ASSESSMENT POLICY ISSUES FOR THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN ETHIOPIA

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this review paper is to discuss assessment policy issues that can have salient contributions in the design and implementation of national qualifications framework (NQF). Nowadays, many countries in the globe are considering the introduction of NQF to properly link the provisions of education and training with the skill demands in the economic development. Hence, NQF is unthinkable without the promulgation of a sound assessment policy that guides the certification, monitoring, and evaluation of qualifications and standards at the various levels of education and training provision. This review relied on a method of content analysis that required an intensive reading and questioning through the literature of educational assessment and qualifications framework documents of few countries which have already introduced qualifications framework to the system of education and training. The result of the review showed the importance of giving emphasis and priority to assessment policy issues in the introduction of qualifications framework in the education and training systems. The extent to which assessment procedures to be followed in the awarding of part qualifications, qualifications, and professional designations are designed, understood by stakeholders, and implemented is underscored as a major success factor in the design and implementation of qualifications framework.

Keywords: Qualifications Framework; Assessment Policy; Qualification Levels; Recognition of Prior Learning; Credit Transfer and Accumulation; Level Descriptors

INTRODUCTION
Qualifications Framework is a system to develop, classify, and recognize acquired knowledge, skill, and competency from different levels and providers of education and training. A qualifications framework interconnects different sectors involved either in the provision of education and training (formal, non-formal, informal, workplace, apprenticeship) or in employing skilled human power from the labor market. Moreover, it provides a foundation for improving quality and relevance of education and training, accessibility of education and training, and labor market acceptance for qualifications. The significance of the NQF is its potential to contribute to policy goals such as lifelong learning, recognition of knowledge and skills, certification of competence, relevance and quality of education and training provisions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER
This review paper has the following objectives:

1. To describes qualifications framework in the context of education and training systems.
2. To identifies assessment policy issues which have significance to the design and implementation of qualifications framework.
3. To demonstrates the contribution of assessment policy to the effective implementation of national qualification frameworks.

**BASIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper intends to answer the following basic questions:

- What is qualifications framework?
- What assessment policy elements are appropriate to the design and implementation of the NQF in Ethiopia?
- How does assessment policy contribute to the effective implementation of NQF?

**Background Information**

Ethiopia is one of the East African countries with a total area of 1.11 million square kilometers and a population estimate of over 82 million (MOFED, 2011). In recent times, the country is experiencing a fast growing economy. Moreover, the country is making remarkable efforts to prepare a workforce that is responsive to the growing economy. Beginning the stipulation and implementation of the current education and training policy, there is a great dedication to improve education and training. For instance, the annual budget allocation for education provisions is increasing every year. As a result of this, educational institutions at all levels (primary to tertiary) and across all regions are expanding fast. This is the timely response to the problems with respect to accessibility and equitable distribution of education and training provision for all citizens. Despite the fact that some attempts to realize the relevance and quality of education and training programs are already in place, there is still a long way ahead to sense notable outcomes. Therefore, the design of the ENQF will have salient contributions to the realization of quality and relevance of education and training programs. The framework will benefit stakeholders such as government, providers, trainees, employers, trade unions and professional associations. This review article “assessment policy issues for the design and implementation of national qualifications framework in Ethiopia.” intends to discuss about the contributions of assessment policy elements which have relevance to the implementation of ENQF. Moreover, the article will come up with the main elements of a proposed assessment policy (scheme) which will contribute to the design and implementation of ENQF.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**Definitions of Qualifications Framework**

A qualifications framework is a legal system that aims at developing, classifying, and recognizing knowledge, skill, and competencies attained through the various modalities of education and training along a continuum of specified levels. The major assumption in the design and implementation of qualifications framework is the notion of “learning outcomes.” Learning outcomes refer to clear statements of what learners can know and able to do after learning, whether the learning has occurred in formal schools, non-formal settings, or in the workplace and so on. Based on its design and structure, QF may allow for comparison of different qualifications across levels and various study fields (Tuck, 2007).

