was initiated to analyse and find commonalities between existing qualifications frameworks, with the view of using these as a basis for the development of a qualifications framework for VUSSC qualifications across member countries – a TQF.

**Qualifications frameworks have become a global phenomenon**

1.6 Since the establishment of the first generation of national qualifications frameworks in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and South Africa in the 1990s, qualifications frameworks have become a global phenomenon. By 2007 more than 60 countries across the world, including most EU member states and Sub-Saharan African countries, are at different stages of developing national qualifications frameworks, with at least three regions having made progress (Coles 2006). While it is common knowledge that the development of qualifications frameworks has not remained uncontested (Donn & Davies 2003, Young 2005, Keevy 2005, Allais 2007a), it is becoming increasingly evident that qualifications frameworks do offer significant advantages in terms of recognition and comparability of qualifications, if developed and implemented appropriately.

1.7 This concept document for a TQF for the recognition of qualifications offered by the VUSSC is based on a review of existing qualifications systems in small states of the Commonwealth that was conducted in 2007. Importantly, this document and the proposals contained herein do not attempt to replace existing sectoral, national or regional qualifications systems, but introduce a separate and flexible model for the recognition of qualifications between participating countries based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement. The concept document was presented to senior officials in February 2008. It was then refined and an implementation strategy initiated.

1.8 The remainder of the chapter provides a more detailed account of the methodology employed in reviewing the existing qualifications systems and a description of the VUSSC. The proposal for a TQF is also located within the unique context of small states. The final section gives a brief overview of the remaining chapters of the concept document.

# Methodology

1.9 The concept document is based on a literature review of available materials relating to qualifications framework development internationally. The findings of the literature review presented in Chapter 2 are organised according to a qualifications framework typology, consisting of eight components identified within the broad international discourse on qualifications frameworks.

1.10    The literature review is used as a lens through which the collection and analysis of information on qualifications systems in small states of the Commonwealth is interpreted. The data collection was facilitated by two letters sent to the ministers of small Commonwealth states in June 2007 and August 2007. Countries were requested to supply information in two ways: by sending copies of documents relating to qualifications framework development in the specific country or region and supplementing the initial submission by completing an online survey.

1.11    In response to the initial request (June 2007), a total of 76 documents relating to qualifications framework development were received from 21 countries and one region. The documents were coded and analysed using ATLAS.ti qualitative software, and used as a basis for the description of the status of qualifications frameworks in small states of the Commonwealth (Chapter 3). Responses in the form of letters and e-mail correspondence were included where appropriate.

1.12    The second request for information (in August 2007) required participating countries to complete an online survey. Countries that had already submitted documents were not excluded, although the purpose was to broaden participation by allowing countries that may not have had any relevant documentation to give an account of their status. Fifteen responses were received from 13 countries.

1.13    In total 24 countries and one region participated in the data collection. Of the 29 VUSSC participating countries, 20 out of 29 (69%) participated by either submitting documents relating to qualifications framework development or by completing the online questionnaire. A summary of responses can be found in Appendix 2.

1.14    Based on the data collected and the literature review of qualifications framework development internationally, the initial TQF concept was developed as described in Chapter 4. The initial concept was then discussed with senior officials from 20 participating VUSSC countries during a meeting facilitated by the South African Qualifications Authority in Singapore from 25-29 February 2008. Based on input from senior officials, minor corrections and additions were made to the concept document. A summary of the recommendations of senior officials was inserted at the beginning of the document, and a proposed action plan was added as Appendix 5.

# The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth

**A comparison mechanism for VUSSC courses and qualifications is needed**

1.15   People in small island states often say that tourists call their countries "paradise on earth", but when the tourists leave, the island remains home to those who live there. The people of these small states, some of which are like islands in large continents such as Africa and some of which are tiny islands in very large oceans, have as much of a stake in economic development and the 21st century as anyone living in a highly industrialised country. The VUSSC is a linking structure, established by ministers of education to help build human capacity and strengthen their countries.

1.16   The sharing of course materials is becoming more commonplace, and is a founding principle of the VUSSC. Although the free sharing of learning content has been around for decades, UNESCO first introduced the notion of "open educational resources" during one of its online discussions, and it received more attention when the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided financial support to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and others to prepare and publish all their classroom notes on the Internet.

1.17   The VUSSC is taking a similar approach by encouraging small states to share content developed by VUSSC teams. In order to make materials more accessible and useful, the teams consider the target audiences, the national needs of countries, and the appropriate level. Each team of professionals attends an initial 2½-week international training and materials development workshop (also referred to as a "boot camp"). These training workshops bring together professionals from the Commonwealth's small states and immerse them in information communication technologies (ICTs) that they can use practically in their professional lives. In the process they learn not only about ICTs, but also about each other's countries, the different cultures and teamwork across international borders and at great distances.

**The TQF will introduce common quality assurance mechanisms for VUSSC courses across international borders**

1.18   Draft materials developed by VUSSC teams need to be developed into course materials, which themselves need to be turned into courses, and courses need to be recognised. Institutions become involved in completing materials that the VUSSC teams have drafted, while the need for the developed courses to be formally accredited in at least one VUSSC country is emphasised. In the context of the virtual university, the country accreditation is important, but even more so is the need for the accreditation to be recognised on a transnational level.

1.19   Matching desired outcomes in multiple countries is also a significant challenge. We may assume that basic accounting in one country should be the same in the next country, but is it? When country A publishes what it deems an appropriate set of standards, and country B believes this

set does not fit the bill, who arbitrates the difference of opinion? If one country decides on six levels of qualifications and another decides on eight, how does one reconcile the differences? Having an agreed process in place to address these challenges when developing VUSSC standards seems sensible.

1.20    For reasons mentioned above, such as the need for accreditation to be recognised on a transnational level, and having a common frame of reference for VUSSC standards, a TQF is being considered. It is envisaged that such a qualifications framework will introduce common quality-assurance mechanisms for VUSSC courses across international borders, and in this way complement existing national systems. This concept document constitutes a first step towards the establishment of such a TQF.

1.21    Traditionally, governments would take on this role of national, regional and even transnational recognition of qualifications, often in partnership with those industries that in turn employ the learners who emerge from these systems. Institutions, especially universities, have been known to defend their right to autonomy and to assess their own quality. However, some universities now understand that their learners end up in the private sector and that they need to listen to their clients, or risk having the private sector set up its own specialised institutions. This has been quite prevalent in the computer industry, which is notoriously fast-moving. Within this changing environment, universities and other institutions need to be full partners in qualifications framework and quality assurance processes.

1.22    More recently, a new group of people expecting to have a stake is emerging – the general public. A member of the public who uploads a video to YouTube, maintains a blog on her daily activities and sees herself as a competent maintainer of a dozen encyclopaedia pages on WikiPedia, should also be able to help set the standard. There is a view that standards should be posted on a Wiki site and left to anyone to update, much like a WikiPedia article; that these will find a standard through general consensus; and that the daily changes to the standards simply reflect the natural daily changes in the world. While the inclusion of the general public in such "open" standards development is still to be debated more rigorously, it does emphasise the unconventional route presented within the context of the VUSSC and importantly, the possibility of an equally unconventional approach to the development of the proposed TQF.

**The TQF will in some ways be similar to a regional qualifications framework**

1.23    The TQF for the VUSSC will in some ways be similar to a regional qualifications framework, such as is being developed in Europe, Southern Africa and the Caribbean. Whereas a regional framework would try to address the interests of a particular region's culture, languages and issues, the TQF will attempt to address the idiosyncrasies of small and island states. The development of the TQF will include collaboration with regional authorities and help to stimulate networking between regions, in support of the countries with the smallest economies and populations on earth.

1.24    In the first half of 2008, senior government officials of the VUSSC participating countries, then numbering 29, met to consider the concept document as a starting point. The officials discussed how they could continue to update the framework with input from their own countries. Where possible VUSSC exemplars and guidelines would be shared, with a view to contributing to regional and national initiatives. Online means would be explored on how best to continue to build and share human capacity to strengthen the island and small-state "paradises" around the world.

## Recognising qualifications in small states: understanding the unique context

1.25    Small states make up two-thirds of the 53 countries belonging to the Commonwealth. Most are small islands with small populations located in the Caribbean and the Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, there are also landlocked states with small populations such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana – although Botswana is not small geographically. There are also coastal states with small populations such as The Gambia and Belize, which are geographically small, and Guyana and Namibia, which are rather large.

1.26    Despite their diversity, small states face common challenges. The first is their size. A small territory has natural resources that are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to produce skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy. Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links. Lastly, small states face special environmental challenges. Recent examples include the hurricane in Grenada, the tsunami in the Maldives and the floods in Guyana.

1.27    Small states have become increasingly conscious of their common needs and have asked international bodies to formulate programmes to address them. At the conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that led to the establishment of VUSSC, ministers from the small states shared their anxiety that their countries did not have the critical mass, in either expertise or equipment, to engage with online learning in an autonomous fashion. They feared becoming mere contributors, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

1.28    Institutions in small-state countries fall into two main categories: indigenous and foreign. In the South Pacific, Caribbean and Indian Ocean regions, the indigenous institutions can be further grouped into regional and national categories. The primary regional institutions are the University of the South Pacific (USP), the University of the West Indies

(UWI), and the University of the Indian Ocean (UIO). The University of South Africa (Unisa) can also be deemed a regional institution, as it provides programmes to some small-state countries in Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean, even though it is not located in a small-state country.

1.29    Networks of universities are also being formed, such as the University Consortium for Small and Island States (UCSIS) and the Caribbean Knowledge Learning Network (CKLN). These networks strive to link institutions and form multinational institutions, offering qualifications in their own right.

1.30    The national providers in most small states typically include one or more universities, two-year community colleges and professional/technical training institutes. Many of these institutions began through an association with a foreign institution (usually in the UK or the US), and in several cases the relationships still continue.

1.31    The foreign providers are those institutions, usually from the developed economies, that have established a physical presence within a country in order to either offer programmes in a traditional teaching mode or to support the institution's distance education offerings in the country. However, it is worth noting that there are examples of national providers that act as the "front" for a foreign institution in terms of marketing programmes and providing administrative support.

1.32    Among the regional providers, USP and UWI were created and funded by the states they serve. UIO, however, while modelled on the other two, is funded by the EU. UIO also differs from the other regional providers, being a network of several higher education institutions in the region that collaborate on programme and course offerings as well as research. While USP and UWI are the largest providers of university-level education in their respective regions, many of the states they serve also have national colleges and other institutions, and in some of the larger states a national university exists as well. Some of the latter enrol students from other states in the region, either on-campus or via their emerging distance education programmes.

1.33    The programme offerings of regional providers tend to be more comprehensive than those of national institutions, the latter being typically more focused and specialised. Regional providers are taking the lead in interdisciplinary study and research through a wide variety of theme centres and institutes. In the African region, the offerings of national universities tend to be more traditionally academic, resulting in some criticism that they do not offer programmes more relevant to labour force needs.

1.34    Some international agencies also act as providers. One example is the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) virtual university, which works through national agencies to provide ICT-related training.

1.35　All regional and national institutions serving small states began as campus-based teaching institutions. In the case of regional institutions, satellite campuses and learning centres have been created in some larger states in the region. The exception is UIO, which began as a network of existing institutions, none of which offer any off-campus courses via distance education. USP and UWI have adopted a bimodal mandate, with distance education delivery models featuring prominently in their operations. In fact, USP has adopted a strong multimodal policy enabled by its ICT infrastructure. These two institutions are the largest distance education providers in the Commonwealth small states. All institutions are faced with demands for increased access to their programmes, with the result that several, even some in the states served by USP and UWI, are becoming bimodal and incorporating distance education into their overall teaching strategies.

1.36　In all the aforementioned institutions, distance education began as it has in most other places, with correspondence courses. In most instances, the model is still one of print-based courses supplemented by face-to-face tutorials and occasional visits from home campus faculty. A notable exception is USP, which has been using satellite-based course delivery for some time and has upgraded its network to enable two-way digital interactivity among their campuses and centres. The use of outreach centres is almost universal among the institutions involved in distance education. These centres provide a place where students and tutors can interact and, increasingly, where access to ICT equipment and connectivity can be provided.

1.37　The workplace is also becoming an important point of access to learning – obviously, most often for employee training. However, while the ICT infrastructure is likely to be more available in the workplace, the policies that enable and encourage employees to use it for educational purposes are often lacking. Another strategy for the enhancement of access, not related to course delivery, is the creation of mechanisms whereby students can gain recognition of prior learning (RPL). UWI has taken some interesting initiatives in this regard by creating transfer arrangements with some national colleges that provide advanced placement for students who have completed a college programme. It also has agreements with other institutions that allow articulation of coursework (for example, in the area of teacher training) and the awarding of qualifications in conjunction with the cooperating institution.

1.38　While there is some evidence that distance and campus-based teaching models are starting to converge in small-state institutions, this is not progressing as rapidly as in other parts of the world. While there are examples of this convergence at USP and UWI, it is most evident at the University of Mauritius, where distance education materials are used regularly to complement on-campus teaching.

1.39　In response to the unique context of small states as outlined in this section, particularly their limited financial and human resources, the

VUSSC has been established to enable small states to collectively develop, share and offer courses online. Closely associated with the VUSSC strategy has been an emphasis on the development of accreditation and credit transfer mechanisms, as well as a quality assurance framework (COL 2007).

1.40    With regard to accreditation and credit transfer, five key indicators have been agreed: (1) clearly articulated course descriptors that will assist the various institutions in determining credit value are produced for each course developed through VUSSC collaboration; (2) the modification of course descriptors where appropriate; (3) use of appropriate national education legislation for purposes of accreditation and credit transfer; (4) addressing recognition of prior learning through bridging mechanisms; and (5) participating institutions will actively pursue Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) with other VUSSC institutions, where appropriate, to facilitate credit transfers between institutions.

1.41    With regard to quality assurance, three indicators have been developed: (1) a VUSSC quality assurance framework based on international standards, to be developed and agreed by July 2008; (2) tools and processes for evaluating courses and programmes produced through VUSSC collaboration, which were developed and agreed by December 2007; and (3) participating institutions will implement appropriate quality assurance systems when they begin delivery of programmes and courses created through VUSSC collaboration.

1.42    In summary, the recognition of qualifications in small states of the Commonwealth presents unique, but in many cases also common, challenges. The VUSSC approach to course design and delivery is one way to address some of these challenges, yet it stops short of providing a systematic approach to credit transfer that can be overlaid onto existing sectoral, national and regional processes. These facts have led to the proposal for a TQF presented in this concept document.

## Structure of the concept document

1.43    This concept document has five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a background and rationale for the proposed TQF for the recognition of qualifications offered by the VUSSC.

1.44    Chapter 2 is an overview of international qualifications framework developments, based on a review of the relevant literature. A distinction is made between the development and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, which in effect juxtapose (sometimes ambitious) aims with the reality faced during implementation. This chapter draws directly on the experience of at least three members of the project team with qualifications framework development in New Zealand, South Africa, Botswana, Hong Kong, the Commonwealth and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

**The development of the VUSSC includes a focus on credit transfer and quality assurance**

1.45    Chapter 3 summarises the analysis of information provided by participating countries on qualifications framework development. Findings are presented according to the broad typological themes developed in Chapter 2, and in some cases on a country-by-country basis.

1.46    Chapter 4 describes the proposed TQF for the recognition of qualifications offered by the VUSSC. The chapter draws on the literature review and the state of qualifications framework developments in small states to describe the basic components that will make up the envisaged TQF. An important feature of this chapter is that the TQF is presented as a "concept" only, even including multiple possibilities in some instances. While an attempt is made to provide participating VUSSC countries with sufficient detail to facilitate the development and implementation of the agreed TQF, the concept document, and in particular Chapter 4, represents a step toward the establishment of the framework.

1.47    Further steps that will be required to establish the proposed TQF are discussed in the final chapter. The need to use existing sectoral, national and regional processes is also emphasised.

# 2. Qualifications frameworks as a global phenomenon

**Chapter summary**
This chapter reviews qualifications framework literature. It describes qualifications frameworks in terms of eight typological categories, and examines some of the underlying tensions and international debates that have characterised the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks internationally. In effect, the sometimes ambitious aims of qualifications frameworks are juxtaposed with experiences of implementation. It draws mainly on lessons learned from the first generation of frameworks (especially in Scotland, New Zealand and South Africa) because of the wealth of their experience in debating, defending and attempting to resolve issues of international significance.

## Introduction

2.1 Since the first qualifications frameworks were introduced in the UK in the mid-1980s, more and more countries have developed their own frameworks. While such developments were initially confined to the Anglophone countries of the Commonwealth, interest has more recently extended to countries in Central America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Asia- Pacific region.

2.2 As noted by Coles (2006) there is increasing activity from international agencies in the area of qualifications frameworks, including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Office (ILO), the World Bank and the EU. Coles also notes that countries with "explicit frameworks" such as England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa engage regularly with other countries and in effect support a general international movement towards the development of qualifications frameworks. The key underlying drivers for this increased interest and activity are the need to improve people's employability in the emerging knowledge economy, increased internationalisation and globalisation of learning and the development of wider regional and transnational labour markets.

2.3 At a generic level a qualifications framework can be seen as an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications

**There is increasing activity from international agencies in the area of qualifications frameworks**

according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved (Coles 2006). The recent OECD (2007:179) definition of a qualifications framework is more comprehensive and adds dimensions of scope and purpose:

> A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves, or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may take in all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector, for example initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks have a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country or internationally.

2.4 Established and emerging qualifications frameworks adopt definitions for qualifications frameworks that reflect the local context in which they have been developed, for example:

> Mauritius: "Collectively, all nationally registered qualifications and their associated unit standards, the defined and logical relationships between them."

> Malta: "A common reference and translation device between various qualifications, qualifications systems (including sectoral qualifications frameworks) and levels."

> Tonga: "The NQF shall consist of levels defined by a set of descriptors detailing (a) the complexity of the learning outcomes attained; and (b) including all post-compulsory education and training qualifications that have been accredited by the Board or by an overseas quality assurance agency recognised by the Board".

