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ASEAN - AUSTRALIA - NEW ZEALAND FREE TRADE AREA (AANZFTA)
ECONOMIC COOPERATION SUPPORT PROGRAM (AECSP)



The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework:

Promoting Transparency
and Mobility in the Region

BACKGROUND

In a region as large and diverse as ASEAN, there are considerable differences in population, size of the economies, levels of per-capita income and regulatory approaches. For ASEAN, promoting AEC goals of freer flows of people, goods, services and capital between itself and external partners like Australia and New Zealand can be a challenge in such a diverse and regulatory fragmented environment.

Improved students and workers mobility is fundamental parts of regional economic integration. They are also a key to lowering barriers to trade in services and investment as both typically require people movements to deliver services and ensure smooth operation of investments. Governments are, however, concerned about unfettered movement of labour.

It is therefore necessary to have some common standards and qualifications in order for governments to adequately assess the opportunities and risks that can come with the movement of any specific individual. National and regional education and training systems and their recognition across ASEAN Member States (AMS) and with dialogue partners like Australia and New Zealand are an essential part of promoting labour mobility and employment opportunities within and across countries.

The development and adoption of a regional qualifications framework is a key tool to support the efficient and effective recognition of skills and qualifications within and between countries in the region. Nevertheless, the ASEAN region had varying national qualifications systems and lacked any regional qualifications reference framework to improve transparency and facilitate recognition of qualifications between countries. Therefore, there was a particular need to establish an institutional mechanism for ASEAN to collaborate in the development of comparable national qualifications systems based on principles of transparency and quality assurance.

To lower barriers to services trade and strengthen people mobility in the AANZFTA region, the AECSP has supported four phases of an initiative that enabled the establishment of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) and helped build capacity in the AMS to strengthen their National Qualifications Framework (NQF) development and reference their NQF or qualifications systems to the AQRF.

The AECSP has supported the establishment of the first regional qualifications reference framework in Asia and enhanced ASEAN national qualifications framework or qualifications system while providing a mechanism to facilitate comparisons, transparency and higher quality qualifications systems across ASEAN Member States.

AQRF PROJECT INFORMATION

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Timelines	July 2010 – January 2012	August 2012 – March 2016	April 2014 – December 2015	September 2016 to November 2019
Proponents / Implementers	DIISRTE and ASEAN Secretariat	The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Task Force, supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, Australia and New Zealand	ASEAN Secretariat	The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Committee, supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, Australia and New Zealand
Participating AMS	All AMS	All AMS	Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam	All AMS

IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVED PEOPLE MOBILITY FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

In the AANZFTA region, the movement of people and labour contributes to a more efficient and productive use of human resources and catalyses transfers of knowledge across the region. This makes it crucial to boost productivity. When employers can choose from a broader talent pool, they can make better matches and make the best possible use of a scarce resource.

Labour mobility has been an integral part of the ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN's engagement with external dialogue partners. A growing desire within the region to take a more proactive role to facilitate

and foster labour mobility—especially in attracting, retaining, and circulating ASEAN's skilled workforce—has led to its prioritisation in the promotion of services trade and the movement of natural persons under agreements like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA).

One of the AANZFTA key goals has been to facilitate increased cross-border flows of services among the Parties, by assisting them to adapt regulations affecting services trade and to build more vibrant services sectors based on reductions in barriers to trade in services. To realise the full potential created by the AANZFTA, governments have to streamline regulatory arrangements that affect service providers and strengthen institutions that support a freer flow of services among members.

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND AANZFTA ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Recognition of education and training qualifications plays an important role in lowering barriers to trade and promoting worker and student mobility. For decades, students and workers of all levels have relied on qualifications to establish the credibility of their knowledge and skills to employers. In the context of increasing globalisation and resulting freer movement of people and goods over the past two decades, economies and other entities have also tried to establish mutual recognition of qualifications across borders.