There can be different conceptualizations of NQF based on the context. For instance the definition proposed by Hansson (2008) states “A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classifications of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved.” According to Tuck (2007), qualifications framework refers to a structure of defined and nationally accredited qualifications, which are awarded at specified levels and indicate the interrelationship of qualifications and levels with clear direction on how a learner can progress from one qualification level to another.
Objectives of NQF

As forwarded by Tuck (2007) the objectives of NQFs are to (1) create an integrated national framework of learning achievements, (2) facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths (3) enhance the quality of education and training, (4) contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large, and (5) provide the opportunity of special admissions to the different level of education and training programs.

Perspectives on National Qualifications Framework

The practice of developing a National Qualifications Framework is a recent experience for many countries in the world. A number of countries started to think about the issue of NQF to their education and training system after the 1980s (TUCK, 2007). The experiences show a different perspective on the design and development of the NQF. One perspective is that a single country commences NQF, where qualifications described are independent of the institutions, which provide the program leading to the qualifications (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, and Ireland). The other perspective is the Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) covering the descriptions of qualifications in a number of countries in a particular geographic region (e.g. QF EHEA (the Bologna Process/Duplin descriptors), and South African Development Community (SADC)).

The second perspective in looking at the distinctions of Qualifications Framework is that of tracking (tracked), linking (linked), and uniting (unified). The tracked qualifications framework is characterized by having a separate structure or legal scheme for the different types of education and training, such as school education, higher education, TVET, and workplace occupations. The assumption behind this type of structure is that the mentioned types of education and training are distinct and largely unrelated (Tuck, 2007). The other perspective is the linked one that shows existing relationships between qualifications of the different tracks. The linked NQF structure gives clear descriptions and articulations of qualification levels within and between the different fields. In this type of structure learners can have opportunities of mobility along the learning paths as a result of recognition of their prior learning, credit accumulation and transfer, and articulation among the various types and levels of qualifications. Unified qualifications framework is a structure where all types of qualifications are treated in one comprehensive scheme. Many countries that have experiences in the design and implementation of NQF are currently advancing towards the linked or unified system of qualifications framework (e.g. South Africa and Australia).

The third perspective is between tight and loose qualifications frameworks. According to Tuck (2007, p22) tight framework is characterized by regulatory and quality assurance functions. In contrast, loose qualification framework is characterized by communication and enabling functions.

Tuck (2007) further elaborates tight NQF’s as more appropriate when the goal is to have a more regulatory role of the government or an apex organ delegated by the government. On the other hand, loose approaches may be preferred when the goal is to communicate information about qualifications and when the intention is to secure more trust, partnership, and participation from the various stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this review paper is mainly content analysis. This required an intensive reading and questioning through the literature of educational assessment and qualifications framework documents of few countries which have already introduced qualifications framework to the system of education and training. These countries are Australia, South Africa, Scotland, Tanzania and the European Union.
Contributions of Assessment Policy Elements to the Design and Implementations of NQF

Assessment

Assessment policy is a handmaiden for the successful implementations of NQF’s. Assessment is a central task that could help to make certain whether a particular provision of education and training have resulted in the intended learning outcomes (Williams, 2008). Assessment is of central importance in education and training provisions (Taras, 2005). According to Pratt (1998), assessment is a procedure designed to be evidence for what a person can know and be able to do as a result of attending some education or training. According to Crooks (1988) and Sadler (1998), assessment is one of the most powerful aspects of education and training influencing learning. Assessment influences the motivation and self-efficacy of the learner. Moreover, assessment can be a means to check the quality and the relevance of an education/training program.

Assessment is a process for obtaining information in order to make decisions about the attainment of learning outcomes (Nitko, 2004). In the context of National Qualifications Framework, assessment “refers to the process of collecting sufficient evidence about the knowledge and performance of the learner and making a judgment whether the knowledge and performance correspond to the learning outcomes as described in the relevant NQF registered qualifications, and unit standards documentations, whereby a learner is declared competent or not yet competent against the said standard or qualifications.” (Feline Technology, 2008, p1)

The Contribution of Assessment to NQF

Assessment helps to clarify the decisions in awarding qualifications, part qualifications, and professional designations (Samuel, 2007). It also gives directions for a number of issues related to qualifications framework such as qualification level descriptors, the registration of qualifications, assessment criteria, national standards, learning outcomes, learning pathways, recognition of prior learning (RPL), credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), and the registration and licensing of assessors. Assessment also helps to set minimum criteria and provide guidance for effective, fair, valid, reliable, transparent, and appropriate assessment practice in the implementation of the NQF (Samuel, 2007).

