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Different approaches to including qualifications in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

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Abstract:

This article presents key findings from desk research regarding effective ways of including qualifications in a national framework. The research was commissioned in 2022 to inform The Qualifications Authority of Turkey on appropriate policies and procedures in this regard which could become elements of a Handbook at national framework of qualifications (NQF) operational level.

1. Introduction

In 2022 I was engaged as an international expert in qualifications by GOPA Consultancy Group within the TUYEP Project – *Implementation of the Turkish Qualifications System and Framework Operations*. My remit was to draft a Handbook on how to introduce qualifications into the Turkish Qualifications Framework (TQF). Initial work involved desk research of relevant international policy and practice, particularly from the following sources:

- i. European Qualifications Framework (EQF) literature
- ii. National Qualifications Frameworks Referencing Reports (particularly Criterion 4)
- iii. Qualifications Registers in selected European countries
- iv. Cedefop European Inventory of NQFs
- v. Research reports about including non-formal education qualifications in frameworks
- vi. Seven Country Reports from the *NQF-In* Erasmus+ Project.

Trying to organise and synthesise different approaches from different countries and different qualification systems containing different types of qualifications turned out to be both very complex and very complicated.

What had to be taken into account was the fact that the e-commands of the European Commission are implemented by each country according to its own context.

It was almost impossible to group countries exclusively according to the way they introduce their qualifications into the NQF, because in each country there are several approaches, and they depend variously on the type of qualifications, or on the legislative context existing at a certain time, or on the particularities of the system of qualifications in the country.

As an end-product from my research I synthesised information into over-arching advice to the Turkish Qualifications Authority under the following headlines:

- i. Consider a range of ways of introducing qualifications into the TQFs – not just one unitary process.
- ii. Research the current situation in Turkey to establish the scale of the task: are only 382 qualifications placed in the TQF - 1.2% of all qualifications in the database?
- iii. Build on the established robust processes for including qualifications – each one individually scrutinised by the TQF Council and ratified by the TQF Coordination Council.
- iv. Systematically populate the TQF with qualifications as they are ratified – a major priority of the ‘implementation phase’.
- v. Record and evaluate inclusion processes to find the most efficient and effective ways of streamlining and speeding up the process while maintaining quality.
- vi. Revise existing documentation and create new documents and processes where necessary to ensure transparency and ease of implementation.
- vii. Draft, pilot and approve a Handbook for Including Qualifications in the TQF.

This short journal article is based only on research findings around only the first element from the list above:

Consider a range of approaches as a basis for discussion/information exchange towards a national policy and strategy for including qualifications in your NQF.

2. Considering inclusion of qualifications: *defining terms*

What does it mean to introduce a qualification into an NQF? Essentially, to introduce a qualification into a national framework means to introduce an element into a system. The procedure for introducing an element into a system depends on the complexity or simplicity of the system and the way it is built. The characteristics of a system influence the ways and solutions used to introduce qualifications into the NQF/(system). A simple system has simple procedures and a few elements, while a complex system has elaborate procedures and many interconnected elements.

Terminologies and meanings are important. Therefore, any Handbook needs a glossary of agreed terms that underpin the system-in-use. Here are a few key definitions to consider when developing a process of including qualifications in NQFs.

A Qualification System can usefully be defined as all activities related to the recognition of learning outcomes and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and to civil society.

A Qualification Framework is essentially an instrument for development and classification (at national or sectoral levels) according to a set of criteria (using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes.

Regulated professions are professional activity or groups of professional activities, access to which, pursuit of which, or one of the models of pursuit of which, is subject, directly or indirectly, by virtue of legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions, to possession of specific professional qualifications.

3. Linking an NQF with a Register of Qualifications

The inclusion of a qualification in a Register may, or may not, be equivalent to the inclusion of qualifications in an NQF.

The inclusion of a qualification in the Register can represent only one stage of the inclusion of the qualification in the NQF.

It is possible that not all types of qualifications are/can be included in the Register.

The inclusion of qualification in the Register may be slightly different from, or very different from, the inclusion of a qualification in the NQF.

The complexity of any national system should be considered before deciding the precise relationships between a Register of Qualifications and a National Framework. Additionally, the location of the qualification holder/graduate *vis-s-vis* the Register and the 'right to practice' needs to be carefully considered: are there other key gate-keepers/stakeholders between the graduate qualification holder and the regulation of the field of practice, both nationally and internationally? If so, what is the role of an NQF in this regard?

4. What do we need to introduce a qualification into a framework system?

In brief, there are three essential elements to start with:

- i. Qualifications
- ii. Procedures/rules
- iii. Institutions to govern the qualifications and to implement the rules.

In order to be entered into the system, a qualification must have at least:

- i. A standard description of all its elements
- ii. Quality assurance
- iii. Validation/examination.

While these six requirements seem obvious, they imply a coherent paradigm of design, implementation, resources, structures etc to function as an integrated and transparent system at a national level. Including a qualification in an NQF is a late-stage task within a unitary paradigm. Considerable re-design is necessary before the inclusion phase if an NQF is

pushed to its optimum potential. However, if an NQF is essentially an instrument to 'make sense' of an existing landscape of qualifications, then the paradigm shift is considerably less.