Why Qualifications Frameworks Matter for People Mobility:

NQFs can be defined as including all the structures and activities that lead to the award of a qualifications or recognition of learning outcomes in a country. Another important dimension of the relationship between different qualifications frameworks is referencing, a process that involves a comparison between two NQFs in order to improve the correlation between the two frameworks. In regions like ASEAN, the establishment of NQFs and the establishment of a regional qualifications framework can facilitate the referencing process and improve transparency and facilitate recognition of qualifications between countries.

However, as of 2010, most ASEAN countries lacked comprehensive and comparable NQFs. Some AMS had established comprehensive NQFs, others had sectoral frameworks in place, and others had yet to develop or implement qualifications framework or systems.

The concept of a region-wide qualifications framework for ASEAN was conceived in 2010, and the AQRF was developed in 2014 by a task force comprise of officials and experts from ASEAN ministries of trade, labour and manpower development, education, as well as other relevant qualifications agencies. The AQRF was endorsed by the ASEAN Economic Ministers and the ASEAN Education Ministers, respectively in 2014, and by the ASEAN Labour Ministers ad referendum in 2015.

The AQRF aims to provide quality information about ASEAN Member States' education systems, quality assurance systems and qualifications, and increase their overall level of transparency. This assists ASEAN qualifications to be better understood, compared and valued internationally, supporting the mobility of ASEAN graduates to pursue study and employment opportunities in the sub-region, and as a result, strengthening the ASEAN economic community.

In the AANZFTA region, the establishment of a regional qualifications framework strengthens the establishment of high-quality, comparable NQFs and national qualifications systems and thus creates greater confidence in education standards and supports the supply of services through the temporary movement of natural persons, students and education providers within and between economies.

THE ASEAN QUALIFICATIONS REFERENCE FRAMEWORK (AQRF)

Between 2011 and 2020 ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand developed and implemented the AQRF, providing a mechanism to facilitate comparison and exercise transparency towards higher quality qualifications systems in each ASEAN Member States' national qualifications frameworks or qualifications systems.

AQRF Phases

- Phase 1 – Development of a policy concept paper, a regional forum attended by AMS officials and expert to discuss the findings, and eight national consultation workshops held in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.
- Phase 2 – Establishment of a Task Force of AMS and non-voting representatives from Australia and New Zealand to develop the AQRF and agree on its implementation.
- Phase 3 – Provide a tailored plan and practical technical support for NQF development and implementation to AMS through exchanges of officials and technical experts.
- Phase 4 – Support the referencing process of the AMS national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) or qualifications systems to the AQRF.

The AQRF strengthens the operationalisation of key AANZFTA commitments. The initiative addresses key service objectives under the ECWP to “facilitate increased cross-border flows of services among the Parties, by assisting them to adapt regulations affecting services trade,” specifically in the Key Result Area of “Increase education sector investment among Parties.” In addition, AQRF contributes to the realisation of the built-in agenda and objectives of the AANZFTA Chapter on Services, by strengthening the recognition of education or expertise obtained, requirements met, licenses or certifications granted by a particular country (Article 16 of Services Chapter of the AANZFTA).

AQRF PROJECT OUTCOMES

I. Strengthened the development of NQFs

Throughout Phases 1 – 4, the AQRF increased the capability of ASEAN countries seeking to develop and implement NQFs or national qualifications systems, by providing planned, tailored, practical and technical support.



As a common reference framework that enables comparisons of people’s qualifications across ASEAN Member States (AMS), the AQRF establishment was envisioned as one of important tools in empowering the AMS towards the ASEAN Vision.

For Indonesia, the AQRF has become a significant driving force towards the establishment of Indonesian Qualifications National Committee (IQNC) in 2018. This institutionalisation was an important milestone in implementing the Indonesian Qualifications Framework (IQF) as a key tool to improve Indonesian human capital planning and human resource supply system.