Definitions from more than 70 other countries and three regions that have implemented or are in the process of implementing qualifications frameworks, such as New Zealand, South Africa, Mexico (Zuniga 2003), Namibia (Gertze 2003) and Zimbabwe (Pesenai 2003) add more dimensions. Based on the range of existing definitions, the following broad "working definition" of a qualifications framework is used in this concept paper:

**A qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression, comparability and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.**

The intention of this "working definition" is not to replace other national or regional definitions, but instead to create a point of reference from which the concept of a TQF can be developed.

2.5 Similar to the wide-ranging definitions of qualifications frameworks, the nomenclature and terminology associated with qualifications frameworks is also varied and country-specific. Even so, it is possible to identify some aspects that are included in most. Examples include:

**Qualification:** the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process, which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards

**Learning outcomes:** statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence

**Skills:** the ability to apply knowledge to complete tasks and solve problems. Skills are often described as both cognitive (employing logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).

**Competence:** the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and/or personal development

**Level:** a stage in a hierarchical system used for grouping qualifications

**Learning programme:** a programme of studies or training defined by a curriculum, which may consist of one or more modules, units, subjects or courses or any combination of those elements

**Quality assurance:** systems set up to ensure improvement and accountability of education and training that aim at increasing the effectiveness and transparency of provision at all levels, thereby promoting mutual trust, recognition and mobility within and across countries

**Validation:** qualifications that are designed and validated as meeting the criteria are eligible for registration on the framework (depending on the inclusiveness of the framework, this may include

provider qualifications and/or national qualifications)

**Accreditation:** all frameworks require providers to be recognised in some way, usually through a process of accreditation. Ongoing accreditation status is often confirmed through a cycle of institutional audits and some NQFs also have procedures for this.

2.6 The basic design of NQFs can be described under a series of dimensions, and existing NQFs can be located along the continuum of each dimension as shown in Table 1. Clearly the national context influences the selection of a position on each dimension, with some choices being untenable and others being automatic. For example, in federal states the buy-in from regions is essential and development of a legal basis through negotiation and consensus building can be a fundamental requirement. States where social partners have a strong role in qualification design, management and evaluation will be guided towards voluntary arrangements rather than centralist imposition.

**Table 1: Design characteristics of qualifications frameworks (Coles 2006)**

| Main advantages | Design characteristic from...................................................to | | Main advantages |
|---|---|---|---|
| Coherence across qualifications Genuine national system | inclusive of all qualifications | partial coverage of qualifications | Implementation easier Piloting possible Staged development strategy |
| System wide reform possible Linkage with other national policies | designed and managed by central agency | organic development by stakeholders | Encourages harmonisation Stakeholder buy-in Allows regional development |
| Policy coordination Quality assurance | regulatory framework for assuring quality | classification of all qualifications | Communication with stakeholders |
| Powerful authority for framework Sanctions for non compliance | legal basis | voluntary basis | Ownwership secured Stakeholders work together |
| Builds on existing learning infrastructure | descriptors composed of learning inputs | descriptors composed of learning outputs | Independent of institutional structure Linkage with external frameworks |
| Relevance across all parts of education and training possible Linkage with external frameworks | level defined by descriptor | level defined by national reference qualifications | Builds on existing infrastructure Confidence in new framework higher |
| Close relationship to labour market Linkage better between education and work | qualifications based on competency standards | qualifications based on units of learning or achievement | Continues traditions of skills supply Builds on existing infrastructure |

2.7 The national context influences the selection of a position on each dimension. Factors that influence decisions on dimensions of qualifications

frameworks include the scale, breadth and projected timescale of the policy for reform; available financing; the status of the stakeholders; the existing diversity of highly valued qualifications; the status of quality assurance processes; the need to relate to external developments; the capacity of central agencies to manage change processes; and the clarity of the image of the framework (Coles 2006).

2.8 As stated by Young (2003), "at the level of rhetoric or broad goals [a qualifications framework] is a development with which it is hard to disagree". In theory, the benefits accruing from the careful design and implementation of qualifications frameworks to address specific educational, social and economic issues are considerable, but in practice implementation has often been controversial and attracted strong criticism and resistance. Despite being apparently valid responses to the issues that they were intended to address, in the translation of theory into practice some features and dimensions of qualifications frameworks have proved to be unpopular, costly, time-consuming, difficult to manage and even unworkable. The learning to be gained from such issues needs to be understood within the context of a highly complex web of situational factors unique to each framework development. Thus, while much can be learnt from past experiences, there are no simple solutions and many issues remain unresolved. This is perhaps because, as Young (2005) points out, the purposes of a qualifications framework may be inherently contradictory. For most dimensions of a qualification framework options exist along continua of possibilities, and most choices will be compromises that balance vision against pragmatism and expediency[3].

2.9 The following section describes the different characteristics of qualifications frameworks, based on a review of current literature, and incorporates some discussion of international debates on qualifications frameworks.

## Understanding qualifications frameworks

2.10   Considering the work of Tuck et al. (2004), Young (2005), Raffe (2005), Granville (2004) and others, eight typological categories can be identified in the broader NQF discourse that are common to most qualifications frameworks. These are:
  • Purpose
  • Scope
  • Incrementalism
  • Policy breadth
  • Governance
  • Prescriptiveness

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[3] Appendix 3 contains a tabular overview of some of the design features of qualifications frameworks in the context of the issues they are intended to address and the broad goals that they serve.

- Architecture and
- Guiding philosophy.

In this section, each category is discussed with exemplars where appropriate.

## Purpose

2.11    The purpose of a qualifications framework is the explicit, often overt, reasons for the development and implementation of the NQF, usually reflected in its published objectives.

2.12    While many other features of qualifications frameworks may differ, most have the common purpose of establishing a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

2.13    The OECD Thematic Group on the Development and Use of Qualifications Frameworks provides support for the reform and management of qualifications systems and has developed a range of products that might assist any country in developing a general concept of qualifications frameworks. Their report (OECD 2007) identifies the following common reasons for the introduction of a qualifications framework:

- to create a better match of qualifications with knowledge, skills and competencies and a better linking of qualifications to occupational (and broader labour market) needs, present and future.
- to bring coherence to subsystems of qualifications, e.g. higher education, adult learning, school awards and in particular vocational education and training qualifications, by creating an overarching framework for them.
- to support lifelong learning (by opening up access, targeting investments and recognising non-formal and informal learning).
- to facilitate the involvement of political actors and stakeholders, especially in vocational education and training.

2.14    Coles (2006) defines the common purposes of qualifications frameworks in similar terms:

- to establish national standards of knowledge, skills and wider competences
- to promote the quality of education and training provision
- to provide a system of coordinating and comparing qualifications by relating qualifications to each other
- to promote and maintain procedures for access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learning.

2.15    Young (2005) points out that in some developing countries, notably South Africa, which is becoming a model for other countries in the SADC region, NQFs have taken on a rather different and more overtly political purpose as part of a strategy for achieving redress and social justice and overcoming the inequalities of the past.

2.16 A distinction is commonly made (Allais 2007a, Young 2005:12) between two broad types of qualifications frameworks:

- Enabling frameworks (or frameworks of communication), which are rarely comprehensive; have communicative purposes; rely on agreement and trust; and are thus able to forge links between diverse sectors.
- Regulatory frameworks, which are often comprehensive in intent and highly prescriptive, with strong central control.

2.17 While one of the purposes of all qualifications frameworks is to communicate, in the sense that they provide a map of qualifications and give some indication of progression routes between levels and between sectors, frameworks whose main purpose is this communication or enabling function and frameworks that have a more overt regulatory role are differentiated. The essence of the distinction is between using a framework to describe the existing system and seeking to effect change using the NQF as the vehicle (Tuck et al. 2004).

2.18 As pointed out by Tuck et al. (2004) and Keevy (2005), different levels of qualifications frameworks can also be developed. One can move from frameworks within frameworks (subframeworks), to frameworks that are nationally recognised, to frameworks that are regional, such as the proposed SADC and European Qualifications Frameworks. Table 2 illustrates some of the differences between the different levels of qualifications frameworks.

**Table 2: Different levels of qualifications frameworks**

|  | **Subframework** | **National framework** | **Regional framework** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Scope** | Within an NQF, covering specific levels, sectors or types of qualifications | National, but not necessarily all levels, sectors and types of qualifications | Regional, but not necessarily all levels, sectors and types of qualifications |
| **Prescriptiveness** | Usually tighter | Varying from loose to tight | Usually looser (also referred to as meta-frameworks – see Tuck et al. (2004) |
| **Examples** | Vocational frameworks | South Africa | SADC and the EU |

2.19 The design features of a qualifications framework are selected according to the purposes of the framework (see Appendix 3). Thus, in the ensuing review of some of these features and the assumptions, tensions and debates associated with them, it is important to bear in mind the essentially

different purposes of national, regional and transnational frameworks. The establishment of an NQF is usually the enactment of national policy, and as a tool for national policy implementation the function of an NQF is usually regulatory, and compliance with its standards is mandatory. A regional framework is usually a tool for harmonisation and communication; it is more likely to have developmental and supportive functions and voluntary participation. A regional framework is usually reliant on information and assurance provided by national frameworks. A transnational framework that serves countries with no national framework is likely to have characteristics of both national and regional frameworks.

## Scope

2.20    The scope of a qualifications framework is the measure of integration of levels, sectors and types of qualifications as well as the relationships between each on the NQF.

2.21    According to Young (2005), the scope of a qualifications framework has at least three dimensions:

- Qualifications type: e.g. academic or vocational, or those that are publicly or privately funded
- Qualification level: many NQFs exclude university qualifications. The UK has a specific framework limited to higher education qualifications.
- Qualification sector: a framework can be specific to one occupational sector (e.g. engineering, as in many Latin American countries, a state (e.g. Victoria in Australia), or a cross-national or regional initiative, linking qualifications in a given sector across a number of jurisdictions (e.g. SADC, Caribbean and the EU).

2.22    According to Howieson and Raffe (1999), the scope of a qualifications framework can be defined on three levels:

- **Unified**: all systems are integrated
- **Linked**: separate systems exist, but with common structures for transferability
- **Tracked**: separate systems exist, but with limited transferability between each.

The expansion of education and training systems and the espousal of the lifelong learning agenda have led most countries in the direction of a linked or unified system, or a combination of the two (Tuck et al. 2004).

2.23    The development of a unified, linked or tracked framework is closely related to the purpose of the framework, and therefore also to the problems to be addressed. A qualifications framework with a unified scope is a comprehensive system that integrates all qualifications in all sectors, based on a belief that common principles apply across all types of education and training and all qualifications. Unified systems do not allow

for significant sector differences, and sector resistance to "one size fits all" approaches has been vigorous. Linked frameworks recognise the distinctive characteristics and needs of different sectors and show the relationships and comparability between sectors, creating common structures for transferability, while preserving the integrity of existing systems. Tracked frameworks maintain completely separate pathways within the different sectors, with limited transferability.

2.24    Comprehensive frameworks cover all qualifications, while partial frameworks only refer to some types of qualifications. Young (2003) suggests that the different forms of NQF that exist result from the tension between a desire for comprehensiveness (usually on the part of governments) and resistance, usually from upper secondary schools and universities, to the encroachment on their autonomy that a comprehensive framework entails.

2.25    There are two primary examples of comprehensive qualifications frameworks cited in the literature, New Zealand and South Africa. Both have experienced problems of implementation.

2.26    Countries with unification intentions have had to compromise in response to sector resistance. A consequence of deeply embedded philosophical and traditional differences between sectors in New Zealand has been the exclusion from the framework of certain sectors, and thus of certain types and levels of qualifications. In New Zealand compromise has involved the development of a separate but linked system for school qualifications, and a Register of Quality Assured Qualifications to accommodate university qualifications which are not part of the NQF. Experience shows that there is a need to allow for sector differences.

2.27    Young (2003: 232) suggests that "the major lesson from the New Zealand experience [may be] that while it is important to hold on to the long term goals of an NQF, it is also important to recognise that they will not be realised in the short term and whether they become a reality in the future will depend on many other changes".

2.28    Some qualifications frameworks have been implemented in association with comprehensive programmes of qualification development (for example in New Zealand and South Africa). In retrospect it is easy to see that the starting point for any development should be the specific problem or identified demand that it addresses, rather than a "grand design" that has its own intrinsic logic. Approaches that involve the development of all possible qualifications have proved expensive and provide salutary lessons for policy-makers. Large-scale development of unit standards and national qualifications has not resulted in high uptake of these qualifications by providers and learners, suggesting that although the balance of power has been shifted from suppliers (educational organisations) to customers (industry, employers, students), development is more theory-driven than market-responsive. The key question in relation to proposed development is "Is there a need for the programme?" Whereas at

one end of the continuum populating the framework with national qualifications can become an end in itself, at the other end a framework need not include any national qualifications. The framework can provide criteria that ensure that all registered qualifications are market-led (i.e. there is an established demand for the programme), stakeholder-supported and contribute to national strategic goals. A framework can also devolve programme development to education providers, where development of programmes leading to qualifications is informed by knowledge context and pedagogy.

## Incrementalism

2.29    The incrementalism of a qualifications framework is the rate and manner in which the NQF is implemented. Incrementalism includes both the rate (progress/time) of implementation, ranging from gradual to rapid, and the manner of implementation, ranging from phased to comprehensive.

2.30    Some countries, notably New Zealand and South Africa, have attempted to break with the past by implementing a comprehensive programme of reform simultaneously across all sectors. This has proved very challenging, and not entirely successful; nevertheless there are still arguments in favour of this approach (Bjornavold & Coles 2006), which maintains the advantages of a comprehensive change strategy, in terms of both stakeholder engagement and the coordination of institutional roles and responsibilities.

2.31    The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has been reasonably successful in building a unified framework and effecting some improvements in access, participation, progression and attainment, with a relative absence of conflict (Tuck et al. 2004). Nevertheless its development has been incremental, building upon a series of educational reforms over more than 20 years (Raffe 2003). It started as an overarching framework to bring together smaller subframeworks that already existed or were being constructed, and later expanded to include qualifications not already in the existing frameworks. Compared with most NQFs, the creation of the SCQF did not include the large-scale development of new qualifications, or the related standards-setting processes, which have been fundamental to the developments of the NQFs in New Zealand or South Africa, where radical transformation of the existing system was a primary aim.

2.32    Incrementalist approaches can engender inclusive models since they have the advantage of building on existing practice, and fostering credibility and trust in the system over time. The potential risk with this approach is that sectors that were not involved in the formative stages may be less inclined to "buy in" to a system that might be perceived as insufficiently customised to their needs. However, in its later stages the development of the Scottish framework was led by the universities, so this is not necessarily the case. Most theorists comparing the fraught

implementation of comprehensive frameworks with the relatively straightforward development of the Scottish framework are inclined to think it is a mistake for policy-makers to move too far ahead of current practice, and that the benefits of an incremental approach need to be weighed against the urgency of political agendas.

2.33    Raffe (2003) and Tuck et al. (2004) concur that "second-generation NQF countries" need to take account of the full sequence of regulation and educational reforms required at subsystem level and not only its latest stage, and might therefore usefully consider adopting an incrementalist approach that concentrates initial framework-building activities in areas that will have maximum impact on the intended social or educational goals, such as expanding vocational education or widening access to higher education.

## Policy breadth

2.34    Policy breadth is the extent to which the NQF is directly and explicitly linked with other measures that influence how the framework is used (Raffe 2003).

2.35    In earlier studies on the impact of qualifications reform (Raffe 1998 and Raffe et al. 1994) argued that the "intrinsic logic" of the modular system with its flexible pathways and incentives to participate was less powerful than the "institutional logic" in which it was embedded.

2.36    The intrinsic logic refers to the inherent design features of an NQF, and institutional logic refers to the extent to which external systems and policies, including those of specific institutions, are aligned with and supportive of an NQF. Raffe (2003: 242) concluded that "[a] qualifications framework may be ineffective if not complemented by measures to reform the surrounding institutional logic, for example, local institutional agreements to promote credit transfer, or encouragement to employers to reflect credit values in the recruitment process".

2.37    The literature also shows that the goals of access, mobility, progression, quality, redress and development, which are often included in the objectives of an NQF, cannot be achieved by the establishment of an NQF alone. These goals require a range of other actions, including appropriate laws and policies, institutions, budgetary allocations, infrastructure development, professional development for teachers and trainers, and provision of learning resource materials.

## Governance

2.38    The governance of a qualifications framework is all the activities that can be seen as purposeful efforts to guide, steer, control or manage institutions, sectors or processes associated with the NQF, including

activities that lead to the development and implementation of an NQF, such as legislation, the role of implementing agencies and funding.

2.39    Tuck et al. (2004) note that an NQF implementation strategy combining intrinsic and institutional logics requires strong central leadership and resources. Government has an essential role to play in providing a framework of policies to support NQF development and to ensure fit with other relevant education policies.

2.40    Coles (2006) echoes the findings of a European Commission survey of critical success factors for the development of an NQF when he identifies the need to establish mechanisms for the systematic coordination of the roles of the main government bodies (typically the Ministries of Education and Labour) and any body with assigned authority for NQF implementation.

2.41    Where countries have established a body with central authority for managing the technicalities of the NQF and for offering advice to government on main policy issues (e.g. New Zealand, South Africa and Hong Kong) the body needs full political and financial support in order to be able to carry out its role effectively. In order to ensure sustainability, and also avoid reliance on government funding only, revenue generation options are considered.

2.42    Coles (2006: 22) defines the common functions of NQF agencies as follows:

- accrediting qualifications to NQF levels
- engaging and communicating with stakeholders
- reviewing NQF design, functioning and operational procedures
- monitoring NQF effects on lifelong learning
- advising ministries on policy implications of monitoring.

However, he points out that the diversity of NQF designs and national education and training infrastructures is so great that there can be no single model for best managing a newly created NQF.

2.43    Coles (2006: 230) and Young (2005: 29) both reflect on the important issue of costs. Coles notes that the scope and purposes of the NQF directly affect the costs of implementation and ongoing maintenance. Even if the NQF is essentially conceived as having a coordinating role in respect of existing qualifications and structures, the necessary preparatory work for establishing an NQF (policy analysis, consideration of relevant experience elsewhere, development of options, modelling of the favoured option(s), engagement of leaders of stakeholder groups, specialist task groups, consultation with main institutions and the general public, piloting, establishing a specialist agency) is likely to be costly and must be carefully budgeted for.

