



# On Outlining the Establishment of a United States Qualification Framework

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# Introduction and context of the United States Qualification Framework

Students of the United States need and deserve a National Qualification Framework (NQF). A United States Qualifications Framework (USQF) will unleash the power of educational credentials and allow all types of education to be properly valued and leveraged to advance learners in the modern workplace and education environment. US higher education institutions, employers, and other allied educational entities (non-profit and membership organizations) are positioned to unify in collaboratively achieving this goal.

## Background and Rationale

A National Qualifications Framework (NQF) provides a commonly accepted structure for describing the relationship of educational qualifications within a country, in terms of level, length and learning outcomes. Over 100 countries and regions have developed an NQF and many others are actively in the process of doing so. The NQF is a basic instrument to understand each qualification in the context of the full educational system. The NQF ensures proper recognition of earned qualifications for further educational attainment, employment, and professional recognition. It provides portability of credentials, both physically and digitally, within the country where it was earned and across borders if the learner is mobile.

This flexible and expandable model is vital to the landscape of education, as new types of qualifications (e.g. microcredentials) are introduced and modes of learning (e.g. hybrid and remote) evolve. An NQF provides the structure and regulation needed to ensure consistency and standardized definitions for new educational developments.

The United States needs to join the family of nations with established NQFs so its citizens and residents can benefit from fully recognized credentials and learners coming to the USA from elsewhere can more effectively apply their education for the benefit of society, their communities, and families.

## The Plan

According to the Lumina Foundation, 'one has to initiate any project such as this with a manage-able group of people who have studied and led in the world of U.S. higher education for a long time. The iterative process of DQP [Degree Qualification Profile and subsequent National Qualification Framework] development was purposefully designed to include an ever-expanding universe of contributors' (p 40).

Educational Credential Evaluators and the other members of the USQF Advisory Council are valued allies and major contributors to the recognition of earned education across borders. As such, we are launching a collaborative initiative to establish a USQF in 2022. Stakeholders from a range of areas of interest are invited to join in this voluntary project. The plan of action includes:

- identifying stakeholders,

- assembling an advisory council,
- refining data collection and developing white papers,
- convening a symposium,
- confirming scope and content,
- piloting a model, and
- communicating results to stakeholders.

## What is a National Qualification Framework?

The most commonly accepted definition of a national qualification framework, or NQF, is ‘a system for classification, publication and articulation of quality assured qualifications according to a set of criteria’ (UNESCO 202 EX/8, 2017). However, open questions remain such as who develops the set of criteria and who is responsible for the quality assurance of such qualifications? Further research is required in order to establish these answers for a qualification framework to be developed and successfully implemented in the United States.

An NQF has also been described as ‘an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes’ (Tuck, 2007, p. v).

Education is increasingly a global network. The vision for the USQF is to facilitate recognition of diplomas and certificates from all sub-sectors and levels of education and training; to enhance comparability and allow for greater mobility of student and employee; to compliment previously established NQFs, to promote cooperation amongst all stakeholders, and to support the development of diverse learner pathways. To this end, the USQF ‘aims to be inclusive and comprehensive, open to innovation and new technologies, and based on learnings from similar processes’ (ASQF, 2021). A USQF would categorize nearly all qualifications offered in the USA.

‘Equally, the innovative and widespread use of technologies in the delivery of tertiary education programmes requires more careful monitoring and evaluation of the quality of provision in order to ensure that all technology-enhanced or-empowered learning programmes are quality assured. The rapid development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and MOOC platforms, together with the proliferation of online learning to supplement traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and learning, necessitates that new procedures and criterion are developed so as to monitor the quality of online learning.’ (Asia Pacific Study)

This preliminary report documents how the design and implementation of the USQF will be consistent with global expectations and standards set forth for national qualification systems and builds upon the foundations previously established.

## Origins of qualifications frameworks

Guidelines and standards for developing NQFs have previously been established by the following networks, and will be used in future reports to identify the procedures, policy, and criteria for the successful creation and implementation of a United States Qualification Framework (USQF):

### AFRICA

- [Towards the African Continental Qualifications Framework \(ACQF\) Mapping Report](#)

### ASIA

- [Guidelines on Developing and Strengthening Qualifications Frameworks in Asia and the Pacific Building a Culture of Shared Responsibility](#)

### EUROPE

- [Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning \(EQF\)](#)

### SOUTH AMERICA

- [Analytical inventory of experiences in the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks in Latin America](#)

The aforementioned studies will be utilized to establish the timeline, framework, and necessity of the USQF, specifically the areas that focus on “strategies for developing qualifications frameworks” as is the case of the ASEAN study.