On the other hand, assessment policy for qualifications framework serves purposes such as facilitation of access to quality education and training, recognition of knowledge and skill acquired, standard setting, and mutual understanding of stakeholders to the assessment requirements of the registered qualifications and learning outcomes.

The Elements in The design of Assessment Policy for ENQF

The assessment policy in NQF’s should be stipulated in such a way that it contributes to the quality of learning and assessment for all learners and education providers. It must consider the key elements to be included in its design. Moreover, its design and implementation should involve the potential stakeholders. The potential stakeholders may include the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor, Civil Service Ministry, Ministry of Industry, Quality Assurance Agency, Examinations Agency, education and training providers, professional associations, learners, employers, representatives from occupations and industry. In addition, it has to be designed in line with an encompassing principle. For example, in the case of the South African Republic the assessment policy that serves the implementations of the NQF was based on the principle of “lifelong learning” that considers the development of the whole learner, and an approach in which assessment is seen as a dynamic part of learning and learning improvement (Samuel, 2007, p2).
Principles of Assessment

As key elements of assessment, the design of assessment policy for QF’s should follow specific principles recognised in the theory and practice of educational assessment. Some of the core assessment principles to be followed are:

**Validity** – is a major criterion for the quality assessment process. In broad terms, validity refers to the appropriateness, usefulness, and meaningfulness of assessment procedures, methods, instruments, and materials used in the assessment process. If the assessment process assures validity as a principle, it means that it helps to collect the appropriate information required for the assessment’s intentions. Assessment is judged as valid when the assessment tasks actually test the knowledge and skills for a definite competence or learning outcome (Samuel, 2013, p12). Another key concept worth mentioning as related to assessment validity is assessment validation. Assessment validation is the process of obtaining credibility of the assessment process through documentation, moderation, explanation, and presentation of evidence to peer reviewers and stakeholders, which play either a regulatory or partnership role in the NQF.

**Reliability** – is a key principle and concept as relates to the degree of error in the assessment process. It refers to the consistency of the collected information about the achieved competencies and learning outcomes. The more error-free is the assessment procedure, the more the data obtained are reliable and consistent. In the context of NQFs, assessment methods and procedures must ensure that competence standards are applied consistently within and between the different qualification levels.

**Transparency and accountability** – those assessors conducting the assessment of a registered competence or learning outcome in NQF should make the assessment criteria explicit and known by learners. This also has to give clarity about what to do during disputes in assessment as well as the rights and responsibilities of those assessing and being assessed.

**Evidence** – the development and moderation of all assessments required for a qualification should always be evidence-based. All stakeholders involved in the assessment process should abide to the principle of assessment evidence.

**Content** – the assessment procedure needs to be comprehensive enough in terms of assessment content. The assessment content for each level of qualification or part qualification should be substantive. Moreover, the range of content should cover representative sample behavior of all cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Based on the level of qualification sought, the assessment needs to embrace all ranges of knowledge, skills, and competencies (Nitko, 2004). The design of assessment content should also follow the principle of simple to complex performances. For instance, assessment content can include simple reproduction of knowledge, skills, and values, comprehending and applying the knowledge, skill, and value in both familiar and unfamiliar settings. Furthermore, the assessment content can include the ability of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating relevant knowledge and information in the field. In fact, all these aspects of assessment content could be considered when applicable to the specific level and type of qualification (Samuel, 2013).

On the other hand, the assessment content should be outlined, focusing on both quantities of learning and quality behavioral changes of learners. Quantity of learning refers to the breadth and depth of knowledge, skill, and competence required to be assessed for the purpose of awarding a defined qualification level. Whereas quality behavioral change includes the type and level of manifested knowledge and skill as well as the latent (tacit) competencies of the learner that comes out when conditions are favorable. Assessment of knowledge and practice in the system of education and training and also in NQF design and implementation should take into account the facilitation and informative role of assessment for the learner on how to learn and improve learning.