2.44    The Report of the study team on the implementation of the NQF in South Africa (2002: 24) underlined the importance of consultative, consensus-building activities:

> The success of a qualifications framework may be measured by the extent to which its standards and qualifications are valued and used. Unless providers offer them, and unless committed employers understand and demand them, standards and qualifications per se will be inert and disregarded. Thus a qualifications framework cannot stand on its own but needs to be embedded in both the provider community and the communities of users. Trust, which is closely allied to credibility and acceptance, is an essential attribute of successful qualifications anywhere, whether conventional or otherwise. If outcomes-based qualifications are too far removed from the contexts where learning is done or where qualifications are put to use they will be rejected or ignored.

2.45    The cost of ongoing maintenance is also related to scope and purpose. If the NQF has a role in the major reform of the education and training system, it may require legal status. Moreover, if the agency is also responsible for quality assurance procedures, curriculum and assessment monitoring, reviews of employment standards, and establishing benchmarks against other national and international examples, costs can rise steeply. For example, in Hong Kong in 2007, statutory responsibility for implementing the NQF was given to the existing Academic Accreditation Council. This entailed a lengthy legislative process to change the council's name from the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) to the Hong Kong Council for the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) and dramatically extend its remit, functions, staffing and funding requirements.

2.46    The literature suggests there are three main models of implementing agencies:

- **Strong Authority**: At present the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is the only example of a strong authority that oversees all other bodies. This is, however, currently under debate and will probably not retain this role for much longer. Although New Zealand may have started out as a strong authority, it nearly became a coordinating authority with only coordinating powers (Philips, 2003), but gradually evolved into the weaker central authority configuration.
- **Central Authority**: A central authority has responsibility for quality assurance and accreditation, but there are separate awarding bodies for particular sectors and/or levels such as schooling, VET and Higher Education. The central authority usually has some oversight function, but cannot prescribe to the awarding bodies. Examples are found in Ireland (NQAI, FETAC and HETAC), Scotland (SQA and QAA) and New Zealand (NZQA, NZVCC, PPCAP and CEAC).
- **Coordinating Authority**: A coordinating authority has mainly administrative and coordinating powers and is influenced by powerful

partners. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is such an example, as noted by Keating (2003: 285):

> [T]he AQF is the weakest partner in a collection of national bodies, not having a ministerial council, substantial personnel and budget, direct constituencies, or the operational capacities of the other agencies. Its influence depends on the willingness of the powerful partners.

## Prescriptiveness

2.47    The prescriptiveness of a qualifications framework is the stringency of the criteria that qualifications have to satisfy in order to be included in the NQF (Raffe 2003) and that providers have to satisfy in order to offer NQF qualifications. Prescriptiveness also includes the level of specification and standardisation of documents and processes.

2.48    NQFs may be situated along a continuum of tight (or "strong") to loose (or "weak"). Tight frameworks, such as the NVQ framework in the UK and the NZQF in New Zealand, are very prescriptive about qualification design and quality assurance across a range of sectors, if not across all. Loose frameworks such as the AQF and the SCQF are based on consensus-building among stakeholders and focus much more on the practicalities of achieving the framework's objectives. Young (2005:13) points out that "governments tend to want to move towards strong frameworks as they provide greater potential leverage both in relation to coordination and accountability. However, the stronger (tighter) the framework, the less likely it will be to achieve agreement, and for the framework to be able to include a wide diversity of learning needs".

2.49    Highly prescriptive qualifications frameworks, whose purpose is to regulate quality standards, exert strong centralised prescriptive control over the design and quality assurance of qualifications. This type of system requires legislative authority. Systems that overemphasise central control of quality assurance have been known to create an environment of cynicism, risk the disenfranchisement/alienation of sectors and key players such as academics, and create a compliance culture. Tight centralised control of national quality assurance can become excessively bureaucratic and such systems can become an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end.

2.50    Too much central control causes controversy and risk of bureaucratic considerations taking precedence over customer service considerations. However, pragmatism and responsiveness to a changing environment and some elements of central control of quality assurance are necessary for assurance that framework standards are met and stakeholders are protected. Quality assurance is key to the development of public confidence in qualifications, and to the environment of credibility and trust

which is essential for the implementation of articulation and credit transfer systems.

2.51    Raffe (2003) prefers pragmatism to prescriptiveness, reflecting that a pragmatic approach to a qualifications framework avoids stringent criteria for admitting qualifications, and it interprets its criteria flexibly. It does not rely purely on technical judgements of level, volume and quality when taking decisions about fitting qualifications into the framework. Instead it takes care, at least tacitly, not to undermine the trust that underpins qualifications, nor to offend powerful groups whose support may be needed to make the framework effective.

2.52    Such enabling frameworks rely on agreement, their level of prescription is low and they are much less problematic to introduce. However, with very limited prescription, the framework depends entirely on voluntary cooperation and its potential to challenge existing/traditional practice, which may not be meeting the current and future needs of learners, is also limited. No sanctions are imposed on the providers of qualifications who do not comply with common design criteria. As a result many of the barriers to progression are likely to remain.

2.53    The Australian (AQF), Scottish (SCQF) and French qualifications frameworks represent different versions of an enabling framework. For example, there are three criteria for inclusion in the SCQF: (1) qualifications must be credit-rated (the volume of learning can be measured); (2) qualifications and the credit-bearing components of qualifications must be levelled (assigned to one of the 12 levels of the SCQF); and (3) assessment for the qualifications must be quality-assured. Raffe (2003: 241) describes this as an intermediate point on a scale of prescriptiveness (more stringent than the UK but less stringent than New Zealand), but warns there is a trade-off between the scope of a qualifications framework and its prescriptiveness. The more prescriptive a framework, the harder it is to cover a wide range of levels, modes and content of learning.

2.54    Regulatory frameworks, such as in South Africa and New Zealand, which were created as vehicles for the accomplishment of major aspects of government policy, have a more overtly regulatory role. The turbulent history of these two initiatives and the compromises that have had to be negotiated to secure progress towards inclusivity and integration are well-documented (Young 2003, Allais 2003, Tuck et al. 2004, Philips 2003, Forsyth 2007).

2.55    The distillation of wisdom from the experience of pioneering countries suggests that if an NQF is unified it cannot be highly prescriptive or tightly controlled (such as the New Zealand system). Within linked frameworks, on the other hand, it appears that tight control of the various sectors by the relevant sector bodies under the oversight of a unifying body, is a workable approach. Both of these approaches (unified and loose or linked and tight) allow for differences between sectors.

## Architecture

2.56    The architecture of a qualifications framework is the configuration of structural arrangements that make up the design of the NQF. Examples include the use of outcomes-based qualifications, core skills and level descriptors.

2.57    A fundamental feature of qualifications frameworks is that they are organised in terms of levels of learning. While most frameworks define these levels independently of the national qualifications that are associated with a level, some are "equating frameworks" based on qualifications. As an example, the AQF (Forsyth 2007) classifies 15 national qualifications according to the accrediting sector and to pathways for progression of learning within and between sectors. The two most significant features of the AQF are that there are no numbered levels described independently of qualifications (the criteria for levels are implicit in the qualifications descriptors). Unification between the three sectors is achieved not by eliminating sectoral differences, but by highlighting choice and diversity across sectors (qualifications accredited in each sector offer a choice of learning pathway: a general education pathway, an industry-based pathway and an academic pathway).

2.58    Frameworks that are organised according to levels, to which a formal level descriptor, expressed in terms of learning outcomes, is attached, may be described as "descriptor-based" frameworks. The independence of level descriptors from any content or context or processes of learning or institutional setting is a key characteristic of descriptor-based frameworks. The number of levels varies between frameworks and generally reflects the existing qualifications system from which the framework emerged. A recent survey of countries in the Asia-Pacific Region revealed that the number of levels in NQFs in the region varied between five and 11 (Corpus et al. 2007). The emerging norm in Europe is for eight levels to be defined.

2.59    Level descriptors take account of different types of learning at the same level, including:

* knowledge (and understanding)
* skills
* wider personal and professional competencies, which are further divided (by EQF for example) into autonomy and responsibility, learning competence, communication and social competence, and professional and vocational competencies.

2.60    Other types of content- and institution-specific descriptor can be developed to augment, or compensate for, the limitations of level descriptors. These include subject benchmarks and graduate profiles, which are derived from level descriptors and provide subject-specific and

institutional interpretations that may be more useful to academics and prospective students.

2.61    Closely related to level descriptors is the extent to which content is specified within qualifications at different levels of an NQF. For example, as illustrated in Figure 1, it is commonly accepted that a higher level of content specification will occur at lower levels of an NQF, such as in general education, while qualifications at the higher end of the NQF (Level 10 in this example), such as in Master's and Doctoral degrees will have very low content specification.
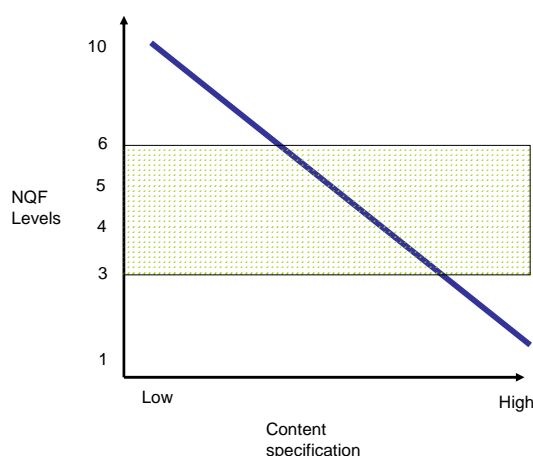


**Figure 1: Level of specification**

2.62    In regulatory frameworks where qualifications must be referenced to a level in the framework, the framework acts as a tool for quality assurance. For example, in Hong Kong only accredited qualifications may be registered on the framework, and the burden of proof is placed on the provider to demonstrate that the learning outcomes match the generic level descriptors for the appropriate level on the framework.

2.63    Outcomes-based learning has its origins in behavioural learning theory and was popularised in the fields of vocational education and training in the 1980s. Its subsequent application in academic learning environments in schools and universities has been highly contentious, largely because learning outcomes (like level descriptors) are often specified without any reference to any specific content or learning processes.

2.64    Outcomes-based education has impacted significantly on the roles of the various stakeholders in qualification design. Figure 2 shows the process of "designing down" in which the programme leading to the qualification is derived from outcomes (specified by industry) and content and methodology (selected by education institutions). The diagram shows graphically a new hierarchy in which education providers are no longer the leaders and standards-setters, and content (or inputs) is no longer the

starting point.
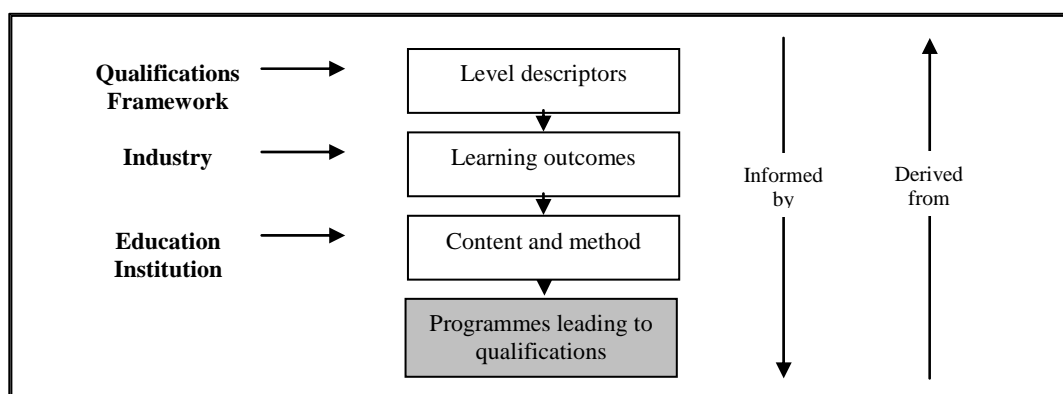


**Figure 2: Graphic representation of the process of "designing down"**

2.65    Frameworks that have had the fewest implementation problems are those which, in their specification of outcomes, criteria and assessment requirements, have taken the inputs and requirements of teaching programmes into account.

2.66    Despite valid criticisms of learning outcomes approaches, and the elusiveness of absolute transparency and objectivity, learning outcomes do provide a firmer basis for comparison than inputs and they enable better articulation between modules and programmes; it is hard to compare qualifications without explicit statements of the broad outcomes. Comparison on the basis of learning inputs, i.e. duration, location, type and content of learning, is less defensible because consistent inputs do not assure consistent outcomes.

2.67    While there is fierce criticism from some sectors, especially traditional academic schools and universities, there is also a large body of literature that supports outcomes-based education, and a recent study of European developments suggests that outcomes-based learning is becoming widely accepted (Bjornavold & Coles 2006).

2.68    Criteria for validating all types of qualifications for registration on a framework are likely to require qualifications to be described in terms of broad outcomes. This is not to say that all qualifications on the framework must necessarily be fully competency-based, and indeed it may not be considered good use of time and effort to convert all existing programmes and modules to a specific outcomes-based format, especially with a view to divesting them of the specific content and context for which they were designed.

2.69    Qualifications frameworks do not necessarily require any particular approach to assessment, or overtly influence assessment systems, but have nevertheless become associated with particular approaches, such as unit standards assessment in New Zealand. Quite apart from philosophical problems with the nature and centrality of outcomes in this system, there is a risk that with the greater emphasis on learning outcomes, assessment can

dominate the programme of learning, to the detriment of other more formative learning activities. Controversy and criticism have been particularly prevalent where existing traditional systems have been changed from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced after the introduction of the framework.

2.70    Criterion-referenced assessment is widely thought to be fairer than norm-referenced assessment because it is more explicit and transparent. A more consistent performance is required of the learner because all outcomes must be achieved, and very good outcomes do not compensate for very poor outcomes. It is considered more valid and reliable, because an individual's results do not depend on the performance of his or her cohort, and (in theory at least) the standard remains constant over time, and is consistently interpreted and applied by all users (ILO 2007).

2.71    One of the reasons why competency-based assessment has not been well accepted in all quarters is that it is seen to be incompatible with marks or grading systems. While it is true that for some skills (like changing a light bulb) a binary system is appropriate (either you can do it or you can't), in some areas of learning (such as making a shirt) it is legitimate to ask "How well can you do it?" or, for a theoretical subject, "How well do you understand it?" Competency-based assessment can, however, co-exist with marking and grading systems. An example is provided in New Zealand, where school qualifications are based on "Achievement Standards" which can be achieved through merit or excellence. However, not all the issues have been resolved, and it is administratively problematic, for example, to recognise prior learning in respect of a graded course.

2.72    One of the major purposes of establishing a qualifications framework is to promote lifelong learning and enable learners to gain credit for assessed knowledge that can be accumulated (theoretically across sectors) towards a whole qualification. In order to achieve this aim, whole qualifications must be broken down into smaller units of learning (typically modules or courses) and those components measured in terms of volume of learning and level.

2.73    It is useful to distinguish between two approaches to the division of learning into components:

- Modularisation is usually teacher-led and divides the curriculum into components for delivery
- Unitisation divides assessment into the smallest parts which can be independently assessed and for which credit can be awarded.

2.74    A module or course is a small discrete chunk of learning and assessment that is a component part (or building block) of programme(s) of learning and at the same time has its own stand-alone value independent of any programme. Learning is always sequenced, and often divides naturally into topics and aspects of theory and practice that can be further classified as pre-requisite and co-requisite components. Modularisation is in many

ways just a formalisation of natural sequencing, but modularisation of learning has attracted criticism and resistance, perhaps because of its association with unitisation, which is a far more radical reduction of learning into weighted components.

2.75    For the purposes of a qualifications framework, especially with goals related to mobility, access and lifelong learning, it is essential to be able to identify and compare chunks of learning, independent of the programmes within which they are embedded. While there are strong arguments for a "holistic" delivery of programmes of learning, and for the importance of consolidation and synthesis of learning, some divisibility provides a flexible model that meets learners' access, choice and progression needs and ensures that learners don't waste any time covering old (or irrelevant) ground. In addition, a modularised programme can be easily adapted in response to environmental changes.

2.76    Unit standards-based frameworks have been strongly criticised for their fragmentation of learning. In theory the division of assessment into its smallest components means assessment is completely independent of delivery and learners can start anywhere, progress at their own rate, select and combine units as they require, and sequence their learning to meet their own needs. From pedagogical, curriculum development and education management perspectives, somewhat larger chunks of learning and assessment are more manageable and in practice the acquisition of learning and skills almost invariably depends on particular combinations and sequencing. As a result providers tend to "package" units into modules for delivery purposes, thereby increasing the coherence and structure of the learning and reducing the theoretical benefits. It requires considerable skill and experience to use unit standards to develop curricula in which learning and assessment are experienced as seamless and synthesised.

2.77    Credit systems provide a way of quantifying the learning to be transferred or recognised; they allow the amount of time required for the learning to be described and compared. Credit points are a quantification of the "volume" of learning, or how long it takes a typical learner to achieve a specified chunk of learning. Credits represent notional learning hours: these include all formal and informal learning activities, practical work and practice and all assessment-related activity. A common definition of one credit is 10 notional hours of learning.

2.78    The Scottish NQF has evolved into the Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework (SCQF). All qualifications in the SCQF must be credit-rated, which implies that the volume of learning of each credit-bearing component of the whole qualification must be measured. In Hong Kong, the Education and Manpower Bureau's ambitious attempt in 2005 to gain simultaneous buy-in for a credit accord and the NQF was thwarted by stakeholder resistance based on fundamental differences between the measure of a credit from the funded Higher Education sector and from private providers. Importantly, both Raffe (2003) and Coles (2006) consider that credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems may be seen

as a second-stage process in the incrementalist approach to NQF development.

2.79  A key distinction should be made between CAT and RPL systems. Transfer of credit is a paper exercise based on analysis and evaluation of the credit awarded against learning outcomes by another provider. RPL is an actual assessment of evidence provided by the applicant against the learning outcomes. Both systems are dependent on information about levels and credits, since credit is awarded, either through transfer or recognition processes, at a certain level for a chunk of learning that is quantifiable as a certain amount.