According to those entities, the main characteristic to address in an NQF include knowledge and skills, competence and learning outcomes, and quality assurance and oversight. Furthermore, both the ACQF and UNESCO assert the core values of an NQF contain the following:

- **Levels based on expected learning outcomes:** Coherence and permeability between sub-systems’ learning outcomes and qualifications.
- **All qualifications are quality assured:** Quality, transparency, enhanced visibility, and trust of end-users: by introducing learning outcomes approaches, stakeholders’ participation in qualifications development and approval, and accessible users’ information through digital and online instruments.
- **Multiple Sectors and Learner pathways:** Parity of esteem and value of learning in different contexts and sub-systems: academic, vocational, formal, non-formal.
- **Accreditation of Prior Learning:** Qualifications can be obtained via validation of non-formal learning, recognition of experience from work and life.

## Policy basis for qualification frameworks

The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) project planning document identified eleven thematic areas to include when designing a qualifications framework. They will be individually addressed in subsequent planning sessions of the USQF Advisory Council and include the following aspects:

- **Legal, policy base of the qualifications frameworks:** *legal acts and policies that underpin the qualifications framework.*
  - **Governance:** *leading institutions and key agencies; the role of social partners and other stakeholders; partnerships with sector councils; resources; indicators and mechanisms to support implementation and monitoring.*
  - **Vision, scope and structure of qualifications frameworks:** *objectives and added value for education and training systems; employability policies; levels and descriptors; scope (partial, comprehensive coverage of levels/sub-sectors of education and training; place of non-formal, informal learning and validation/recognition of prior learning). Quality assurance (QA): principles, policy, institutions; practice; registers; verification mechanisms.*
  - **Learning outcomes:** *concepts; application/use in different contexts (qualifications standards, curriculum, assessment) and sub-sectors (vocational education and training [VET], higher education); links with QA.*
  - **Credit systems:** *concepts; specifications; transferability/pathways between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education qualifications; status of development/implementation.*
  - **Alignment and referencing:** *objectives; approaches; criteria; and status of implementation.*
  - **Databases and registers of qualifications:** *types; uses; target users; governance; involved agencies.*
  - **Costs and financing of NQFs.**
  - **Dissemination, communication to end-users:** *learners; employers; education and training providers; career guidance advisors, employment/recruitment agencies mechanisms; practice; platforms; use of digital tools.*
  - **Role and place of RQFs in supporting development at national level:** *clarity of learning pathways and permeability; promoting mutual trust; use of common QA principles/mechanisms; use of learning outcomes; renewal and reform of qualifications; improved methods and approaches for better qualifications; other aspects of the ecosystem of education and training (efficiency, effectiveness).*
- (ACQF, 2019)

## Challenges to developing an NQF

As previously mentioned, no central governmental body controls educational oversight in the United States. So how does the USQF get fidelity? The consultancy team of the Mongolian Higher Education Reform Project (2016) states ‘enhancing only impact and role of the NQF towards education reform without collaborating with the other policy measures can lead to a unsuccessful implementation.’ They go on to address the challenges of developing a national qualification framework independent of the government and cite both Australia and Hong Kong with having success in this regard. The study indicates, ‘There are two opportunities for developing qualifications framework independent of the Government:

- The apex body in charge of NQF shall be politically responsible for providing routine performance and implementation of NQF and introduction and promotion for public.
- The conditions are provided for not directly influenced by ministries, agencies and amendment of the state policy.'

Vargas and González (2020, p. 23) indicate a lack of governmental oversight could actually be a benefit to the implementation of an NQF. Their finding was that when a separate entity such as an inter-agency commission or committee was involved in the development of a country's NQF, the time surrounding the formal adoption of the NQF was greatly reduced. When a ministry of education or other governmental body is involved, the success of the NQF is 'seen to be slower compared to experiences where commissions or committees have been set up to mobilize the issue of the framework (24).'

Consideration has been given to the level of governmental involvement and oversight of NQFs, and how these may vary. Diverse styles and types of frameworks are being utilized in a multitude of countries. Models that mirror the US educational system are already in existence. Replicating these models should provide an effective template to develop an NQF quickly and efficiently for the United States. Even though education is autonomous in the United States, the goals and outcomes are often identical to those of countries with a more centralized system.

According to the Lumina Foundation (2014, p. 46), 'some skepticism has been expressed as to why the U.S. should follow what Europeans have done in their various qualification frameworks'. However, unlike the previous studies, this report urges stakeholders to more closely model the NQF based on the "efforts of other nations." The Degree Qualification Profile goes on to state that, 'in the absence of a ministry of education, too, our efforts — both in the initial construction and execution of the DQP — in the U.S. are entirely voluntary.'