Other desirable principles of assessment to be incorporated in the assessment policy of NQF are fairness, absence of bias, sensitivity to language, sensitivity to persons with special needs, match
Criteria of Implementing Assessment Policy for NQF

An effective assessment policy in the context of QFs implementation must be responsive to the set criteria. For example, the implementation of assessment should abide the principles of assessment outlined in the policy document. The assessment process should also pass through a careful and rigorous standards setting with reference to desirable and useful learning outcomes for part qualifications as well as for each level of the NQF. As a rule of thumb the interpretation of assessment information for NQF should always be criterion-referenced interpretation. There is also a need to develop a national standard for each level of qualifications. A national standard is a registered statement as desired education and training outcomes and their associated assessment criteria (Australian National Training Authority, 1998). Moreover, an assessment policy for NQF should include statements on how the articulation of qualifications within and between the different frameworks and levels will be understood and attended.

Furthermore, an assessment policy for NQF should provide sufficient explanations on the following issues:

- learning outcomes that can be demonstrated and/or latent (tacit) competencies,
- formative and dynamic assessment in education and training,
- the recognition of prior learning (RPL),
- credit accumulation and transfer (CAT),
- the moderation process of assessment, and
- The registration and licensing of potential assessors in the different tracks and qualification levels of the NQF.

Proposed Assessment Policy Scheme and Its Elements for ENQF

Assessment policy is a comprehensive document that can show directions on how to give awards and recognition of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies. It has to be stipulated in such a way that it gives clear directions about how to identify, gather, and interpret relevant information with respect to the expected knowledge, skills, and competencies for a given qualification, part qualification, or professional designation in order to pass a sound judgment about the attained learning outcomes of a learner.

As the design of the NQF is a new experience in the country’s education and training system, stipulating a number of policies to support its implementation is a requirement. One of the pillar policies is then assessment policy because it is only by means of assessment that one can authenticate what an educated or a trained person can know and be able to do as a result of attending an education or training program. Therefore, identifying the key elements to be included and stipulating a clear and workable assessment policy is compulsory for the present and future success of ENQF. Hence the following schematic diagram in figure 1 below and the interpretations which follow show the proposed assessment policy structure (Scheme) for the design and implementation of ENQF. As indicated in the figure (see next page) the structure centers assessment policy on the different tracks of ENQF. Before the acquisition of sufficient experience in the field, scholars suggest to follow separately tracked and well-articulated qualifications framework (Tuck, 2007). The figure below shows the proposed qualifications framework and the accompanying assessment issues for the Ethiopian National Qualifications Framework (ENQF).
The key elements required for the design of assessment policy for NQF are discussed below:

**Principles of Assessment**

First of all, the stipulated assessment policy should provide sufficient coverage to sound principles of assessment. The assessment policy has to clarify the procedures to be followed in verifying the fulfillment of the principles for a certain assessment process before awarding qualifications. Some of the key assessment principles as discussed above are validity, reliability, comprehensiveness of content, fairness in assessing, sensitivity to language and special need issues, practicality, and absence of bias.

**Level descriptors**

The design of qualifications framework arranges qualifications at defined levels. Some countries do have ten (10) qualification levels in their framework (e.g., Republic of South Africa & Tanzania), and some others do have only eight (8) qualification levels (e.g., UK and New Zealand). For each level of a qualification, there have to be clear descriptors about the expected quality behavior of the learner. Level descriptors are statements of wider abilities, which a learner could be expected to have developed. Level descriptors are designed in such a way that they are not program specific. They are designed as generic abilities to serve for all qualification types regardless of the field of study. They are major sources when preparing learning outcomes, developing assessment criteria, and assessing prior learning for the different levels of qualifications. Level descriptors are considered in cumulative
Learning Outcomes