2.80  For some frameworks, particularly those that aim to redress historical inequities in national education provision, the development of a system that enables non-formal and informal learning to be equated with learning acquired in formal learning environments is a key goal. Such frameworks require RPL to be widely available. In theory the "liberation" of qualifications from their traditional association with programmes of learning means that qualifications can be gained outside any traditional learning environment. RPL allows anyone who thinks they already have the knowledge and skills required to achieve the unit or module or qualification to be assessed and awarded credit.

2.81  One of the major problems with implementing RPL is the infrastructure and resource requirements required to support it. In practice RPL systems that rigorously apply the principles of RPL and the practices of quality-assured outcomes-based assessment are often overwhelming for the applicant and labour-intensive, time-consuming and not cost-effective for the provider, even in a "user pays" context.

2.82  A distinction should be made between comparability and equivalency. General credit is awarded when modules or qualifications are broadly comparable, whereas specific credit is awarded when modules are equivalent – i.e. the same. Comparability determines the face value of the qualification or module in terms of its level, credits and broad outcomes, which is the information required for situating it correctly in the framework and for identifying relevant progression routes. Equivalency determines the extent to which qualifications or modules are the essentially the same. This level of detail is often required for the recognition of foreign qualifications.

## Guiding philosophy

2.83  The guiding philosophy of a qualifications framework is the underlying thinking that implicitly, often covertly, underlies the development and implementation of the NQF. Examples include neo-liberalism, managerealism and vocationalisation.

2.84  Young (2005) locates the intellectual roots of the idea of an NQF in the competence approach to vocational education which was popular in the UK in the early 1990s and which led to the idea that all qualifications could

and should be expressed in terms of outcomes, without prescribing any specific learning pathway or programme. This idea found favour in the context of the emerging neo-liberal economic policies of the day in the UK and New Zealand, which emphasised the primary role of the private sector in economic development. It was assumed that employers would be in the best position to identify training needs and therefore to say what kind of vocational qualifications were needed, by basing them on workplace performance outcomes. This approach effectively marginalised the former key players in vocational training – the unions and the education and training providers – who were seen by the government of the day as offering what their staff could teach rather than what employers in different sectors needed. The major political function of the first qualifications framework in the UK (the NVQ framework) was to provide a mechanism for transferring the control of vocational education from providers to employers.

2.85    Thus qualifications have become an arena in which a framework is used in the service of powerful political agendas, including social redress and economic reform. The impact of these agendas on a domain that was formerly the preserve of academics and master craftspeople has been immense. It is small wonder, then, that the implementation of qualifications frameworks has been characterised by the vigorous resistance of educationalists in many parts of the world. Frameworks and their associated systems have introduced a radically different approach to learning, and a bureaucracy and jargon that is perceived as foreign and alien, and in many respects irrelevant to the former communities of shared practice.

2.86    Allais (2007a) reflects that the popularity of NQFs over the past 20 years has resonated with the increasing dominance of neo-liberalism, which emphasises market solutions and argues that the state should be pared down. Under this philosophy an emphasis on education for human capital and human resource development may partly account for the rise of outcomes-based frameworks that are linked to employment, economic improvement and international competitiveness.

2.87    NQFs are also seen as a way of raising the status of vocational qualifications, by showing that they are on the same level on a framework as another qualification and thus establishing that they should be seen as equal by society. This "vocationalisation" is promoted by governments as a means to produce more useful skills and develop the economy. Young (2005) defines this phenomenon as the embracing by governments of the principle of similarity (similarities are more important than differences between qualifications across sectors). He points out that in reality, differences in types of learning, and the skills and knowledge required by different occupational sectors and between qualifications related to general and vocational education, remain. He suggests that many of the difficulties in implementing unified frameworks derive from a failure to perceive this fundamental truth, and also that governments embrace the idea of an NQF because it provides mechanisms for accountability and control of

providers. He sees the trend on the part of governments internationally to use qualifications as drivers of educational reform as "having less to do with improving the quality of education and more that an NQF provides a government with an instrument for making educational institutions more accountable and quantitative measures for comparing different national systems" (Young 2003).

2.88    Allais (2007a: 68) expands on this theme and sees outcomes-based qualifications as a significant tool to open up markets in education. Instead of it being dominated by the concerns of educators and the academy, education can be opened up to wide range of private providers who can provide programmes that lead to the required outcomes or competences. Allais (2003, 2007a) also argues that while the rhetoric of the South African NQF relates to democratic transformation and social redress, the early stakeholders were involved in a limited project focused on making the South African economy competitive in the international capitalist economy and on bringing the benefits of more jobs and a greater spread of wealth, higher wages and increased skills. Allais (2007a: 73) describes the outcomes-based qualifications approach to educational reform as a "managerialist-type" reform, and suggests a number of key reasons why it has encountered problems:

- the system leads to a spiral of specification that becomes completely unworkable
- over-specified outcome statements do not provide a basis for curriculum design, because they do not specify knowledge
- the nature of curriculum knowledge is such that it needs to be acquired in educational institutions.

## Implications for qualifications frameworks in small states of the Commonwealth

2.89    Qualifications frameworks are drivers of change that have profound effects on education systems. Outcomes-based education penetrates deep into the heart of teaching and learning. Qualifications frameworks influence the way education institutions are organised and how they operate; they blur the traditional boundaries between sectors and types of institutions and can effectively shift the balance of power between stakeholders. Great care needs to go into the development of such a powerful instrument, with its huge implications for social and economic development in small states.

2.90    Young (2003) identifies three major problems for the implementation of qualifications frameworks:

- overcomplex approaches
- overambitious visions
- top-down strategies.

Ideally then, implementation should be based on simplicity of design and incremental vision and should encourage local initiatives. Some general principles for the design can be derived from this advice.

2.91 Lessons drawn from the experiences of the best-established frameworks suggest the following broad principles:

- Avoid extreme standardisation by allowing for sector differences, building on existing practice (but challenge relevance and outmoded approaches), avoiding prescriptiveness and "spirals of specification", and encouraging differentiated provision.
- Facilitate communication and relationship-building by promoting trust and credibility, incentivising participation, balancing the interests of stakeholders, valuing traditional domains and expertise, and developing workable systems for CAT and RPL.
- Develop quality assurance systems that are enabling and enhance "home-grown" quality improvement by facilitating the recognition and sharing of good practice, promoting relevance and quality of qualifications, and balancing theory and vision against pragmatism and expediency.

2.92 The starting point for the development of a qualifications framework is our current understanding of existing key qualifications and their relationship to each other. Most frameworks derive from considerations of what already exists, but some frameworks have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Existing qualifications can provide important benchmarks, and since (as discussed above) level descriptors are usually developed without reference to a specific knowledge area, and can be quite abstract and technical, typical or well-known qualifications provide valuable reference points in the framework architecture.

2.93 An enabling framework can provide broad parameters and developmental support, challenge outmoded programmes and practices and encourage engagement between stakeholders and partners. Programme development can be led by education providers, building on existing qualification systems. Implementation of the framework can be incremental, allowing for trust and credibility to develop over time. The inclusivity of the framework depends entirely on the extent to which participation is perceived by stakeholders to be essentially beneficial. An enabling framework needs to allow for sector differences, learner diversity and different teaching and learning approaches and methods.

2.94 It is useful to learn from the experiences of other countries and guard against the risks associated with unitisation of learning and criterion-based assessment, especially the risk of assessment procedures becoming unmanageably detailed and unwieldy and programmes of learning becoming dominated by assessment.

2.95 In the establishment and implementation of a new qualifications framework, consideration needs to be given to a number of transition

issues. These include whether to require accreditation of all participating institutions at the outset, with the risk of delaying the implementation of the NQF, or whether to provisionally accredit all existing reputable institutions and commence an audit regime to confirm ongoing accreditations over a longer period of time. Similarly, there are decisions to be made about the approach to various categories of qualification, such as whether all existing qualifications should be required to meet the validation criteria prior to registration on the framework (which may, for example, require conversion to outcomes-based modules), and how to handle international qualifications.

## Considering future practice: open and dynamic standards

2.96    The design of a TQF not only stands to benefit from past experience and current convention, it also provides an opportunity to incorporate new thinking and innovation for the future. The development of information technologies since the conception and implementation of the first frameworks is nothing short of revolutionary. Similarly, the way that work is conceived and organised and carried out today, the skill sets required for working in the modern world, and the implications of all this for education provision and management represent a complete paradigm shift. Technology that was inconceivable 20 years ago when the first-generation frameworks were developed is now readily available. Any consideration of the introduction of new thinking can benefit from the lessons of the past, which show that sometimes defensible ideas, founded on solid theory and promising perfect solutions, were in practice unmanageable and divisive.

2.97    Chapter One alluded to possible innovations in future framework design that could include developing and maintaining standards by a general consensus approach, rather like entries in WikiPedia. This approach would certainly be in keeping with modern trends in information management.

2.98    Standards are usually fixed goalposts that remain constant over time, though approaches to them may be diverse and vary over time. Inflexibility is both a strength and a weakness. One of the challenges for quality assurance is the tension between the need for, on the one hand, clear non-negotiable standards, stable structures and consistent processes, and on the other for flexibility and the ability to respond and adapt to a continually changing external environment. Moreover, performance information from the internal environment that regularly stimulates continuous improvement, involving critical review of, and adjustments to, the standards, structures and processes, needs to be maintained.

2.99    Standards apply to almost everything we touch, from hammering a nail into a piece of wood to connecting across the Internet or assessing the level of a unit of learning. Standards may be created by a major supplier

and by choices made by the public. In its day, the VHS video recorder became the standard and the Betamax video recorder became almost extinct. This was not a choice by a standards-setting body, but was driven by consumers. When a piece of technology suddenly becomes popular, by default it may become a "standard". An example of a controversial "standard" is the file formats used by Microsoft. These are used internationally, by possibly 85% of computer users, but because the details of these standards are not fully disclosed other providers of computer programs can never create complete compatibility between their programs and the Microsoft equivalents. These are "closed standards" – they exist, but not all the details are known.

2.100 "Open standards" are routinely set by organisations like the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), a non-profit organisation that works with global groups of people to establish standards. The IEEE claims to have 370 000 members in over 160 countries, and when it sets a standard most organisations will conform to it, thereby facilitating the cooperation of different pieces of technology. An open standard is publicly available for others to use. In the programming world "open" is often taken to mean "royalty-free" and in some countries, open standards are legislated to be free of charge to users. Open formats relate more to the specifications for storing digital data such as wordprocessor documents and databases. As indicated above, the widely used Microsoft standards are not open because the specifications are not released to enable other software producers to make fully compatible products.

2.101 The idea of open and dynamic standards needs to be carefully examined from the perspective of all stakeholders, and in terms of the enduring concepts that underpin qualifications frameworks, including implications for participation, credibility, consistency and simplicity. For a TQF to work, the maximum amount of detail would have to be available to everyone so that course units could be correctly "pegged" within the framework. The network using this framework would need to be able to freely exchange data with the framework so that course units could be compared and transferred from one country's system to another's.

2.102 This review of past and current practice has shown that parallel to, and perhaps as a consequence of, the incremental introduction of qualifications frameworks internationally, education has become increasingly outcomes-based. This trend mirrors similar developments in the field of organisational management. Over the past 40 years stages in the incremental rethinking of the concepts of organisational management and performance can be traced. Simplistic input/output models have long since disappeared. With the emergence of quality management as an approach to improving performance came the increasing focus on process. Since the 1980s, the use of "excellence models" as tools for conceptualising and planning organisational management has gained momentum. In the evolution of excellence models one can trace a new eclecticism that recognises there is no "one way" to manage organisations, and what is needed is a framework within which different approaches can be

coherently deployed to deliver the outcomes required of the organisation by its stakeholders.

## Concluding comments: qualifications frameworks as a global phenomenon

2.103 This chapter provides a detailed account of qualifications frameworks as a global phenomenon, organised mainly according to eight categories. The main points contained in this chapter are listed below.

a) It is evident that qualifications frameworks have become a global phenomenon, with more than 70 countries and at least three regions at various stages of implementation. There is also increasing activity in this area from international agencies, such as the OECD and the ILO.

b) Qualifications frameworks are broadly defined as "instruments for the classification of qualifications".

c) Even though the nomenclature associated with qualifications frameworks is varied and country-specific, there are common definitions for terms such as *qualifications, learning outcomes, skills, competence, level, learning programme, quality assurance, validation* and *accreditation*.

d) Although the purposes of qualifications frameworks may range from being enabling and communicative to regulatory and transformational, a number of common purposes also exist, such as to establish national standards, to promote quality, and to provide a system of coordination for comparing qualifications.

e) The scope of qualifications frameworks can be defined on three levels: unified, linked and tracked. Countries with unified frameworks have encountered the most difficulties, while most countries are considering linked models.

f) Incremental and phased approaches to qualifications framework implementation seem to be more successful, although more rapid and comprehensive approaches are warranted in certain contexts.

g) A qualifications framework may be ineffective if not complemented by measures to develop the surrounding institutional logic (e.g. institutional credit agreements), as well as the intrinsic logic (the inherent design features) of the framework.

h) There are three main models of national qualifications framework implementation agencies: strong (one national body with overall responsibility), central (a central oversight body that collaborates with sectoral and/or other awarding bodies), and coordinating (the national body has mainly administrative powers).

i) Highly prescriptive qualifications frameworks require legislative authority and have an overt regulatory role. Less prescriptive frameworks rely on voluntary participation, and are generally more successful in building trust between stakeholders.

j) The architecture of qualifications frameworks differs, but includes common aspects such as levels with level descriptors, quality assurance systems, a description of learning outcomes, assessment methods, the division of learning into components and credit systems.

k) The intellectual roots of qualifications frameworks are located in the competence approach used in vocation education in the UK in the late 1990s. This approach emphasised the role of private-sector providers in economic development and has subsequently been criticised for advancing the neo-liberal agenda.

l) Lessons from the experiences of established qualifications frameworks suggested the following broad principles: avoid extreme standardisation by allowing for sectoral differences; facilitate and build communication and trust and credibility; and develop enabling and "home-grown" quality assurance systems.

m) 'Open and dynamic standards" are not generally associated with qualifications framework developments, but do merit further investigation in the context of the proposed TQF.

# 3. Qualifications frameworks in small states of the Commonwealth

**Chapter summary**
Based on an analysis of the information provided by participating countries, this chapter provides an overview of the status of education and training in small states of the Commonwealth, with a specific focus on current qualifications framework developments. A detailed summary of progress towards national qualifications frameworks on a country-by-country basis is included in tabular format.

## Introduction

3.1 Between June and August 2007 small Commonwealth states were requested to provide information relating to qualifications framework development in their countries, and in some cases also the region wherein the country is located. A total of 76 documents from 24 countries were received, including discussion documents, draft policies, promulgated legislation and correspondence wherein the status of qualifications framework development was explained (Appendix 2 contains a list of all responses). In addition, an online questionnaire was developed, 15 responses to which were received from 13 countries. Overall, 20 of the 29 participating VUSSC countries participated in the request for information.

3.2     This chapter presents an overview of the information provided by member countries. In some instances a country-by-country overview of specific aspects of NQF development is given; it is important to note that this is not done to compare countries with each other, nor should it create the impression that member countries are competing to develop qualifications frameworks.

The chapter has three main sections:

- An overview of the involvement of small states in regional qualifications framework developments
- The status of education and training in small states of the Commonwealth – including an overview of the coordination of education and training, expectations related to qualifications framework

developments, specific issues related to tertiary education, TVET and general education, and the recognition of qualifications. An overview of the terms and concepts used in small states is also included.

- Progress towards national qualifications frameworks. This section includes an overview of how NQFs are defined and understood in small states, including the extent to which NQF-related legislation and policies have been developed and resources have been allocated. A summary of progress towards NQF development and implementation is included, based on the indications received from small states.

3.3  The initial findings presented in this concept document are based on an interpretation of the data provided by participating small states. Verification of data was done by the senior officials from 20 counties that attended the meeting in Singapore from 25-29 February 2008 (see the recommendations at the beginning of this concept document).

**A national approach to the coordination of education and training is underdeveloped in most small states**

## Involvement in regional qualifications frameworks

3.4 As expected, many (if not all) small states indicated a strong reliance on regional qualifications framework initiatives, notably in SADC, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Asia-Pacific and the EU. Specific examples are described below.

3.5 Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Guyana, St Kitts and Nevis made explicit reference to the regional CARICOM qualifications framework development. In addition CARICOM itself participated in the survey. Important aspects emphasised included: an NQF will be instrumental in supporting the concept of free movement of goods, services, capital and persons, including skilled labour, in CARICOM (Antigua and Barbuda); the value of having regional examinations in the form of the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE), the regional equivalent of the Cambridge A-Levels (Belize); the establishment of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) as the Regional Examining Body as early as in 1972 (Belize); discussions currently under way within the Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies (CANTA) to expand the Regional Qualifications Framework to seven levels to accommodate postgraduate certifications at the Master's and Doctoral levels (CARICOM, also referred to by St Kitts and Nevis); and various meetings, conferences and workshops that are being conducted by the Association of Tertiary Institutions (ACTI) and the CARICOM Secretariat (Guyana).

3.6 In the SADC region, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and the Seychelles referred to the benefits of the regional process. Examples include: recognition of the importance of benchmarking to the SADC region and in consideration of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (Botswana); the development of an NQF as "fulfilment of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training, which urges member states to work progressively towards the equivalence, harmonization and standardisation of education and training systems" (Lesotho); inclusion in

the work of the SADC Technical Committee for Certification and Accreditation and its sub-committees (Mauritius, Namibia and the Seychelles).

3.7 The Pacific Islands countries have opted for the development of a unified register, Pacific Regional Qualifications Register (PRQR), with the longer-term aim of expanding it to a qualifications framework. Parallel to this is the development of an inventory of TVET programmes which has been championed by PATVET and implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. The development of PRQR by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) has been strongly supported by the following Pacific Islands countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. It is expected that the inventory of TVET programmes will be incorporated into the PRQR. Important aspects of PRQR are: the national qualifications frameworks or registers will not be interfered with; instead countries agree to develop 10 level descriptors for the region, and collaborate on the quality assurance procedures, controls and continuous improvement and implementation of such systems to ensure trust across the member countries; national levels will be mapped onto the regional levels; educational providers must have their courses quality-assured by national quality assurance systems before they can be accepted by PRQR; a continuous improvement rather than compliance system is planned; non-cooperation could mean non-acceptance or deregistration; and international alignment of PRQR registered programmes will be negotiated.