Megawati Santoso, PhD, Chair of the AQRF Committee (2019-present), Vice Chair of AQRF Committee (2018-2019), Vice Chair of AQRF Interim Committee (2016-2017), Vice Chair of AQRF Task Force (2012-2015) and Member of Indonesian Qualifications National Committee (2018-present)

For developing AMS, the AQRF increased their knowledge of existing NQF or national qualifications system models in the region and their understanding that the guidance of other AANZFTA partners is vital for their journey.



In Cambodia, we have in place an NQF. The AQRF has supported the development of our NQF. Cambodia will benefit from the transfer of skills, and our people will have a platform where there is mutual agreement on the quality of qualifications. Each country has a different category of educational qualifications, but through this project, we can make these categories equivalent to a common category in the region.

Pichmalika Yim, Vice-chair of the AQRF Committee & Deputy Director General, Directorate General of Technical Vocational, Education and Training, Cambodia Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training

For instance, Phase 3 set up arrangements between countries with established NQFs or national qualifications system, which provided targeted and planned expert advice and hosted placements for ASEAN countries to benefit from policy and implementation assistance, encompassing technical and operational support.



The experts from Malaysia that we met reviewed our draft version of the NQF and gave us very insightful comments. They visited several institutions with us and met university people and people from the Skill and Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector and gave very useful feedback. After that, we went to Malaysia to visit the MQA and visited three or four universities. We learnt a lot from this project.

Kyi Shwin, Myanmar Representative to UNESCO Executive Board at UNESCO and Rector, Banmaw University

For AMS in the process of developing or implementing their NQF or national qualifications system, the AQRF triggered national reforms that strengthened and expedited the process. For instance, as Case Study 1 shows, in the Philippines, AQRF phases helped the institutionalisation of the Philippines Qualifications Framework (PQF) and the development of the Philippines Qualifications Register.

Technical Exchanges between Host Country (HC) and Participating Country (PC)

- Australia (HC) and the Philippines (PC)
- Australia (HC) and Viet Nam (PC)
- New Zealand (HC) and Indonesia (PC)
- Malaysia (HC) and Lao PDR (PC)
- Malaysia (HC) and Myanmar (PC)

6th ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Committee Meeting and 6th Technical Expert Workshop, 21-23 May 2019, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR



Case Study 1: Institutionalizing the NQF in the Philippines

The Challenge: Before the AQRF process came into place, the Philippines was facing significant hurdles in the institutionalisation of their PQF, as it required the restructuring and harmonisation of the Philippines education system. In the Philippines, accreditation was mostly conducted by private accreditation bodies like universities, who showed resistance to the implementation of an outcomes-based and quality assurance accreditation system managed by the government.

Outcomes of AQRF Assistance: Under AQRF Phases 1–4 the Philippines:

1. Received materials and technical assistance on quality assurance, which the Philippines officials employed when crafting the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of the Philippine Qualifications Framework Law.
2. Developed a National Referencing Committee (NRC) as part of AQRF's governance requirements. The NRC developed the Philippine Qualifications Register, which tracked all the qualifications issues by government mandated qualifications bodies in the Philippines.
3. Participated in the referencing process, which brought all accreditation bodies together and allowed the Philippines to articulate concepts like quality assurance into their system.

1st ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Committee Meeting and 1st Technical Expert Workshop, 9–10 February 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia

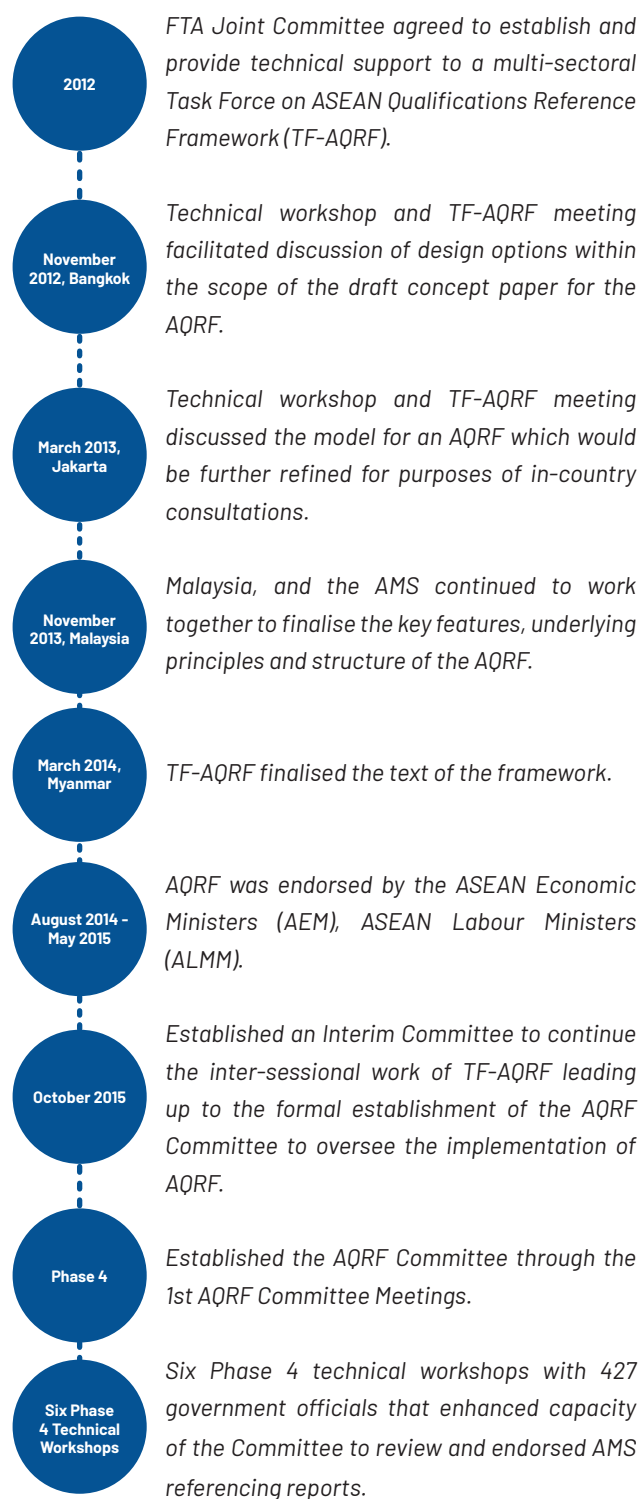


Upon reflection, referencing the PQF to AQRF catalysed the shift to a lifelong learning paradigm in education as well as the understanding of stakeholders of the qualifications system of the country. As a case in point, for the first time, we were able to articulate the existing quality assurance system and the role of government and private accreditation bodies. Contending QA bodies finally accepted the articulation although the reality is not what a number of these bodies consider desirable. Prior to the referencing process, the public's perception—and even that of the government agency responsible for higher education—was that private accreditation bodies were the ones in charge of the country's quality assurance because QA in the public mind referred to what private accreditation bodies do. The term accreditation was reserved for the mandate of these bodies. Thus, until the referencing, the public considered accreditation (and for that matter QA) to be voluntary, the tension between government and accreditation bodies until then was a result of any allusion by the government to it as an external body assuring the quality of higher education. Understanding that the “accreditation” as used in other countries entails the grant of permits to operate the monitoring of compliance with minimum standards etc., resolve a nagging issue between the government and private accreditation bodies because government performed those functions. Enabling (and compelling) stakeholder dialogue and coordination were the biggest contribution of the AQRF.

Dr. Cynthia Rose B. Bautista, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, University of the Philippines and Former Chair of Task Force on AQRF and AQRF Interim Committee

II. Improved Regional Governance through the Establishment of the AQRF Committee

The support and development of external expert input and multiple AMS meetings led to the development of key reference documentation and the establishment of the AQRF, an effective tool for comparing qualifications frameworks across the region. Leveraging the learning from the 2011 AANZFTA Forum titled “ASEAN Regional Qualifications Framework,” the AQRF:



We use AQRF as a regional common framework which we can reference, and as a result, we can understand each other's systems. The AQRF saves AMS time because instead of referencing ten times, each AMS only needs to do one referencing to a common framework. It is a time-saving process that provides equal opportunities for countries to articulate their NQF to a common system that benefits the mobility students and workers across the region.