With that, however, comes a degree of flexibility in our approach. It is possible to replicate the pre-existing qualification frameworks of countries that are modeled after and closely resemble the educational system of the United States while continuing to build upon the work previously completed in the DQP study.

## Benefits of establishing an NQF

While this may appear to be an overly ambitious and lofty goal for some, the fact remains that a multitude of countries already have operable qualification frameworks in place. According to a report prepared for the World Bank, 'NQFs have now evolved over a period of almost two decades across a vast range of countries, and in 2010 the ETF identified 110 countries that have developed qualification frameworks. It is possible to identify some lessons for effective NQFs.' (World Bank, 2013) The framework for frameworks has been vetted and successfully implemented in every continent in the world. The United States is absent from the recent editions of the global inventories of qualifications frameworks (CEDEFOP et al., 2017b, 2019b).

CEDEFOP (2011) explains, 'Frameworks help to make qualifications easier to understand and compare. They can also encourage countries to rethink and reform national policy and practice on education, training, and lifelong learning.' A framework of qualifications classifies and categorizes credentials by level, based on learning outcomes. This classification reflects the content and profile of qualifications - that is, what the holder of a certificate or diploma (or eventually badge or microcredential) is expected to know, understand, and be able to do. The learning outcomes approach also ensures that education and training subsystems are open to one another. Thus, it facilitates movement not just between institutions, but also levels and sectors. An NQF allows stakeholders to focus on what the learners know, not just the credential they earn.

According to the Mongolian Higher Education Reform Project (HERP) on the establishment and implementation of national qualification frameworks, 'Many countries that have developed and implemented an NQF were concerned with the poor articulation between qualifications and actual skills needs in the workplace (2016, p. 7).' As we have demonstrated, this is a challenge the educational system in the United States is currently facing (according to employers). The ACQF believes the NQFs 'enhance the workforce by aligning skills with demand and allowing for recognition of qualifications on a greater scale' (2020, p. 6).

In addition, HERP states that an NQF 'promotes life-long learning and supports quality assurance and recognition of qualifications.' Likewise, UNESCO states 'robust quality assurance enhances credibility and builds trust in learning outcomes achieved at different levels of the qualifications framework.'

Currently, there is an urgent need to establish the treatment of microcredentials in the United States. Badges and other alternate credentials do not yet have a place in the formal educational system in the USA. The structure of a qualification framework would provide institutions, employers, and lifelong learners with the ability to determine the value of a credential via transparency. This means that stakeholders will not only know the qualification and provider, but also the objectives and scope of learning targets based on the level on the qualification framework. Through NQFs learners will have more options, flexibility, and opportunities to pursue a broad range of educational qualifications.

## Looking to the next phase: Establishing an NQF in the United States

According to Bateman and Coles (2013, p.16), "effective NQFs rely on engaging diverse stakeholders in a continuous development process. These stakeholders may include students, educational institutions and training providers, employers and industry. In addition, there is a clear need to build the understanding and practical commitments required from senior government managers to implement the quality-assured NQFs for the recognition of tertiary qualifications. Yet too often, the main stakeholders spearheading an

NQF (e.g. policymakers) are not the primary end-users (e.g. employers, credential evaluators for recognition, and lifelong learners).’

Upon completion of the 3rd UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, a symposium will be held to discuss the next steps in implementing and studying the impact of the USQF on stakeholders. At the conclusion of this inaugural meeting, a supplemental report will be prepared including the following outcomes and recommendations:

- Establish appropriate levels of core competencies and learning outcomes
- Develop scope of lifelong learning credentials
- Determine equivalency of educational levels
- Indicate minimum requirements for evaluation
- Propose framework and publish to stakeholders

Additional reports will be drafted, and subsequent meetings held to ensure acceptance and execution of the USQF and to monitor quality assurance as necessary. A timeline will be created for both the design and implementation based on previous models and feedback from stakeholders.

## Concluding remarks

The USQF has the potential to fill the need for vocational and alternative education to find its proper place within the traditional educational system, to provide guidance for employers, and to facilitate global mobility of learner credentials. According to Bateman and Coles (2013), the benefits of establishing a NQF in the United States include the following:

- Increased consistency of qualifications
- Better transparency for individuals and employers
- Increased currency of single qualifications
- Broader range of learning forms recognized
- National/external reference point for qualifications standards
- Clarification of learning pathways and progression
- Increased portability of qualifications
- Establishment of a platform for strengthening cooperation and commitment
- Greater coherence of national reform policies
- Stronger basis for international collaboration, understanding and comparison

There is an opportunity for the USQF to become the solution to the challenges facing transferability and transparency of educational qualifications, both domestically and abroad. The USQF aims to join the generations of globally adopted qualification frameworks in order to enhance access, recognition, and equitability of education.

If not now, then when? And if not us, then who?

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