3.8 In the European context, The Gambia, Malta and Cyprus noted benefits from the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) initiative. Examples include: alignment to the EQF levels to establish pathways into other qualifications and courses (The Gambia); ensuring that qualifications issued in small states "carry currency across Europe, raising the value of our workers and opening up greater opportunities locally and within the European region", as well as assisting "local education institutions to be able to attract more foreign fee-paying students, giving the educational sector higher status internationally while also bringing in financial support for further training offered to local students" (Malta).

3.9 Limited mention was made of regional processes in West Africa (ECOWAS) (The Gambia).

# The status of education and training in small states of the Commonwealth

## Coordination of education and training

3.10　The evidence suggests that a national approach to the coordination of education and training is underdeveloped in most small states. Various coordination challenges are noted, including limited recognition of qualifications by employers despite the availability of qualifications:

> While various alternative post-secondary vocational training programmes are available, these generally do not lead to qualifications that are recognised by potential employers or carry international currency. (Antigua and Barbuda)

3.11　Recent systemic reviews, for example in Botswana in 2006, highlight problems in secondary education and the rapidly growing demand for tertiary-level education. In particular, the Botswana study identified the "limited opportunities for flexible learning and the lack of clear entry and exit points", adding that by implication these problems were related to limited credit transfer and lack of articulation. A significant growth in the number of students pursuing tertiary education (up to 10 000 full-time and part-time students) was also reported in Malta, with the accompanying challenges for mobility and articulation and the need to upgrade infrastructure and services.

3.12　Despite the challenges experienced with regard to national coordination of education and training, examples of good coordination were also noted. In Botswana two examples of articulation between a vocational qualification and a university degree, though currently in the planning stage, were mentioned: one involves the BTEP Diploma in Travel and Tourism and its links to the University of Botswana Bachelor's Degree in Tourism and Hospitality, within the University of Botswana Business Faculty. The other involves the CTVE Diploma in Technical and Vocational Education.

3.13　In the case of The Gambia flexibility was noted, including the transfer of skills common to a number of fields of work from one qualification to another. Articulation arrangements were also reported between the University and other institutions such as the Community College in Barbados. St Kitts and Nevis reported that "articulation routes across sub-systems are quite evident". Likewise in Brunei a number of articulation options were mentioned, including from A-Level to a Bachelor's degree programme, a Diploma in the vocational area to a Higher National Diploma (HND) or first degree, and Master's degree to a PhD.

3.14    Recent attempts to improve parity and comparability through specific policy interventions, championed by national quality agencies, were noted in a number of countries, including Malta and Samoa:

> This [working] document is inspired by Malta Qualifications Council's *advocacy for parity of esteem* between VET and HE provision, progression as well as mobility (of learners and workers) and employability. (Malta, emphasis added)

> The Samoa Qualifications Authority is developing policies and procedures for facilitating programme articulation and credit transfer. All our institutions are currently using "course" as the unit of their respective qualifications. These will be converted to "credit values" *to facilitate both national and international comparability* of qualifications. (Samoa, emphasis added)

3.15    Evidence of existing multiple pathways were given by some countries. In most cases students dropping out of the academic pathway were given the option of following a TVET pathway (e.g. in Brunei, Malta and Samoa):

> The Level II lower secondary curriculum is devised as an alternative programme for students who are more inclined towards vocationally-oriented studies, especially those who have sat for PSR twice and are still not able to fulfil the minimum passing rate. (Brunei)

> In the case of students who have left compulsory education with a School Leaving certificate which is not a Full School Leaving certificate, the opportunity is being made available through VET Level 1 so that they may obtain a certificate that enjoys the same parity of esteem as a Full School Leaving Certificate. (Malta)

> At the completion of 13 years of schooling, students proceed to either Higher Education or Vocational Education depending on their results. Some students drop out of the schooling system before completion. These students are picked up either by vocational institutions or the occupational system where they can continue their education through the apprenticeship scheme. They can continue to a higher-level qualification by completing a qualification at the lower levels at these institutions. (Samoa)

3.16    Table 3 shows the status of coordination of education and training in small states, based on the 15 responses received from the online survey.

**Table 3: Current status of the coordination of education and training in a selection of small states of the Commonwealth**

| Sector | Status of coordination | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Un-coordinated | Limited coordination | Centralised coordination (voluntary) | Centralised coordination (regulatory) |
| **General education / schooling** | | | | Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Brunei, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Kiribati, Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa, Seychelles, St Kitts and Nevis |
| **TVET / Occupational** | Bahamas | Samoa | Cyprus | Barbados, Belize, Brunei, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Kiribati, Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa, Seychelles, St Kitts and Nevis |
| **Higher education / Tertiary** | | Barbados, Belize, Grenada, Samoa | | Bahamas, Barbados, Brunei, Cyprus, Guyana, Kiribati, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, St Kitts and Nevis |

3.17    Keeping in mind that only 13 of the VUSSC member states are reflected in this table, a number of preliminary observations can be made:

- A centralised regulatory approach to the coordination of education and training on all levels is preferred by the majority of small states.
- Very few countries have indicated that systems are uncoordinated, or have only limited coordination. While this response may have been expected, it is significant in that despite the acknowledgement of deficiencies, many of the very same countries are embarking on strategies (notably qualifications frameworks) to address the issue of limited coordination.
- Only Cyprus is considering adopting a voluntary approach to coordination, and then only in TVET.

**Most countries reported high expectations**

## Qualifications framework expectations

3.18    Most countries reported high expectations for the improvement of the coordination of education and training through the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks. Even countries that have been involved in qualifications framework development for some time (e.g.

Mauritius, Malta, Seychelles and Namibia) emphasised expectations of improved progression, comparability, transparency, and portability:

> NQF is the tool through which individuals can identify their level of learning as well as be able to progress from one level to another, be it through formal, informal and non-formal education … It is important to point out that the NQF does not allow only progression within a particular education context, but is also a tool which establishes comparability of levels between general and vocational qualifications. (Malta)

> The need for a clear framework for national competency standards is becoming more pressing and training providers need to be assisted in delivering training courses that are relevant to the needs of industry. This will lead to greater portability and transferability of qualifications and competencies. As a result it will create an incentive for individuals to seek training and also facilitate adjustment to structural changes in the economy. (Seychelles)

3.19    Countries that initially focused on the development of TVET qualifications frameworks, but are now in the process of developing national qualifications frameworks (e.g. Botswana and The Gambia), confirmed the benefits of having established TVET qualifications frameworks, and also reported high expectations of the benefits of expanding these sub-frameworks into full national frameworks:

> A National Credit and Qualifications Framework, with an accompanying credit framework, will assist in addressing … problems with education flow, particularly in secondary education and the rapidly growing demand for tertiary-level education; limited opportunities for flexible learning and the lack of clear entry and exit points; problems of credit transfer and articulation. (Botswana)

3.20    Other small states at an earlier stage of NQF development (e.g. Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada and Cyprus) echoed the high expectations of the more advanced countries:

> The new NQF seeks to address [the local challenges] by ensuring learning is nationally accredited with recognition of achievement at all different levels of qualifications with clear routes of progression between vocational, academic and workplace qualifications. (Antigua and Barbuda)

## Tertiary education

3.21    In a number of countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, Rwanda, Guyana and Jamaica, development of separate qualifications frameworks for the tertiary[4] sector was reported:

> The [Guyana] Tertiary Qualifications Framework contains the main criteria for defining qualifications based on the general characteristics of education and training at each qualification level and in each category of qualification, thereby providing a common ground for the award of qualifications by different institutions. (Guyana)

> [The Tertiary Qualifications Framework] should facilitate the process of articulation by allowing students to accumulate credits that are transferable from one institution to another and from one programme to another. The Tertiary Qualifications Framework should also assist employers, employees, professional associations and the wider public, including students and parents, in understanding the factors determining the levels and types of qualifications available within the Jamaican Tertiary Education System. (Jamaica)

3.22    An important feature of the tertiary qualifications frameworks, for example those in Guyana, Rwanda, Jamaica and Namibia, is the inclusion of a credit structure wherein minimum credits are ascribed to each qualification, as well as an emphasis on benchmarking against regional and international credit systems.

## Technical and Vocational Education and Training

3.23    A number of responses indicated that articulation challenges seemed to be less pronounced in vocational areas (e.g. in the Bahamas and Belize), suggesting that in most small states the development of TVET systems have been prioritised, although mobility was still limited. For example, the mobility between vocational education and training and academic education in Botswana is described as "minimal" as many of the vocational training qualifications are not recognised as minimum entry qualification to higher level training within the academic system.

3.24    Accompanying the reported TVET reform processes was the introduction of occupational standards- and competency-based examinations, as reported in Samoa, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize and Botswana:

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[4] In some countries 'tertiary' includes both higher education (offered at universities) and TVET (offered at polytechnics and colleges).

These basic competences are intended to provide the possibility for learners to move from one occupation and possibly also one sector to another. They are also intended to provide parity of esteem between the vocational track and the general education track, leading to options for progression beyond Level 5 to those within the vocational track. (Samoa)

The NQF is central to the Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education Project (STAVEP), designed to aid the restructure and strengthening of technical and vocational education (TVET) by introducing a system of competence-based vocational training that is demand-led and driven by industry. (Antigua and Barbuda)

With the recent reform of technical vocational education in Belize the Ministry of Education introduced a new scheme for certification of TVET competencies. The new certification scheme facilitates the provision of occupational testing and certification which will lead to the awarding of the BzNVQs. (Belize)

The underlying concept of training at this level is the acquisition and application of the necessary skills and competencies to the standards set in the proposed Botswana National Vocational Qualifications Framework. (Botswana)

3.25    An important feature of the more recent TVET reform processes, as observed in the case of qualifications framework development, was a strong alignment with and even dependence on regional initiatives. The development of new qualifications for CARICOM countries is a case in point (as noted by Antigua and Barbuda and Belize, among others):

- Work-based Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs); and
- Institutional-based tertiary qualification for people who are not immediately concerned with obtaining employment but wish to attend a post-secondary educational institution, either to gain a recognised qualification in order to enhance their employment prospects at a later date, or to follow a route of articulation from universal secondary education to higher tertiary education.

3.26    As part of its TVET reform process, Botswana indicated an emphasis on work-based vocational training provisioning through private, in-house employer training. Malta expressed a similar intention, namely to:

… create an autonomous and self-regulating system in vocational education and training which on the one hand responds to competitiveness and cost-effectiveness and, on the other hand, to a wider inclusion of learners. (Malta)

3.27    Similarly to the tertiary sector, small states reported the establishment of central regulatory bodies (training authorities) to oversee TVET. Examples include the Botswana Training Authority (BOTA),

National Training Authority (The Gambia) and the National Accreditation Council (Brunei). Typical responsibilities of these bodies include:

- promote access to training opportunities in vocational training on an equitable basis;
- accredit, register and monitor both public and private training institutions to ensure adherence to the required standard and quality of training and to minimise variability between the training institutions;
- develop and review national training standards for the various qualification levels to form a clear and consistent system that is relevant to the needs of the various sectors of the economy;
- approve and guide the development of new and emerging vocations to meet the requirements of the diversifying economy;
- guide the development of programme courses and curricula in vocational training;
- accredit, monitor and evaluate the implementation of programme courses for a comprehensive development of the individual, the economy and the society;
- initiate, monitor and evaluate pilot programme courses for further development of vocational training;
- establish a database and initiate relevant surveys in matters relating to vocational training;
- regulate assessment and testing within the vocational training system being developed.

## General education

3.28    In most small states the delivery of education at the primary and secondary levels is offered by a combination of government schools, community schools (in some cases supported by public funds), grant-aided denominational schools and private schools. An important feature of general education in many small states is the use of examinations to channel students, often done to allocate limited places in secondary and tertiary institutions to the best performers:

> Primary School Examination (PSE) scores complete students' profiles as they transition to secondary level. Scores may determine whether students are admitted to their secondary school of choice. (Belize)

> The main examinations taken at school level are the Standard 7 Certificate awarded at the end of primary schooling, the Junior Certificate taken at the end of Junior Secondary, and the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education, that allows entry to University. (Botswana)

3.29    Opening access to primary education remains a priority for small states. While many report significant progress in this area, the challenges

are still considerable (even to the point that some countries have reported a recent decline in primary enrolments).

3.30    The "political economy" of small states sending students abroad (e.g. to the UK, India, New Zealand, Australia and neighbouring states) is noted as a major challenge to articulation, for example by Seychelles and Mauritius. In the Caribbean, specifically in Antigua and Barbuda and Belize, it was noted that a very small proportion of young people (less than 25%) "leave secondary school with acceptable and recognised qualifications" (Antigua and Barbuda), and as a result go abroad for tertiary education, and in many cases "find career opportunities within these countries and do not come back" (Antigua and Barbuda). A similar sentiment was expressed in Brunei.

3.31    Another feature of education and training in small states is the existence of a significant number of privately-funded schools, which according to Brunei "provide more choice and variety for students". The qualifications offered by international schools, in many cases following a British curriculum, were also noted as posing a challenge to improved articulation.

## Common understanding of terms and concepts

3.32    Terms and concepts are usually understood and applied differently in different contexts. When comparing the use of terms and concepts across different countries, particularly when such countries are located in different regions across the world, the differences become even more apparent. Despite these apparent divergences, a review limited to terms and concepts within the education and training context, and even more specifically, to those closely related to qualifications framework development, does offer some interesting commonalities that can be of value when considering a TQF.

3.33    The review of terms and concepts presented below has been limited to the following:

- accreditation
- certification
- curriculum
- learning programme
- provider of education and training
- quality assurance
- qualification
- registration
- recognition of prior learning
- comparability

**Accreditation**

3.34    Most small states participating in the VUSSC initiative were familiar with the term "accreditation". It is generally used to refer to the successful completion of a process of evaluation during which compliance with a specific standard is measured, and includes application to both education and training providers (institutions) and programmes.

3.35    The following are two examples of how accreditation is defined:

Evaluation conducted against the standards established by the Barbados Accreditation Council based on international and regional trends whilst taking into account the local context. (Barbados)

Process through which a legally responsible agency or association grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or program of study that meets established educational standards. (Papua New Guinea)

3.36    Concerns related to accreditation included the tendency for such processes to become overly complex and bureaucratic, particularly when more than one quality assurance agency was involved:

Some institutions have to accredit with three different agencies (QAA, BOTA and TEC) to quality-assure the establishment of each individual programme, and some of the accreditation procedures seem to be over-complex. (Botswana)

3.37    The importance of involving industry in accreditation processes was also emphasised (Malta).

3.38    Considering the use of accreditation in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Accreditation:

- is a process of evaluation
- uses set standards
- is performed by a competent authority
- recognises compliance
- applies to programmes, qualifications and education and training providers.

**Certification**

3.39    Just as with accreditation, the term "certification" is widely used among small states. The apparent differences in the use of the term were related to the purposes of the evaluation processes for which the certification signifies compliance and/or attainment.

3.40    The following are examples of how certification is defined:

Process of formally validating knowledge, know-how and/or skills and competences acquired by an individual, following a standard assessment procedure. Certificates or diplomas are issued by accredited awarding bodies. (Malta)

The formal recognition or attestation of an individual's level of achievement in a particular area/field of study or occupation. (Barbados)

3.41    Considering the use of certification in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Certification:

- is the outcome of a formal assessment process
- leads to the award of a qualification
- is signified by the issue of a certificate
- is issued by a competent awarding body.

**Curriculum**

3.42    The divergent use of the terms "curriculum", "programme" and "qualification" was evident from the data. Once again this is not unique to the small states, as it is common for inconsistencies in interpretation to occur even at the domestic level. Often the problem is not with the differences in terminology, but rather the differences in understanding. For example, some NQFs may register qualifications, although it is commonly understood that such "qualifications" include curriculum, while in other cases an explicit differentiation is made between the qualification and the curriculum.

3.43    The following are examples of how curriculum is defined:

A set of actions followed when setting up a training course: it includes defining training goals, content, methods (including assessment) and material, as well as arrangements for training teachers and trainers. (Malta)

The range of programmes, courses and other learning experiences that are offered in an institution. (St Kitts and Nevis)

3.44    A strong emphasis was placed on the need for curriculum to be an "adequate preparation for the world of work" (Botswana).

3.45    The body/institution responsible for the development of curricula was also an important theme identified from the responses and source documents. For example, in The Gambia (and similarly in Malta) it was explicitly noted that the National Training Authority (NTA) would not be

responsible for the development of curricula, but would have a guiding role instead:

> The NTA will not develop curricula for unit standards. This task is the job of the training providers. The NTA will develop a Guideline to aid the development of curriculum based on unit standards. The guideline will be made available to training providers, to assist them to develop common but not standardised alignments of their curricula and learning programmes to the unit standards. Training will be needed for the training providers in developing curricula from unit standards. (The Gambia)

3.46    Considering the use of curriculum in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Curriculum:

- is a broad concept
- that includes context, content, assessment and delivery
- states purpose and outcomes
- is usually developed by education and training providers (institution)
- often in accordance with parameters set by national quality assurance bodies.

**Learning programme**

3.47    The following are examples of how learning programme is defined:

> A structured pathway of learning or training designed to equip a person with knowledge, skills, understanding, attitudes. (Mauritius)

> Pathways towards the award of a qualification, [learning programmes] are not themselves qualifications. (Namibia)

> The sequential learning activities associated with curriculum implementation leading to the achievement of a particular qualification or part qualification. A learning programme can be identified with a cluster of qualifications, a single or part qualification. A particular qualification may be achieved through different learning programmes that meet the exit-level outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the qualification. (Seychelles)

> The syllabus/ range of teaching learning experiences in a specific course of study. (St Kitts and Nevis)

3.48     As was also noted in the previous section on "curriculum", it is evident that the term "learning programme" is used in many different ways in small states. An important feature of the use of these terms, however inconsistent, is the need for the programme (or curriculum) to be recognised/accredited by a competent national authority in order for the

programme (or curriculum) to be "aligned" to the national qualifications framework, as the following example from Malta illustrates:

> Training providers would also need to apply to the Malta Qualifications Council to have their courses accredited and aligned to a level within the qualifications framework. In order to do this, it is necessary for courses to follow guidelines set by the Malta Qualifications Council – mainly those of defining the course in terms of learner outcomes such that they can be compared to the eight levels of the Framework. (Malta)

3.49    Considering the use of learning programme in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. A learning programme :

- is associated with curriculum implementation
- is recognised by a competent national authority
- is aligned to a level on the national qualifications framework
- leads to a qualification.