Dr. Hazman Shah Abdullah, Deputy CEO, Malaysian Qualifications Agency

III. Institutionalising a Valid NQF Referencing Process

Based on the learning and capability gap assessments obtained throughout Phases 1 – 3, the AQRF Phase 4 strengthened the development of mutually comparable NQFs based on a common reference framework. It led to positive outcomes across AMS regardless of the development level of their own NQFs.

For ASEAN Member States with an existing NQF or national qualifications system, the referencing process identified, in a broad sense, the best fit of levels of the national qualifications frameworks to that of the AQRF. For instance, in Malaysia, the only AMS with a previously established National Qualifications Agency (NQA), the referencing process complemented the review of the country's NQF.

3rd ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Committee Meeting and 3rd Technical Expert Workshop, 14-16 November 2017, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia





During our review, one of the instruments that we looked at was the AQRf besides many other frameworks in and around the region. AQRf become one of the key documents in the review to ensure that our qualifications system and framework is comparable to and benchmarked to countries in the Asia-Pacific region. AQRf fitted in nicely with what we were already doing, there was congruence within the NQA.

Dr. Hazman Shah Abdullah, Deputy CEO, Malaysian Qualifications Agency

For AMS without an NQF or national qualifications system, the referencing process identified which national qualifications types or key qualifications fit best to the level of the AQRf. This enabled the commencement of a domestic reference process in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam.



The Referencing Report can help us to show other ASEAN countries that our human resources are meeting the common criteria and requirements and the similarities in the level of education quality. That's very important not only for us in promoting our NQF but also for other countries to recognise our human resource. Through this project we see the importance and value of international inputs to guide us on how to do the referencing report and how to improve our system and process of NQF implementation.

Nguyễn Thu Thủy, Acting Director of Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education and Training, Viet Nam

For AMS without NQFs or national qualifications systems that did not participate in the AQRf referencing process (Brunei and Singapore), the project strengthened national level efforts to improve the quality of their NQFs. Brunei representatives attended AQRf workshops that improved their own national qualifications referencing process.



The shared ideas, comments, and advice from the invited experts and others AMS during the meeting and workshops are considered to be useful for Brunei as a guide and prepared us better. The most useful should be the guideline for the referencing process that gives an idea, overview process, and knowledge on how to perform the referencing of qualifications from the early up to its final stage.

Puan Rosimah Sumaimah bin Haji Matassim, Acting Executive Secretary, Head of Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council (BDNAC), Brunei Darussalam and Former AQRFC Chair (2017-2018)

SUCCESS FACTORS

1. Needs Based Approach to the Development of NQF

Throughout the four phases, the AECSP has supported the development of a planned and progressive programme, tailored to the specific needs of AMS. For instance, to encourage the completion of NQF or national qualifications system referencing, the AQRf Committee allowed AMS to submit partial referencing reports in a selective and staggered manner according to national priorities and resources. This allowed AMS referencing countries to incrementally develop the referencing report and receive feedback from other AMS.

Case Study 2: A Flexible Approach to Strengthening National Qualifications Systems in Lao PDR

Before AQRF, Lao PDR did not have in place a National Qualifications Framework.

The Challenge: With no qualifications system in place, Lao had multiple departments that managed domestic qualifications. There were four departments each for TVET, higher education and universities, teacher training for schools and university and general education. Thus, it was very difficult to coordinate with all of them simultaneously and develop a unified qualifications framework.

AQRF Assistance: Through all phases of the AECSP Support for the development and implementation of AQRF, Lao PDR received tailored and flexible technical assistance and knowledge for the development of its NQF.

