

## Executive summary

### *The project*

This report on qualification frameworks was undertaken for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Human Resources Development Working Group (HRDWG) Education Network Subgroup (EDNET).

The project aimed to facilitate increased transparency and reliability of information about qualification frameworks across the APEC region, share knowledge and skills and identify future areas of collaboration.

A qualifications framework is an instrument for classifying qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning outcomes. Considerable benefits are expected of national qualification frameworks (NQFs). If backed by a good system of quality assurance, they can support the development of workers' skills, facilitate educational and labour market mobility, and help improve the access of individuals to higher and different levels of education and training over their lives. Education and training providers and authorities are able to design more consistent and linked qualifications when descriptors of qualifications are developed within NQFs. Employers benefit in their recruitment and training of staff when they can understand and have confidence in qualifications. The international recognition of an economy's qualifications can be enhanced by the transparency of qualifications to which an NQF can contribute.

This report is based on desktop analysis of qualification frameworks, contacts made by members of the project team and on a survey of APEC member economies carried out in the project.

### *Features of national qualifications frameworks in APEC*

The NQFs in operation in the member economies of APEC are diverse in their structure, coverage, operational purposes and governance. They aim to provide greater transparency for qualifications, support for skills standards systems, a means of managing quality assurance, and facilitate the international recognition of qualifications. Some economies use the NQFs as a basis for credit systems for transfer across education and training levels and institutions.

Seven APEC economies—Australia, Hong Kong SAR China, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines have NQFs. The Republic of Korea is in the process of implementing one and five others have them under development or consideration. Of the seven with frameworks:

- Five have NQFs covering senior secondary, vocational education and higher education qualifications, but there are differences in the framework across the sectors. In Singapore the framework applies only to vocational education and in Thailand to higher education.
- Five of the economies have explicit levels of qualifications and two have them implicitly.
- Most NQFs contain descriptors of qualifications and units, and the descriptors are based on a taxonomy of learning outcomes at least for the VET sector.
- Competency standards are the basis for qualifications and units in the VET sector.

- Most of the NQFs include measures of the volume of learning, and a formula for estimating the amount of learning required to achieve a qualification.
- Credit frameworks have been developed in New Zealand and Singapore and they are under development in some other economies.
- All the NQFs have an associated public register of qualifications.
- Recognition tools are being introduced in Australia and are under discussion in New Zealand.
- The NQFs in each economy are managed by a national agency.
- Compliance with the NQF is supported by systems of quality assurance though its operation tends to be shared by a number of agencies.
- The frameworks have been supported by legislation or by government regulation.
- To date the NQFs are not linked to regional or international frameworks.

It is the education and labour departments of government that have been responsible for qualifications. In several economies NQFs have emerged from the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET or VET) sector associated with the developments of industry skills standards and competency standards-based qualifications. The introduction of competency-based training has been associated with a relative shift in control of the content of training from providers to industry.

The autonomy of universities, who generally wish to retain the major influence on the content of their courses, has in some cases been a barrier to the development of an NQF, especially where the frameworks are accompanied by quality assurance and accreditation systems that are external to the education providers. However, as was the case with the Bologna processes in Europe, the diversity of higher education systems also creates pressure to establish qualifications frameworks.

The agencies that conduct the oversight of quality assurance include qualifications authorities, government departments, and more independent bodies—commissions, councils, boards and institutes. Quality assurance also takes several forms and improved registers of courses and providers can be considered part of this.

### *Factors affecting implementation*

The most frequently cited constraints on the development of NQFs were those of acceptance and understanding of the NQF across the various agencies and sector authorities involved in education, training and employment. Universities in particular have tended to guard their autonomy and only accept frameworks that largely reflect their existing practices.

Those economies where the regulatory and quality assurance activities are distributed among a range of bodies raise concerns about whether the framework is being implemented as the NQF agency would consider appropriate. Conversely the more centralised NQFs have the challenge of maintaining a dynamic capacity across their qualifications system. Several NQFs have attempted to address these problems through sector-based qualifications or by having an umbrella type of framework that allows the education sectors to develop fairly separate frameworks.

Because so many of the NQFs are in their early stages of development the most common challenges are those of continued improvement, dissemination and stakeholder engagement. In some cases there is the challenge of convincing or negotiating with a non-participating sector to embrace the NQF. All NQFs face the challenge of the changing international contexts, including increased student and worker mobility. So while some economies are anticipating changes this is either the expectation that another sector will come into the NQF or a processes of on going reform rather than any major change in the fundamental characteristics of the NQFs.

Amongst those economies that have developed NQFs there is a high level of political support for NQFs. The main achievement of NQFs is their acceptance by the wide range of sectors, agencies and stakeholders.

The response to the survey by the United States is notable in relation to questions of implementation and the need for an NQF. The US has a federal system where the national government has a relatively small role in education and training and an NQF is unlikely to be introduced. Despite this, there is considerable commonality in qualifications across the country and extensive registration of providers and accreditation of qualifications. Some of this is via regulated occupations and professional associations. Some is via the state accreditation of education institutions. There are requirements for tertiary colleges to provide considerable information on their websites. The US is taking an active part in the development of recognition tools. Hence some, at least, of the objectives held for NQFs are potentially achievable by other means.

#### *A regional framework?*

All economies see benefits in linking their NQFs internationally. The advantages that such links can bring are the greater potential for international recognition of national qualifications, the facilitation of the mobility of labour and students, the liberalisation of trade in education and training, and the greater transparency of national qualifications systems. Most economies who responded to the survey indicated support for the development of a regional framework.

The report reviewed whether an Asia-Pacific Qualifications Framework (APQF) might be developed and if so how. Consideration was given to the need for and benefit of such a framework, the cost implications of such a framework and whether there were alternatives to developing a new framework. The conclusion was that there was a strong case for having a framework available *as a voluntary reference point* for Asia-Pacific economies but that the costs of such a development would need to be investigated and kept to a fairly modest level. These issues taken together led to the recommendation that the core elements of the European Qualifications Framework, which is already being extensively used beyond Europe, be the basis for development of a framework for the Asia-Pacific region.

## Recommendations

The report includes the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1.** Economies that have developed NQFs should be asked to identify key lessons from their experiences.

- Seven APEC economies have frameworks and another six are in process of developing or implementing them. These economies could be asked by EDNET to use this report as a means of identifying the key lessons for the further development and usefulness of their NQFs and the relation of their NQF to that in other economies.

**Recommendation 2.** EDNET should use the report and the lessons provided by economies with NQFs to facilitate ongoing dialogue between member economies and other Asia-Pacific economies on national qualifications frameworks.

- EDNET could extend the dialogue on the differences between the economies in their NQFs, or in their intentions towards them, and the advantages to be gained from understanding these differences and/or modifying their frameworks.
- The dialogue on NQFs should be closely linked with other work in the region on quality assurance and the recognitions of qualifications to ensure coherence and avoid duplication of research and development.

**Recommendation 3.** A proposal for a voluntary regional framework should be developed and disseminated amongst member economies for comment.

- The framework should be a set of qualifications level descriptors and/or domain based descriptors.
- If possible it should be aligned to core features of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- The European Training Foundation (ETF) could be approached by EDNET for advice and support in investigating the development of the voluntary regional framework drawing on the core features of the EQF.
- An early assessment should be made of the costs of advice and support from the ETF and the costs of developments within the Asia-Pacific Region
- In support of this recommendation APEC could consider the complementary proposal in DEEWR (2008) for the establishment, in economies that do not presently have them, of National Information Centres on qualifications and course structures to provide information to potential users in other economies.