**Qualification**

3.50    The three terms "curriculum", "learning programme" and "qualification" are not well defined in most countries, yet each forms a central aspect of qualifications framework development and implementation. For this reason some common agreement is required when a transitional qualifications framework is considered. From the previous two sections, and at least on a generic level, it can be deduced that curriculum is a much broader process that includes various facets of education and training, of which a learning programme is one, and which leads to the award of a qualification.

3.51    The following are examples of how a qualification is defined:

> Formal certification, issued by a relevant approved body, in recognition that a person has achieved learning outcomes or competencies relevant to identified individual, professional, industry or community needs. (Jamaica)

> The formal recognition of the achievement of the required number and range of credits and other requirements at specific levels as determined by the awarding body. (Mauritius)

> A certificate, diploma or degree gained as a result of satisfying conditions and requirements set by an examining authority or accredited provider and showing hours attributed to the course and the levels of competency gained. (Tonga)

3.52 In addition to the various definitions of "qualification" summarised above, the structure of qualifications was an important theme identified from the responses and source documents. Examples include the "building blocks" of qualifications (e.g. modules, units and unit standards), as well as differences in "the quantum of learning", i.e. how credits are assigned to each: for example a qualification (120 credits in the Seychelles), modules (15 credits each in Antigua and Barbuda) and units (30 notional hours each in the Seychelles). The use of credits also varied from 40 hours of learning (Antigua and Barbuda) to "10 notional hours" (Seychelles and Tonga). Other issues related to the design of qualifications included:

- level at which a qualification is designed, and using descriptors for defined levels of a qualifications framework (Namibia, Botswana and Antigua and Barbuda)
- articulation between qualifications from different sectors (e.g. vocational and tertiary) (The Gambia)
- unique identification codes for qualifications (Botswana)
- integrating education and training outputs with the requirements of the world of work (The Gambia)
- taking previous learning into account (Botswana)
- locating a qualification in the public domain so that it can be awarded by any appropriately accredited education and training provider that complies with and meets any national assessment arrangements stipulated for the award of that qualification (Namibia)
- "nesting" qualifications in the framework so that the system moves logically from the most general to the most specific layers (Botswana)
- defining qualifications through "qualification standards" (Botswana)
- purpose of the qualification (Namibia)
- the differences between outcomes-based qualifications (e.g. Tonga and Namibia) and competency-based qualifications (e.g. the Seychelles)
- inclusion of generic components, e.g. the use of essential competencies in the Seychelles (Communication, ICT & Life Skills)
- optional and/or specialised competencies necessary at particular levels of an occupation (Seychelles)

3.53 Considering the use of qualifications in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF.
A qualification is:

- a formal certification
- awarded by a competent recognition authority
- to an individual
- in recognition of achieved outcomes or competences (on completion of a learning programme)
- at a specific level and consisting of a specific volume (number of credits) of learning.

**Provider of education and training**

3.54 The following are examples of how providers are defined in small states:

> A collection of persons/institutions that are recognised as meeting certain standards for the teaching of various programmes. (Grenada)

> An education and training body (institution, organisation, company, centre, collaborative partnership or consultancy) which delivers learning programmes that are directed to a specified NQF standard(s) or qualifications and manages assessment. (Seychelles)

3.55 An important aspect related to providers (both public and private) was the need for formal recognition, mostly through registration and/or accreditation processes, by a competent national authority.

3.56 Considering the interpretation of the term "provider" in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF.
A provider is:

- An institution, organisation, company, centre, collaborative partnership or consultancy
- required to meet specified standards set by a national competent authority
- that offers learning programmes
- that lead to qualifications and/or units on a national qualifications framework.

**Quality assurance**

3.57 The following are examples of how quality assurance is interpreted in small states:

> Formal process by which acceptable standards are ascertained through the use of clear measurement and evaluation procedures against set performance criteria. (Belize)

> A generic term for all activity which provides assurance that the educational and training services of an organisation are being delivered effectively, to the required standard, and in line with published goals and objectives. (Samoa)

> Mechanisms that are in place at an institution to monitor the quality of teaching and assessment at the institution to ensure that graduates attain the desired and required level of competence. (St Kitts and Nevis)

3.58 The central role of a national quality-assurance body was noted by many small states. Responsibilities included setting standards, monitoring compliance and taking action where necessary. Linked to the establishment of national quality-assurance bodies, involvement in regional quality-assurance developments was also emphasised, particularly in small states associated with the EU (such as Malta and Cyprus):

> There is a necessary link with the European Qualifications Framework document in which quality assurance is defined as "a crucial dimension of the proposed EQF and commitment to a set of common principles is a precondition for cooperation between stakeholders at different levels" … This is to ensure a more solid anchorage with systems which will eventually govern the European standards in quality assurance in vocational education and training. (Malta)

> The establishment of a Quality Assurance Agency is examined and promoted by the relevant government departments … These efforts are in line with the Berlin Communiqué, the ENQA Standards and Guidelines on QA as accepted by the Bergen Communiqué, and the Agreement on Quality Assurance in the EU. (Cyprus).

3.59 Considering the interpretation of quality assurance in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Quality assurance is:

- A process to guarantee set standards are met
- through formal evaluation, monitoring and auditing processes
- mostly overseen by a national quality assurance agency that recognises compliance (e.g. registration and/or accreditation).

**Registration**

3.60 Registration, as a signifier of the successful completion of a quality-assurance process, is used in at least two ways in small states: registration of institutions and registration of qualifications (the use of registration for administrative purposes not directly related to quality assurance, such as when a student enrols at an institution, is not included).

3.61 The following are examples of how registration is defined in small states:

> We have 2 types [of registration]: i) Registration of Providers – Permission granted to an organisation to set itself up as a legitimate education and training provider, and to enter the education and training market along with other institutions recognised by Government, such as universities, Mission schools and Government agencies delivering education and training services. ii) Registration

of Qualifications – The process used to recognise that a qualification has met the criteria for inclusion in the list of quality assured Samoa Qualifications Framework qualifications. (Samoa)

The process of providing an institution with the opportunity to establish a formal, publicly recognised relationship with the National Accreditation Council. (Guyana)

It is an evaluation of the capability of an organisation to provide and maintain a well organised, sound and stable learning environment encompassing all its modes of delivery. It is a process that examines the basic organisation, ensures that it is established for educational purposes, has suitable management structures and systems and has the necessary financial resources, staff and necessary equipment and materials to provide educational programmes. (Samoa)

3.62 Considering the interpretation of registration in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Registration of a provider:

- is the responsibility of a national recognition authority
- signifies that a provider meets quality assurance requirements
- is a license to offer quality-assured programmes leading to recognised qualifications.

Registration of a qualification:

- is the responsibility of a national recognition authority
- signifies that a qualification meets qualifications framework requirements
- is taken up in the formal qualifications framework register and becomes a public good.

**Recognition of prior learning**

3.63 Recognition of prior learning (RPL), as well as "comparability" (which is the last concept that will be discussed in this section), have been included in this study, as understanding and application of both concepts are central to qualifications framework development in most countries.

3.64 The following are examples of how RPL is defined in small states:

[RPL] refers to learning that has taken place in a formal or non-formal academic setting, as well as learning that is the product of experiences gained at work or during life. (Jamaica)

Assessment of prior or experiential learning for either entry into courses and or certification. (Namibia)

3.65 While the importance of RPL was acknowledged by most small states, it was clear that implementation was lacking, as noted by Botswana, Malta and Cyprus:

> It is recommended that RPL be advertised and offered as a standard practice in enrolment and re-entry procedures in all education and training courses offered in Botswana … There is little evidence of RPL being applied currently by education and training providers in Botswana. (Botswana)

> Informal and non-formal education and training as well as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) will eventually form part of the national qualifications framework for lifelong learning. (Malta)

> The general matter of recognising prior learning arose in the context of the discussions about the development of a National Qualifications Framework, but the discussions are at a very early stage. (Cyprus)

3.66 The recognition of current competences (RCC) was noted as another way of looking at RPL (Botswana and Tonga).

3.67 Considering the interpretation of RPL in the participating small states as summarised above, and considering that in the main RPL is still at an early stage of conceptualisation and implementation, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF.
RPL:

- is a recognition of knowledge and learning, howsoever obtained
- following the assessment of evidence against specified outcomes.

**Comparability**

3.68 In the case of Malta, a particularly useful description of determining comparability (also referred to as benchmarking) in which various purposes (developmental, regulatory, implicit/explicit, independent/collaborative, and internally/externally focused) and forms (vertical or horizontal, qualitative or quantitative) of benchmarking are discussed. This work is revisited in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.69 The following are examples of how comparability is referred to in small states:

> The act of assessing the similarities and differences between two or more qualifications prior to making a judgment using NQF level descriptors, notional hours, entry criteria and other relevant information. (Seychelles)

> The extent to which qualifications are found to be comparable based on an analysis of their specifications. (Barbados)
>
> Certification which are recognised across different jurisdictions; for example, a Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) is recognised in all CARICOM countries. (St Kitts and Nevis)

3.70 Other issues related to comparability included the advantages of a credit system being included in the qualifications framework (The Gambia), the need for parity of esteem on a domestic level (Malta), the role of protocols, bi- and multilateral agreements for recognition and equivalence (e.g. Mauritius with France, the former USSR, China and India).

3.71 Considering the interpretation of comparability in the participating small states as summarised above, it is possible to identify at least the following common principles that will be of value when developing a TQF. Comparability:

- is the extent to which it is possible to establish equivalence between qualifications
- is based on an analysis of the specifications of the qualifications
- takes place on a sectoral, national, regional and international levels.

## Recognition of qualifications

3.72 In this last part of the section presenting the status of education and training in small states of the Commonwealth, based on the responses and source documents received, the focus is shifted to consider the recognition of qualifications. Two main dimensions are considered: recognition challenges when domestic qualifications are offered in another country or region; and the recognition of qualifications from another country or region in a small state. While the two dimensions are closely related, each is first presented separately to distinguish the challenges more accurately.

**Recognition of domestic qualifications in other countries and regions**

3.73 A number of countries reported high levels of recognition of domestic qualifications elsewhere. Antigua and Barbuda noted that, as is the case in most of the Caribbean region, many of its young people (less than 25%) leave secondary school without "acceptable and recognised qualifications". According to the Antigua and Barbuda response, these people go on to higher tertiary education, often in countries abroad including Jamaica, Trinidad or the US.

3.74 The Bahamas reported that "students from The College of The Bahamas have been transferring to institutions all over the world and have had their work accepted". The Bahamas also noted that students with high

school diplomas have been transferring to institutions outside The Bahamas without any difficulties.

3.75 Brunei noted that the legacy of the British system still existing in the country contributed to the mobility of its students to the UK. In addition, Brunei reported that "qualifications awarded in Brunei Darussalam are also accepted by the neighbouring countries, Malaysia and Singapore either for the purpose of employment, credit transfer, pursuing further studies including professional practice".

3.76 Reports from some countries were qualified in that the qualifications awarded domestically were recognised by other countries "according to their legislative procedures" (Cyprus). Namibia had a similar response, indicating that "Institutions of Higher Education have their own entry requirements in their respective countries". Guyana noted that some of its graduates "are required to do additional programmes if they want to pursue further studies overseas". Samoa mentioned a similar challenge in that bridging courses for New Zealand and Australia were required:

> However, the level differs and qualification holders undergo training/education in order to bridge the gap or to bring our qualification to the same level as those of that country, in particularly New Zealand and Australia. (Samoa)

3.77 The Seychelles reported similar challenges, noting that the country was not fully aware of the extent to which its qualifications were recognised abroad:

> In terms of accepted for work purposes our knowledge is of a limited extent. E.g. we know that Nurses qualified in the Seychelles will be accepted in the UK and Australia But apart from that we do not really know. (Seychelles)

3.78 Inclusion in regional initiatives was clearly noted as benefiting the recognition of domestic qualifications. Cyprus noted that "as members of the EU our degrees are recognised in Europe", while Mauritius mentioned that most of its qualifications are recognised in the Commonwealth. Namibia stated that its qualifications were recognised "via the SADC protocol on education and training".

**Recognition of qualifications from other countries and regions**

3.79 In comparison with the reports from countries in relation to the recognition of their domestic qualifications abroad, the recognition of qualifications from other countries and regions seemed much less problematic, though not entirely without challenges.

3.80 Most responses focused on the mechanisms through which foreign qualifications are recognised. Examples include: the Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council, tasked to consider and evaluate the status

and quality of qualifications awarded by various local and overseas institutions; the National Equivalency Council of the Bahamas that certifies equivalency of certificates, diplomas and degrees and other awards as against recognised qualifications; the National Equivalence Council, Mauritius Qualifications Authority and Tertiary Education Commission in Mauritius; the Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre; the Seychelles Qualifications Authority, which is to "assume NARIC-like functions" (Seychelles); and the Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in Cyprus.

3.81 The availability and verification of information was noted as a serious challenge:

> The process has never been an easy one because the procedures were long and sometimes frustrating. The most problematic issue has been the time taken for various authorities overseas to respond to our queries. (Seychelles)

3.82 From Cyprus it was emphasised that local institutions were not permitted to allow foreign educational institutions to award their own degrees in Cyprus.

**General challenges related to recognition**

3.83 Compared to many of the other aspects that required responses from participating small states, a substantial number of countries (16 out of 24) contributed to the issue of recognition of qualifications. In addition to the issues already raised above, the following submissions were received:

3.84 Seychelles noted that the need for a policy on the recognition of foreign qualifications had become more pressing as "the effects of globalisation become more apparent, especially in the form of an increasingly mobile work force and qualifications which purport to be portable, the need to address issues relating to equivalence becomes more urgent". Seychelles added that recognition of its qualifications happened mostly in instances where partnership agreements existed, citing the example of Seychelles diploma holders being accepted for degree programmes in certain institutions in France, Australia and the UK.

3.85 In a similar manner Cyprus reported signing an "Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications" with Germany. Mauritius noted that "Protocols of R & E" exist between Mauritius and France, the former USSR, China and India. Samoa reported that its national university had developed memoranda of understanding with overseas universities "where qualification recognition is already agreed upon".

3.86 An important feature of the responses related to the recognition of qualifications was the high expectations surrounding the establishment of national qualifications frameworks and national qualifications agencies. Examples include Samoa and Malta:

> But with the establishment of the Samoa Qualifications Authority, this [lack of recognition] will be eradicated as the Samoa Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance Standards were set to ensure international recognition of Samoa awarded qualifications. (Samoa)

> One of the functions of the Malta Qualifications and Credit Framework is to foster the recognition abroad of professional and vocational certificates awarded in Malta. (Malta)

3.87 Again the benefits of regional processes were singled out as promoting the recognition of foreign qualifications. Malta (and to some extent Cyprus) was particularly optimistic about the potential benefits of having an NQF within the broader EQF regional framework:

> The NQF will help simplify the exercise of comparability of foreign qualifications, particularly those obtained within Member States of the EU, as it is the tool for comparability with the EQF… The EQF aims to act as a meta-framework enabling national and sectoral frameworks and systems to relate and compare to each other. Such a framework will promote and facilitate the transfer, transparency and recognition of qualifications. It also serves to provide mutual trust between the different stakeholders involved in the lifelong process. (Malta)

## Progress towards national qualifications frameworks

3.88 This section summarises the progress made by small states of the Commonwealth towards developing and implementing national qualifications frameworks. To some extent it provides another view of the status of education and training presented in the first part of this chapter, but from a very specific perspective. Keeping in mind that the purpose of this concept document is to propose a TQF for the recognition of qualifications offered by the VUSSC, this section offers an overview of qualifications framework development in the participating small states, as well as in the regions wherein they are located.

3.89 The section starts with an overview of the various ways in which the national qualifications frameworks are defined. This is followed by an analysis of the extent to which NQFs are included and prioritised in broader national strategies; different types of NQFs in small states (drawing on the work presented in Chapter 2); and legislation and policies related to qualifications frameworks, resource allocation and related quality-assurance structures. The rest of this section presents an overview of the progress toward national qualifications framework in small states, as well as the extent to which small states have become involved in regional qualifications framework development.

3.90 Table 4 presents a selection of the definitions of national qualifications frameworks as contained in the responses and source documents.

**Table 4: NQF definitions**

| National Qualifications Framework | | Key characteristics |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Botswana | NCQF should be a descriptive framework consisting of 10 levels and 3 strands and inclusive of all qualifications, including those from private providers … The NCQF is therefore an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. | • descriptive<br>• inclusive<br>• classification |
| Guyana | The Tertiary Qualifications Framework (TQF) seeks to provide a comprehensive, coherent and consistent, yet flexible framework for the diversity of qualifications in the tertiary education and training systems. | • comprehensive<br>• coherent<br>• consistent<br>• flexible<br>• diversity |
| Lesotho | The QFL aims at supporting the nation of Lesotho in realising the full potential of its entire people by developing, monitoring and evaluating learning systems that ensure quality, coherence, comparability and recognition of education and training opportunities. | • quality<br>• coherence<br>• comparability<br>• recognition |
| Malta | Malta's NQF is a neutral device which locks together in synergy and complimentarity, the four main educational strands: Compulsory, Vocational, Higher and Adult education … the main function of our National Qualifications Framework [is that] it illustrates, in a transparent manner, the various routes to learning. | • neutral<br>• synergy<br>• complimentarity<br>• transparent |
| Namibia | The NQF shall consist of a number of fields of learning as determined by the Council and subfields and domains known as the NQF Classification System …Qualifications and unit standards shall be placed on the NQF according to their level and an approved item from the NQF Classification System. | • classification |
| The Gambia | The GSQF is not a "full" framework including both academic and vocational learning. It is a partial qualification framework, concerned with technical, vocational and literacy skills. | • partial |
| Tonga | The National Qualifications Framework shall consist of levels defined by a set of descriptors detailing the complexity of the learning outcomes attained; and include all post-compulsory education and training qualifications that have been accredited by the Board or by an overseas quality assurance agency recognised by the Board. | • complexity<br>• inclusive |
| Samoa | The Samoa Qualifications Framework [SQF] is a coherent structure encompassing all quality assured qualifications offered in Samoa. | • coherent<br>• encompassing |

3.91 Table 4 shows a trend towards enabling frameworks, also referred to as "frameworks of communication", as discussed in Chapter 2. Importantly though, the trend is not entirely as clear-cut as expected, as it inclines significantly toward comprehensiveness and inclusiveness, as well as toward increased regulation. This contradiction is revisited in Chapter 4.