- In Phase 2 of AECSP support, which focused in the development of the AQRF Guidelines, Lao PDR officials increased their understanding of the NQF, its connection to quality assurance (QA) of qualifications and the importance of learning outcomes.
- In Phase 3, Lao PDR received tailored technical assistance from Malaysia. Through a Malaysia mission to Lao PDR officials were able to receive what participants termed “useful” recommendations and feedback when proceeding with the project.
- In Phase 4, Lao PDR officials attended multiple technical workshops where other AMS presented their own progress in the development of the referencing reports.



For me it was good to have a workshop format where we read Malaysia and Thailand’s referencing reports and

practised the process before doing the referencing process ourselves. This provided us with experience and was very useful because it is very difficult for us to go around and learn from other countries. The programme provided us the opportunity to have this experience without much difficulty.

Panya Chanthavong, Director of ESQAC, MoES, Lao PDR (Lao PDR Representative to AQRF Committee)

II. Ongoing Support from Australia and New Zealand

Continued participation by AANZFTA partners on the AQRF Committee helped maintain the momentum of the initiative. In the workshops and the AQRF referencing activities, the technical expertise of Australia and New Zealand, especially regarding previous comparability studies, strengthened and deepened the understanding of all AMS and increased the international credibility, sustainability and validity of the initiative.



All throughout the work of the Task Force before the endorsement of AQRF as an ASEAN framework, we were always reminded that the credibility of the AQRF relies heavily on affirmation by external groups of the review process. During the referencing of the PQF to the AQRF, the substantial comments of Australia and New Zealand mattered. Ignoring these comments would have prevented us from achieving the referencing outcome. We need external reviewers with proper qualifications and experience to vet the referencing process, since AMS do not have the deep experience the way the other countries had.

Dr. Cynthia Rose B. Bautista, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, University of the Philippines and Former Chair of Task Force on AQRF and Interim Committee

III. Cross-Country Exchange and Learning

AQRF activities emphasised the sharing of information between participating countries, collective learning and mutual support. A process of peer learning across AMS was employed in the design and support of NQFs or national qualifications systems and NQF referencing drew on each AMS unique needs and learnings. For instance, AQRF capacity-building programming leveraged AMS progress reports, detailing the steps taken towards referencing strengthened understanding and engagement of other participants.



We learnt a lot from the processes that other countries established. When looked at Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia as examples and now we have already succeeded in putting forward our master plan for higher education. We found out that other countries put in a lot of resources and investment in developing their NQF but we have not done so that much. We realised that we need to push for support from higher authorities and have to persuade our stakeholders to get involved and do more.

Nguyễn Thu Thủy, Acting Director of Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education and Training, Viet Nam

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROJECT

The establishment of the AQRF has strengthened the establishment of high-quality, comparable NQFs and national qualifications systems across the AANZFTA regions. This has created greater confidence in education standards and supported the supply of services through the temporary movement of natural persons, students and education providers within and between economies.



The ability to recognise qualifications between ASEAN Member States is an important component of the AQRF project. The robustness and transparency of the referencing process are critical, so we can extend the recognition beyond ASEAN. Once this project is completed, the recognition of the AQRF can be extended to other national qualifications frameworks such as New Zealand. This means that students from AMS who come and study in New Zealand can be assured that their New Zealand qualifications will be accepted in their home country, and vice versa.

Dolly Seow-Ganesan, Acting Manager at New Zealand Qualifications Authority



The AQRF and the referencing process is a complex, technical and long-term policy initiative, requiring high-level decision-making at key stages of implementation at the regional and national levels. As such, the AQRF project has taken a few years to tangibly contribute to regional and national education goals. Throughout its implementation, steady progress has been made in building national and regional level AQRF-related capability. Significant work is underway to maintain the project's positive momentum and build on key learnings to promote the development of national qualifications frameworks, quality assurance systems, and the AQRF itself.

Jane Azurin, Director, Multilateral Policy, Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment



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