5. The degree of centralisation and decentralisation of a qualifications system

In some countries there is a central institution responsible for receiving applications, analysing them and deciding whether or not to introduce a qualification into the NQF (France, Estonia).

In other countries there are several institutions that can decide on the inclusion or not of the qualification in the NQF (Poland, Scotland).

The degree of centralisation and/or decentralisation of a qualifications system is an important consideration. In a centralised model, the responsible central institution must have sufficient legal powers, political support, human and financial resources etc to allow it to operate efficiently. A new, centralised system could involve considerable disturbance of the status quo. A thorough cost-benefit analysis should be undertaken at the start.

In a more de-centralised model, the institutions that decide on the introduction or not of the qualifications into a centralised system (a Register or an NQF) must trust each other, be interconnected, and be built on the same principles. The risks that might arise from major change from a decentralised system to a centralised system should be carefully considered in advance.

6. Different approaches on inclusion of qualifications

There are essentially 3 main approaches to inclusion:

- i. inclusion by entitlement
- ii. Inclusion by request
- iii. Inclusion by trust.

Methods of inclusion/steps based on these approaches are as follows:

a. Inclusion by entitlement

Inclusion by entitlement is almost automatic. It happens in the case of qualifications offered by state educational institutions (universities, TVET providers). For example, a high school proposes to introduce a qualification that requires the completion of a training programme. At the end a diploma is obtained.

There are systems in which recognised qualifications are obtained *only* through the national education system. Qualifications from outside the regulated formal education or training system are NOT included in the system.

b. Inclusion by request

- An organisation sends the qualification form/sheet/standard to the responsible institution (can be a national qualifications authority).
- The responsible institution analyses the formal aspects of the qualification and sends it to the relevant Ministry.
- The relevant Ministry consults stakeholders and specialists, and makes the decision to include the qualification or not.
- The relevant Ministry assigns the qualification level, and in some cases, proposes entry into the qualifications Register.
- The relevant Ministry starts the procedure of appointing the awarding bodies for the submitted qualification.

In some systems, entering the qualifications into the Register is equivalent to entering the qualifications into the national framework.

c. Inclusion by trust

- The existence of a quality assurance system in education and training with all the necessary elements including procedures, methodologies, instructions.
- Responsible institutions/awarding bodies that operate according to quality assurance principles and procedures.
- Specific legislation.
- An external body to verify the functioning of the quality assurance mechanism.

In this paradigm all qualifications issued by institutions that respect quality principles and procedures should be valid and recognised. These should be accepted into the national qualifications framework.

7. A hybrid, or mixed approach to inclusion

There is no country that takes only one approach regarding the introduction of a qualification into the system. Usually, the qualifications created by state institutions (high schools, universities) are normally automatically entered into the qualifications system. Usually, the qualifications created by private institutions, outside the education system, follow a fairly rigorous procedure in order to be introduced into the qualifications system. The approach depends on the type of qualification, as illustrate below where levels in Turkey are placed against EQF levels.

TQF qualification types by TQF/EQF level

TQF levels	Qualification types awarded in formal education and training system	NVQ	EQF levels
8	Doctoral Degree (PhD, proficiency in arts, specialty in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary)		8
7	Master's Degree (with thesis) Master's Degree (without thesis)		7
6	Bachelor's Degree	Level 6 vocational qualification certificate	6
5	Associate Degree (academic) Associate Degree (general)	Level 5 vocational qualification certificate	5
4	High school diploma High school diploma (VET, fine arts, and sports) Mastership certificate Level 4 course completion certificate	Level 4 vocational qualification certificate	4

3	Journeyman's certificate Level 3 course completion certificate	Level 3 vocational qualification certificate	3
2	Level 2 adult learning certificate Level 2 course completion certificate	Level 2 vocational qualification certificate	2
1	Literacy certificate		1

8. The introduction of regulated qualifications into an NQF

Again, policy and practice vary across countries. In some instances, only the Ministry or regulatory body initiates the inclusion procedure and only they decide at what interval a qualification is revised or excluded from an NQF.

Sometimes the procedures for introducing regulated qualifications may differ slightly from the rest of the procedures, in the sense that they may have more or fewer stages, but the principles and criteria remain the same because they give an NQF its unity and coherence.

9. Key advice for a Handbook for Inclusion of Qualifications in an NQF

From my desk research there are clear pieces of advice regardless of the national context.

Here are my main findings:

- i. Devise a simple and coherent system, composed of institutions with clear attributions and competences.
- ii. Involvement of stakeholders is crucial.
- iii. Qualification inclusion processes have become longer than expected for fear of lowering quality: find ways to circumvent these delays.
- iv. Coordination among Ministries is crucial and not always easy.
- v. Introducing solutions to include qualifications from outside of formal education requires substantial human, organisational and financial resources, but it is important.

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