3.92 Based on this review of the definitions of qualifications frameworks (summarised above), and as noted in Chapter 2, the following working definition of qualifications framework is proposed:

> A qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression, comparability and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

3.93 In Chapter 2 the different types of qualifications frameworks were presented according to eight categories common to most qualifications frameworks: *purpose, scope, incrementalism, policy breadth, governance, prescriptiveness, architecture* and *guiding philosophy*. On the following pages the different qualifications frameworks in the participating small states are viewed in terms of these categories, with some additional information, followed by a tabular summary (Table 5: Progress towards NQFs).

## Purpose

3.94 In addition to the common purposes of qualifications frameworks in small states identified by Coles (2006) (establishing national standards; promoting quality of provisioning; providing a system of coordination and comparability; and promoting and maintaining procedures for access, transfer and progression), Tuck et al. (2004) suggest that the purpose of a qualifications framework is either to describe the existing system, or to attempt to effect change using the NQF as a vehicle. Young (2005) and Allais (2007) offer a third option, suggesting that two broad types of qualifications frameworks exist: enabling and regulatory.

3.95 Using the categories proposed by Tuck et al. (2004), 17 of the 29 countries (59%) included in Table 7 fall into the "describing the existing system" category, while only eight countries (28%) can be placed in the "attempting to effect change using the NQF as vehicle" category. Amongst the many countries that described their existing systems with NQFs, the common purposes identified by Coles (2006) were strongly evident (also see Appendix 3 for a contextual description). Among the countries that were attempting to effect change through NQF implementation, change was argued necessary for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- Botswana: the importance of the NCQF as a tool for promoting the development of human capital in the imminent Human Resource Development
- Malta: the option to shift from the vocational to the general education track, as well as for recognition both locally and on a European level, and promoting labour force mobility within a European labour market
- Seychelles: to achieve articulated pathways in education and training which provide for greater efficiency in the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

## Scope

3.96 Using Howieson and Raffe's (1999) definition of scope (tracked, linked or unified), it is apparent that most of the qualifications frameworks are linked (17 or 59%), while only a few are unified (three) or tracked (five).

3.97 Malta is an example of a linked framework that attempts to be comprehensive, but still differentiates between sectors:

> [The] NQF being proposed does not only apply to existing vocational training, but will also be able to accommodate the process of validation of informal and non-formal learning as well as the recognition of prior learning in the future. (Malta)

3.98 On the other hand, Namibia maintains that its framework is unified:

> Unified system – the NQF is a unifying tool for qualifications in Namibia. (Namibia)

## Incrementalism

3.99 The rate and manner in which qualifications frameworks are implemented can be defined in terms of two continuums: gradual to rapid rate, and phased to comprehensive implementation. The matrix in Table 5 summarises the respective positional permutations.

**Table 5: Incrementalism**

| Rate<br>Manner | gradual | rapid |
|---|---|---|
| **phased** | Botswana, Jamaica, Mauritius, Gambia (4) | (0) |
| **comprehensive** | Bahamas, Lesotho, Seychelles (3) | Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Brunei, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Kiribati, Malta, Namibia, PNG, Rwanda, Samoa, St Kitts & Nevis, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Vanuatu (18) |

3.100 An important observation from the matrix is that the majority of countries starting out with NQF development are all opting for rapid and comprehensive implementation, while most countries that have more experience are opting for a gradual rate.

## Policy breadth

3.101 Based on Raffe et al. (1998), policy breadth is made up of two aspects: intrinsic logic, which refers to the inherent design features of an NQF, and institutional logic, which refers to the extent to which external systems and policies, including those of specific institutions, are aligned with and supportive of an NQF. In both cases the logic can be evaluated on a continuum from low to high.

3.102 Most countries reported that the development and implementation of an NQF formed one part of a larger national strategy. Examples include Antigua and Barbuda and Botswana:

> The NQF is central to STAVEP, designed to aid the restructure and strengthening of technical and vocational education (TVET) by introducing a system of competence-based vocational training that is demand-led and driven by industry. (Antigua & Barbuda)

> The NCQF is a valuable tool to assist the realisation of the vision and goal espoused in Vision 2016 (1997) of lifelong learning in Botswana. The NCQF should also be a unifying factor in improving the future governance and administration of education and training. (Botswana)

3.103 The continued impact of globalisation, including the demand for free movement of goods and services, has undoubtedly also contributed to the move towards qualifications frameworks in small states. Antigua and Barbuda, for example, state this explicitly:

> The Government of Antigua and Barbuda seeks to put in place a new NQF as a key tool in addressing the employment challenges faced in Antigua and Barbuda. Like many other countries in CARICOM, as it moves towards membership of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) the NQF will be instrumental in supporting the concept of free movement of goods, service, capital and persons; including skilled labour. (Antigua and Barbuda)

3.104 While evidence that NQFs contribute not only to the classification of qualifications, but also to access, progression and comparability, is gradually becoming available, there are also serious concerns associated with the seemingly unquestioned implementation taking place in many developing countries. Many of these concerns have been raised in Chapter 2 and will not be repeated here, except to say that national strategies in small states will have to become much more sensitive to concerns that are become increasingly more acute as some countries are starting to move beyond the first 10 years of implementation.

3.105 Well-designed feasibility studies are an important component of national strategies for NQF development. They also provide a useful forum for the critique of proposals. In this regard Botswana has set a good example since 2003:

> The EDF9 Feasibility Study for a National Qualifications Framework (2003) views the development of an NQF as a way of creating a coherent system of qualifications to improve access, flexibility, and progression for all learners at all stages of life, as well as contributing to the quality assurance of education and training. The study found the current situation with regard to qualifications to be characterised by inconsistency and fragmentation, which led to confusion and lack of comparability for learners and institutions. It lists the benefits of developing an NQF as making the qualifications system easier to understand, facilitating credit transfer between qualifications and making progression routes easier and clearer with consequent improved access to education and training opportunities. (Botswana)

3.106 A number of countries reported being in the process of developing, or having already developed, various NQF-related policies (e.g. The Gambia, Malta, Mauritius, Seychelles and Samoa).

3.107 The matrix in Table 6 provides an overview of the characteristics of the policy breadth of the qualifications frameworks.

**Table 6: Policy breadth**

| Institutional logic<br><br>Intrinsic logic | Low | High |
|---|---|---|
| **Low** | Jamaica, Rwanda (2) | (0) |
| **High** | Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Brunei, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Kiribati, Malta, PNG, Samoa, Seychelles, St Kitts & Nevis, Tonga, Vanuatu, Mauritius, The Gambia (19) | Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia (3) |

3.108 While the ideal situation is clearly to have both high institutional and high intrinsic logic, it is evident that very few qualifications frameworks are able to achieve this in the short term.

## Governance

3.109 The governance of NQFs can include a wide range of aspects, and discussion has therefore been limited to a review of quality assurance structures and resource allocation for the purpose of this study.

3.110 In terms of quality assurance structures, the categories of strong (oversees all other bodies), central (has responsibility for quality assurance and accreditation, but separate awarding bodies exist for particular sectors and/or levels) and coordinating (has mainly administrative and coordinating powers and is influenced by powerful partners) are used as discussed in Chapter 2. Table 7 gives an overview of the different types of quality assurance bodies involved in NQF development and implementation in the participating small states.

**Table 7: Quality assurance bodies in a selection of VUSSC member states**

| Country | Sector | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | General education/ schooling | TVET/ occupational | Higher education/ tertiary | Other |
| **Antigua and Barbuda** | NA | National Accreditation Board | Antigua and Barbuda Training Agency | |
| **Bahamas** | National Accreditation and Equivalency Council of the Bahamas (NAECOB) | | | |
| **Barbados** | | Barbados Accreditation Council | | |

| Country | Sector | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | General education/ schooling | TVET/ occupational | Higher education/ tertiary | Other |
| **Belize** | NA | NA | NA | National Accreditation Council (under development) |
| **Bermuda** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Botswana** | Botswana Examinations Council (under development) QAA Unit of the MOE | Botswana Training Authority | Botswana Tertiary Education Council | National Credit and Qualifications Framework administrative body (under development) "superordinate regulating structure" |
| **Brunei** | BDNAC | | | |
| **Cyprus** | NA | NA | Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications; National QA Agency | *Private tertiary institutions:* Council for Educational Evaluation and Accreditation |
| **Dominica** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Grenada** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Fiji** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Guyana** | NA | NA | NA | National Accreditation Council |
| **Jamaica** | NA | NA | University Council of Jamaica | |
| **Kiribati** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Lesotho** | Ministry of Education and Training | Lesotho Skills Agency (under consideration) | Council on Higher Education | |
| **Malta** | Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Board | NA | NA | *Other than compul-sory education and degrees:* Malta Qualifications Council |
| **Mauritius** | Ministry of Education and Human Resources | Mauritius Qualifications Authority | Tertiary Education Commission | |
| **Namibia** | National Examination, Assessment and Certification Board | National Training Authority | National Council for Higher Education | Namibia Qualifications Authority |
| **Papua New Guinea** | NA | NA | NA | NHEQAAC |
| **Rwanda** | NA | NA | NA | |
| **Samoa** | Ministry of Education Sports and Culture | Samoa Qualifications Authority | | |
| **Seychelles** | Ministry of Education | Seychelles Qualifications Authority | | |
| **St Kitts and Nevis** | Ministry of Education | TVET Council (in progress) | St. Christopher and Nevis Accreditation Board | |
| **Swaziland** | NA | NA | NA | |

| Country | Sector | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | General education/ schooling | TVET/ occupational | Higher education/ tertiary | Other |
| The Gambia | | National Training Authority | | |
| Tonga | Ministry of Education, Woman Affairs and Culture (MEWAC) | TNQAB (in progress) | | |
| Trinidad and Tobago | Ministry of Education | National Training Agency (NTA) | Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) | Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (MSTTE) |
| Vanuatu | NA | NA | NA | |

3.111 The dominant or preferred type of quality-assurance structure preferred in the specific country is indicated in Table 7, and is based in part on the following observations:

- **Strong**: Lesotho (emphasis on role of the Ministry), Seychelles (overall responsibility), Barbados, Mauritius, Brunei, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago and Tonga
- **Central**: Jamaica (including a strong reliance on stakeholder participation), The Gambia, Antigua and Barbuda (include delegation options), Samoa and Malta
- **Coordinating**: Botswana (a loose model of governance and rationalisation of existing functions is being considered).

3.112 In terms of resource allocation for qualifications framework developments in small states, only a few countries reported direct funding. Botswana estimated the cost of the implementation plan over a planned three-year period at P40 million. Lesotho indicated a gradual shift to income generation:

> Funding for the Lesotho Qualifications Authority: Initially the Government of Lesotho should provide for 70% of the budget and 30% should be from fees. This should change gradually so that ultimately 30% will be from Government and 70% from fees. (Lesotho)

3.113 Malta reported a similar intention to move away from "handholding" to that of "shareholding", while the Seychelles reported direct funding, but with a strong reliance on donors.

## Prescriptiveness

3.114 Based on the initial work by Raffe (2003) developed by Tuck et al. (2004), the prescriptiveness of qualifications frameworks ranges from highly regulatory (tight) to voluntary (loose). For the purpose of this study an intermediate category, "mixed", is added to describe a qualifications framework that is only prescriptive in some areas.

3.115 Also associated with the intrinsic logic of qualifications frameworks is the promulgation and development of legislation and policies as an important indicator of the prescriptiveness of the qualifications framework. Considering the countries that participated in this study, the following is observed:

- Countries currently developing NQF-related legislation are: Lesotho (Lesotho Qualifications Authority), Papua New Guinea (accreditation policy), and the Seychelles (Regulations on the National Qualifications Framework).
- Countries that have existing NQF legislation in place are: The Gambia (The National Training Authority Act of 2002), Lesotho (Higher Education Act of 2004), Malta (Malta Qualifications Council Regulations of 2005), Mauritius (Mauritius Qualifications Authority Act of 2001), Namibia (Namibian Qualifications Authority Act of 1996), Tonga (Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board Act of 2004, Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Regulations of 2007) and Samoa (Samoa Qualifications Authority Act of 2006).
- In Botswana it was indicated that NQF-related legislation is currently under review, mainly to replace BOTA and TEC with a single parastatal. (Botswana)

3.116 Copyright legislation is important to qualifications framework development, as it impacts on the extent to which curricula and materials can be shared. This is even more important within the broader context of a TQF for the VUSSC where sharing already takes place. Only Bermuda reported a review of such legislation:

> At present, Bermuda is in the process of drafting copyright legislation which will have exceptions for education use. We will look at the new legislation closely to ensure that all matters have been taken into account. (Bermuda)

3.117 Of the 29 countries in Table 9, the majority (20 or 69%) have implemented or are in the process of implementing regulatory (tight) frameworks. Only one county (Malta) seems to be considering a loose framework, while at least three others (Botswana, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago) are moving towards models that are prescriptive in some areas, and voluntary in others.

## Architecture

3.118 The structural arrangements that form part of the design of an NQF include levels, level descriptors, learning outcomes, assessment systems, credits, the division of learning into components, classification of qualifications and, in some cases, the related occupations, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, etc. As many of these architectural aspects have already been discussed in this document, only a summary of

the aspects is included in Table 9. A selection of qualifications maps is also included in Appendix 4.

## Guiding philosophy

3.119 The underlying education theory that influences the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks is seldom acknowledged, and least in developing countries and small states that are strongly influenced by global and regional factors. Keeping in mind that NQFs are rooted in a competence approach to vocational education, and that qualifications frameworks are often used as instruments of reform (see the discussion on Purpose, paragraphs 3.94 and 3.95), it is useful to reflect on the extent to which such influences are acknowledged. A selection of underlying philosophies that are noted by small states is included in Table 9.

## Progress ratings

3.120 The 13 countries that participated in the electronic survey were asked to indicate progress in six specific aspects of NQFs: (1) vision/strategy, (2) legislation, (3) policies, (4) quality assurance structures, (5) budgeting and (6) the development of qualifications. The responses that were received are summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8: Current status of the qualifications framework development in small states**

| Sector | Extent of development of aspects related to an NQF | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | None | Initial | In place | Advanced | Under review |
| **National vision and/or strategy for an NQF** | Belize | Barbados, Brunei, Bahamas | Cyprus, Guyana, Mauritius, Samoa, Seychelles | | Grenada, Namibia, St Kitts and Nevis |
| **NQF legislation** | Belize, St Kitts and Nevis, Bahamas | Barbados, Brunei, Cyprus, Samoa, Seychelles | Guyana, Mauritius | | Grenada, Namibia |
| **NQF-related policies** | Belize | Barbados, Brunei, Cyprus, Seychelles, Bahamas | Guyana, Mauritius | | Grenada, Namibia, Samoa, St Kitts and Nevis |
| **NQF-related quality assurance structures** | Belize | Barbados, Brunei, Cyprus, Seychelles | Mauritius, Bahamas | | Grenada, Namibia, Samoa, St Kitts and Nevis |
| **Budgeting for NQF-related activities** | Belize, Brunei, St Kitts and Nevis, Bahamas | Barbados, Cyprus, Samoa | Guyana, Mauritius, Seychelles | | Grenada, Namibia |
| **NQF-related qualifications development processes** | Belize, Bahamas | Barbados, Brunei, Cyprus, Samoa, Seychelles | Mauritius | | Grenada, Guyana, Namibia, St Kitts and Nevis |

3.121 In addition, and as indicated in the last column in Table 9, an overall rating of the progress made towards the development and implementation of the national qualifications framework in the particular country was requested. Ratings made by the 13 countries that participated in the survey are shaded, while the remaining ratings are based on a review of the source documents provided and additional comments from senior officials provided after the Singapore meeting that took place from 25-29 February 2008. The following are the criteria[5] on which ratings are based:

- Stage 1: No progress: two countries (Rwanda, Dominica)
- Stage 2: Background work under way, such as national discussions and advocacy: 10 countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Cyprus, Fiji, Grenada, Guyana, Vanuatu)
- Stage 3: Initial development, such as the establishment of task teams and drafting of concept papers: three countries (Kiribati, St Kitts and Nevis, Swaziland)
- Stage 4: Draft legislation formulated and some structures in place: two countries (Malta, Lesotho)
- Stage 5: Legislation passed, structures established, standards being developed, quality assurance under way, national information system developed: nine countries (Botswana, Brunei, Jamaica, Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa, Seychelles, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago)
- Stage 6: Advanced implementation and system functional for five or more years: none
- Stage 7: Continuous review conducted and adjustments applied: two countries (Papua New Guinea, The Gambia)

Figure 3 gives a graphic representation of these figures.

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[5] Senior officials agreed that Stage 7 should not necessarily be seen as a more advanced stage, as review and adjustments could be applied during any of the previous stages. Likewise it was suggested that Stage 6 be adjusted for implementation up to five years, rather than five or more years. In both cases the stages have been temporarily retained, as this criteria was used during the data analysis. Importantly, the comments from senior officials indicate that the criteria will have to be revisited before more general application can take place.
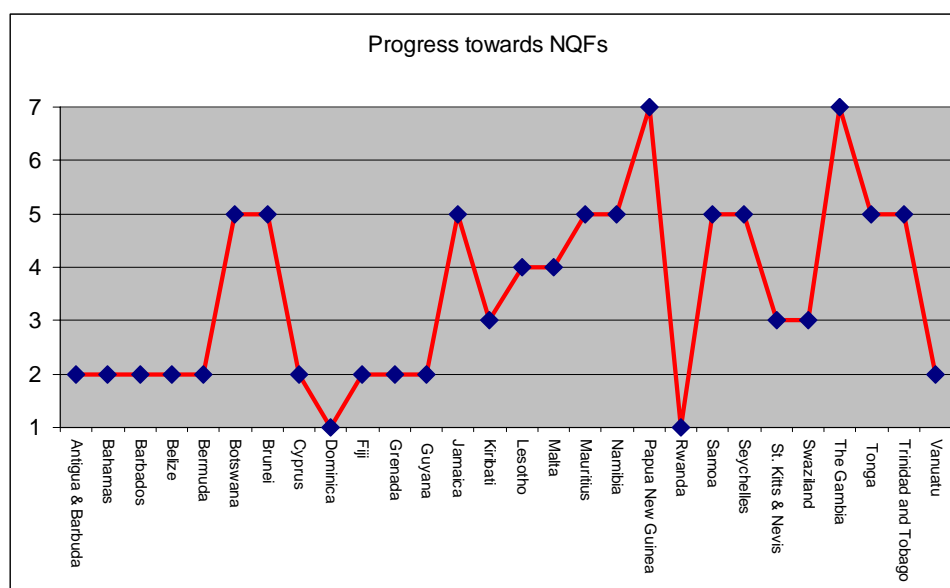
**Figure 3: Progress towards NQFs**

3.122 Keeping in mind that ratings are notoriously difficult to make, are often misleading, and should therefore be seen as indicative only, it as apparent that most countries (10) are at Stage 2 (Background work under way, such as national discussions and advocacy) of development. This appears to be accurate and is supported by other data sources. The following are examples from the Bahamas, Lesotho and Cyprus:

> Background work underway, such as national discussions and advocacy. (Bahamas)

> As we are in the process of legislating for an authority, namely the Lesotho Qualifications Authority (LQA), we do not as yet have legislation, policy or guideline documents on the establishment of the said national quality assurance body. (Lesotho)

> At present there is no National Qualifications Framework in Cyprus. Following the deliberations for the approval of the European Qualifications Framework in the EU, a working committee has been set up to formulate the policies for the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework. The discussions are at their early stages and every effort has been made to involve all stakeholders and government departments in this attempt. (Cyprus)

## Table 9: Progress towards NQFs [6]

Key: NA – Information not available during the development of the concept document

| Country | Name of QF | Purpose | Scope | Incrementalism | Policy breadth | Governance | Prescriptiveness | Architecture | Guiding philosophy | Overall progress rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Antigua and Barbuda | TQF | Describe existing | Tracked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Central | **Tight** | Tertiary only<br>4 levels<br>Modules<br>Credit-based | NA | 2 |
| 2.Bahamas | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Gradual & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | NA | NA | 2 |
| 3.Barbados | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | Credits | NA | 2 |
| 4.Belize | BzNVQ | Describe existing | Tracked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | 5 levels<br>NVQs | NA | 2 |
| 5.Bermuda | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | NA | NA | 2 |
| 6.Botswana | NCQF | Effect change | Linked | Gradual & Phased | H Intrinsic<br>H Institutional | Coordinating | **Mixed** | 10 levels<br>3 strands<br>Level descriptors<br>Credit-based | Outcomes-based<br>Human capital development | 5 |
| 7.Brunei | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | NA | NA | 5 |
| 8.Cyprus | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Central | **Mixed** | NA | NA | 2 |
| 9.Dominica | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 1 |
| 10. Fiji (non-VUSSC) | NQF | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 10 levels | NA | 2 |
| 11.Grenada | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Tight** | NA | NA | 2 |
| 12.Guyana | TQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Strong | **Mixed** | 8 levels<br>Credit-based | NA | 2 |

[6] It is suggested that Table 9 be expanded to allow for sector-specific comparisons within a specific country.

| Country | Name of QF | Purpose | Scope | Incrementalism | Policy breadth | Governance | Prescriptiveness | Architecture | Guiding philosophy | Overall progress rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13.Jamaica | TQF | Describe existing | Tracked | Gradual & Phased | L Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Central | **Tight** | 8 levels<br>Credit-based | NA | 5 |
| 14.Kiribati | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | NA | NA | 3 |
| 15.Lesotho | QFL | Effect change | Unified | Gradual & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>H Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>Title definitions<br>Credit-based | Labour-market | 4 |
| 16.Maldives | MNQF | NA | NA | NA | NA | **NA** | NA | NA | NA | 1 |
| 17.Malta | NQF | Effect change | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Central | **Loose** | 8 Levels<br>3 Dimensions<br>NVQs | Occupational classification | 4 |
| 18.Mauritius | NQF | Describe existing | Tracked | Gradual & Phased | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>3 Tracks<br>Credit-based | NA | 5 |
| 19.Namibia | NQF | Effect change | Unified | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>H Institutional | Central | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>Level descriptors<br>Qualification types<br>UNAt standards<br>Credit-based<br>Fields | NA | 5 |
| 20.Papua New Guinea | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | NA | NA | 7 |
| 21.Rwanda | NQF for HE | Effect change | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | L Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 7 Levels<br>CAT<br>CPD<br>Credit-based<br>Level descriptors | NA | 1 |
| 22.Samoa | SQF | Effect change | Unified | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | Central | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>Credit values<br>Qualification titles | NA | 5 |
| 23.Seychelles | NQF | Effect change | Linked | Gradual & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>Credit-based<br>3 Tracks | Competency | 5 |
| 24.St Kitts and Nevis | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 5 Levels<br>Level Descriptors<br>Credit-based | Competence Outcomes | 3 |

| Country | Name of QF | Purpose | Scope | Incrementalism | Policy breadth | Governance | Prescriptiveness | Architecture | Guiding philosophy | Overall progress rating |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 25.Swaziland | TVET QF | NA | NA | NA | NA | **NA** | **NA** | NA | NA | 3 |
| 26.The Gambia | GSQF | Effect change | Tracked | Gradual & Phased | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 4 levels<br>Level descriptors<br>Credit-based | Competence<br>Outcomes | 7 |
| 27.Tonga | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | 10 Levels<br>Level descriptors | NA | 5 |
| 28.Trinidad and Tobago | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | NA | **Strong** | **Mixed** | 7 Levels | MDGs<br>CARICOM goals | 5 |
| 29.Vanuatu | NQF | Describe existing | Linked | Rapid & Comprehensive | H Intrinsic<br>L Institutional | **Strong** | **Tight** | NA | NA | 2 |

# Overview of findings: qualifications frameworks in small states of the Commonwealth

3.123 This chapter summarises an analysis of the information provided by participating small states relating to qualifications framework developments. The main findings contained in this chapter are listed below.

a) The coordination of education and training is underdeveloped in most small states. As a result, most small states are presently involved in initiatives to improve coordination and international comparability, mainly through the development of national and/or sectoral qualifications frameworks, in many cases within the broader context of a regional qualifications framework.

b) A centralised regulatory approach to the coordination of education and training is preferred by the majority of small states.

c) Most small states reported high, in some cases unrealistically high, expectations of the extent to which a qualifications framework would be able to address challenges of progression, comparability, transparency and portability.

d) The development of TVET systems, including TVET qualifications frameworks, has been prioritised in most small states, accompanied by a move towards competency-based standards and the establishment of training authorities.

e) Although qualifications nomenclature is not uniform across small states, there is sufficient common understanding of most terms, including accreditation, certification, providers, quality assurance, registration, recognition of prior learning and comparability.

f) On the other hand the divergent interpretation and application of the terms curriculum, learning programme and qualification (as holds true in most larger countries as well) will require some negotiation between small countries to promote common understanding.

g) While many countries reported that their qualifications were recognised elsewhere, little evidence was provided, and the extent of recognition remains questionable. Here again there were high expectations of the extent to which national and regional qualifications frameworks would facilitate the recognition of local and foreign qualifications.

h) A trend towards enabling frameworks (also referred to as frameworks of communication) was observed, but also towards greater comprehensiveness and increased regulation.

i) Common purposes of most qualifications frameworks in the small states included establishing national standards, promoting quality, improved coordination and comparability. Two-thirds of small states have opted to describe their existing systems with the qualifications framework, with one-third attempting to effect significant changes using the NQF as a vehicle.

j) Most qualifications frameworks in small states (59%) intend to be linked, while only a few are opting for unified (10%) or tracked (17%) systems.

k) The majority of small states starting out with NQF development (59%) are opting for rapid and comprehensive implementation, while countries that have more experience are opting for a more gradual and phased approach.

l) Few small states reported the value of feasibility studies prior to NQF implementation. In addition, the seemingly uncritical engagement with NQF

development is worrying.

m) In terms of governance, most small states prefer a strong or central national quality assurance body, while the less regulatory and more coordinating option was only reported by one country. Funding challenges, specifically direct funding and an over-reliance on donor funding, were also reported.

n) Most small states (83%) are in the process of implementing regulatory (tight) frameworks, while only a few are considering looser options. As a result most small states reported being at some stage of developing NQF-related legislation.

o) The architecture of the qualifications frameworks in all small states has similar components, such as levels (ranging from 4 to 10), level descriptors, credits (determined in a variety of ways), fields, and divisions of learning into units or modules (also varied).

p) Most qualifications frameworks in small states remain strongly influenced by the competence approach to vocational education and training that also influenced the first generation of frameworks in the late 1980s. Of concern is the lack of awareness of this influence, and of measures put in place to counter the potential problems experienced as a result of this influence in other countries across the world.

q) Progress made in small countries towards NQF development, based on a seven-stage scale, and as self-reported by 13 countries, shows that on average countries are between Stage 3 (initial development) and Stage 4 (draft legislation formulated and some structures in place). Most countries are at Stage 2 (background work under way).

r) A strong reliance on regional qualifications framework developments was reported, notably in SADC, CARICOM and the EU.

# 4. Transnational Qualifications Framework for the VUSSC

**Chapter summary**
This chapter describes the proposed TQF for the recognition of qualifications offered by the VUSSC. The chapter draws on the review of international qualifications framework developments presented in Chapter 2, as well as the state of qualifications framework developments in small states presented in Chapter 3, as it provides a description of the basic components that will make up the proposed TQF.

## Introduction: Why a TQF?

4.1 Since it was first mooted in 2000, the VUSSC has developed to a point where mechanisms to support the recognition of qualifications and credit transfer on a transnational basis are required. While countries are addressing similar challenges on a sectoral and national basis, and by several geographical groupings of countries on a regional basis, the grouping of small states under the Commonwealth presents unique challenges that require a unique solution.

4.2 Evidence suggests that on sectoral, national and regional levels qualifications frameworks are able to provide solutions to some of the challenges of articulation, credit transfer and mobility, although much of this remains contested and still somewhat premature, even more so on a transnational level. As discussed at length in Chapter 2, qualifications frameworks are by no means a panacea for longstanding education and training problems, and require a careful and considered incremental approach that relies heavily on local involvement and simplification. Chapter 2, and to some extent also Chapter 3, show that despite many concerns about qualifications frameworks, many countries and regions are currently engaged in qualifications framework development, including all the participating VUSSC countries. Countries may find that greater awareness of the challenges associated with frameworks in existing systems helps them implement systems in less time.

4.3 Considering the caveats noted above, while also reaffirming the point that a qualifications framework can be of significant value, it is important to now consider the conceptual design of the TQF for the VUSSC. At this point it must also be noted the development of the TQF is in itself an ambitious attempt at developing one of the first qualifications frameworks able to promote credit transfer on a transnational level, as suggested in consultative meetings leading up to the establishment of VUSSC. This chapter attempts to provide an outline of the TQF concept, based on the literature review and analysis of source materials presented in the two preceding chapters.

## The difference between the TQF and national and regional qualifications frameworks

4.4 In developing the TQF concept we need to examine the unique characteristics of the VUSSC.

- The VUSSC is premised on a virtual mode for distance education that is expected to improve access to educational opportunities, enhance the quality of teaching and reduce costs.
- All member countries use English as a common language when working across borders.
- Participating VUSSC countries are all small states that share at least some common challenges in the face of globalisation and the increased mobility of highly skilled professionals.
- The 29 participating VUSSC countries are located across the globe within at least six regional groupings (SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA, EU, Asia-Pacific, and CARICOM), which presents challenges to effective credit transfer.

4.5 These four aspects clearly indicate that the proposed TQF will be much more limited in scope than national and/or regional qualifications frameworks. The following limitations should be considered if the TQF is to be developed in an incremental and phased manner:

- qualifications are offered in English
- institutions from member countries participate in the VUSSC initiative

Additional limitations, such as a distance mode of delivery, may be considered, although this may be unnecessary as course materials can be adapted for mixed-mode and face-to-face delivery. Importantly, the proposed limitations on the initial design of the TQF do not exclude later additional developments.

4.6 Another reason why the proposed TQF may differ from conventional national and regional qualifications frameworks is linked to the preference of small states for virtual education. If the TQF is to embrace a similar non-conventional "virtual" approach to qualifications design, and possibly even

to quality assurance, a number of new opportunities and challenges arise. In the conventional approach to standards development, standards remain static until reviewed through a planned procedure executed by appointed experts and within fixed cycles (often between three and five years). In the "virtual" scenario the standards may be "floated" in an electronic environment (such as used by Wikipedia, MySpace and YouTube) where the standards are changed continually and with much less control.

4.7 One way in which to realise such an approach within the TQF context may be to develop a parallel system where broader stakeholder groupings (such as providers and participating agencies) can have their say, but that allows officials to consider/moderate the changes, and then consider if they need to be included in the official standards on the TQF. Aspects that could be discussed include what good, minimal and poor practice looks like in relation to each standard. This interactive approach can result in a number of potential benefits, including creating ownership, increasing quality-assurance capacity, improving performance, bringing academics on board and creating a common language.

4.8 Although this non-conventional "virtual" approach to standards development may be well suited to the VUSSC, it remains relatively untested in the qualifications framework arena. Considering that the TQF itself is pushing the boundaries of qualifications framework developments in general, it may be far too ambitious, at least in the initial stages of the development of the TQF.

4.9 Before continuing with the description of the TQF it is important to consider the differences between the TQF and other types of qualifications framework. The following examples are based on Table 2 in Chapter 2:

**Table 10: Different qualifications frameworks (expanded)**

| | Sectoral | National | Regional | Transnational |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | Coherence Promote quality | Develop links between sub-systems National standards Promote quality | Mapping Translation | Mapping Translation |
| **Scope** | Within an NQF, covering specific levels, sectors or types of qualifications | National, but not necessarily all levels, sectors and types of qualifications | Regional, but not necessarily all levels, sectors and types of qualifications | Across countries and regions, usually only very specific qualifications and/or sectors |
| **Prescriptive-ness** | Usually tighter | Varying from loose to tight | Usually looser (also referred to as meta-frameworks) | Extremely loose (i.e. no regulatory intention at all) |
| **Examples** | Tertiary (Jamaica), TVET (Botswana) | Malta, Namibia, Seychelles | SADC, CARICOM, EU | VUSSC TQF |

4.8 Important characteristics of a TQF, such as the TQF, as mentioned in this section and in Table 9, include the following:

- only for a very specific grouping of qualifications
- non-regulatory
- does not replace sectoral, national or regional qualifications frameworks
- should be based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement
- aimed at supporting the transfer of credits achieved in different countries.

4.10 Figure 4 illustrates the relationships between types of qualifications frameworks, and shows that the TQF can relate to all other levels, i.e. to a sectoral framework (e.g. tertiary in Jamaica), to a national framework (e.g. the NQF in Namibia), and to a regional qualifications framework (e.g. the EQF). In effect, most TQF qualifications will form a subset of qualifications already registered elsewhere. In some cases unique qualifications may be developed through the VUSSC for specific purposes, but even in such cases, it is recommended that the qualifications be registered on at least one national qualifications framework. It is important to keep in mind that the TQF will be first and foremost a "translation instrument" with no regulatory capacity. This is one important reason why it is necessary for the TQF to rely on existing qualifications frameworks.
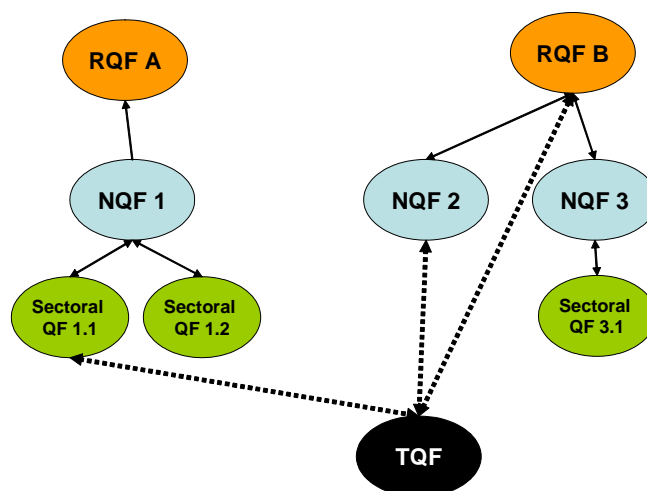
**Figure 4: Relationships between the TQF and other qualifications frameworks**

## Defining the TQF

4.11 It is proposed that the TQF be defined as follows:

**The TQF is a
translation
instrument**

> **The TQF is a translation instrument for the classification of VUSSC qualifications according to set criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, to improve credit transfer and promote common accreditation mechanisms between participating VUSSC countries.**

4.12 Considering the more detailed and elaborate definitions of qualifications frameworks employed at national levels and to a lesser extent at regional levels (as discussed in Chapter 3), this proposed definition signals that the TQF is more limited in its scope. The use of the term "translation" is important, as it further signals that the TQF does not replace any existing sectoral, national or regional qualifications frameworks or quality assurance systems, but rather provides a means by which different frameworks can be compared and related.

**Transnational
qualifications
criteria**

4.13 In brief, the TQF is proposed as an enabling framework that provides a transnational registry of qualifications offered by the VUSSC. This registry provides information on such qualifications following a set format, and in accordance with a broad agreed set of *transnational qualifications criteria*, including the purpose of the qualification, outcomes, assessment methods and in some cases, also the curriculum. This information will be provided in relation to the TQF, but also in relation to national and/or regional qualifications frameworks on which the same qualification may be registered, for example:

- the TQF level at which a qualification is registered, the number of credits associated with the qualification as registered on the TQF, and possible articulation routes on the TQF