The aspects of ENQF should revolve around learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are the central elements in the design and implementation of qualifications framework. As Samuel (2013, p5) defines, learning outcomes are the contextually demonstrated end products of specific learning process, which include knowledge, skills, and values. Outcomes are the demonstrable and assessable end products of a learning process, which give clear statements regarding elements of competence (SAQA, 2001). In the assessment policy of ENQF the determination of learning outcomes along with the assessment criteria for the various qualification levels need to be given significant consideration. The learning outcomes and information about the behavioral expectations that will be anticipated from the learner need to be communicated to the learner as well as for providers of education and training. This means, the expected knowledge, skills, and competencies of the learner for a qualification level and the way they are assessed need to be clearly indicated. Moreover, there has to be hierarchical placement of the learning outcomes (simple to complex) in terms of quantitative and qualitative behavioral developments of the learner from one level of qualification to the other. A team of subject specialists and assessors with good preparation in the subject matter and good understanding about the concepts of human learning and assessment can design the learning outcomes for the various qualification levels and types. Thus, the assessment policy for ENQF must provide clear statements about the determination of learning outcomes together with the corresponding assessment criteria. As put in SAQA (2001, p2) document, assessment criteria are statements that describe the standards to which learners must perform the actions, roles, knowledge, understanding, skills, and values stated in the learning outcomes. Assessment criteria are clear and transparent expression of requirements against which successful and unsuccessful performances can be clearly differentiated. Thus, the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria in the ENQF should complement with each other.

Direct Assessment And / Or Moderation

In the context of ENQF direct assessment refers to assessment procedures for awarding a full qualification, and the assessment is run by a direct responsibility of a central regulating agency for each of the tracks in the ENQF. Recent and good experiences in the country with respect to direct assessment procedures are the certification of competence (COC) exams administered by the national TVET agency and the Law School Exit Exam administered by the National Agency for Examinations.

On the other hand, the moderation of assessment procedures can be conceptualized in two ways. The first is internal moderation to determine the relevance and quality of assessment procedures within education and training providing institutions for the purpose of giving recognition to part qualifications (modules), which eventually lead to full qualifications as well as for the purpose of credit accumulation. The second concept is that of external moderation. In this case, the ENQF regulatory agency or the examination agency directly involved (conduct the moderation) or delegates qualified experts or organizations to ensure whether assessment procedures conducted for the awarding of qualifications and part qualifications are to the national standard set by ENQF. In fact, the issue of moderation requires securing the trust, participation, and a sense of partnership among the stakeholders, who in one way or another take part in the education and training provision and assessment of ENQF qualifications.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of prior learning “means the principle and the process through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated, and assessed for the purpose of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development.” (Samuel, 2013, p7). Recognition of prior learning attained by any means benefits and also motivates learners to stay in the learning process (encourages lifelong learning). For example, if a person who have completed grade 10 or the higher qualifications of track 1 employed for years in a certain trade/ vocational field
and claimed that he/she acquired the standard knowledge, skills and competencies of track 2 as a result of work experience and workplace learning may be recognized and assessed for one of the qualification levels in track 2. Moreover, such possibility of recognizing prior learning will facilitate mature age admissions to education and training programs and also mobility of learners within and between qualification levels and also types.

**Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)**

The credit accumulation and transfer benefits the learner. If it is clearly addressed in the policy, it allows the learner to move in and/or out of education and training programs when he/she faced problems that force to quit learning. With a reasonable limit to the minimum recognized credit in the education and training program, a learner can complete the learning of certain modules for part qualification and may join the program at a convenient time and attend the remaining modules for the award of full qualification. Thus, the RPL and the CAT could be mutually considered and well specified in the policy statement of ENQF.

**The Registration and Licensing Of Assessors**

The description given about assessor in NQF by Samuel (2013) states as:

… a person able to conduct high-quality internal and external assessment for a specific qualification, part qualification, and professional designation. Assessors may also be called lecturers, teachers, educators, trainers, examiners, moderators, chief markers, markers, RPL assessors, CAT assessors (p 3).

The assessment policy in ENQF must have clear provisions about who will be the assessors for a given qualification, with what expertise, knowledge, skills, and other personal qualities. There should also be a clear description on the registration, licensing, and the renewal of license for assessors. The assessor for a certain qualification must have a qualification level higher than the one being assessed. The assessor, other than being an expert in the field of education and training, must attend and complete training on prescribed modules about knowledge and skill of human learning, assessment, and evaluation. Moreover, there will be renewal and upgrading of assessor’s license based on acquiring knowledge and training about human learning and assessment and also on a prescribed duration of time. An assessment policy document by FELINE TECHNOLOGY (2012, p3) identified the following list of expertise for an assessor in the NQF. These are:

1. evidenced proficiency in the subject matter of the discipline,
2. has the qualification of at least one level above the one being assessed,
3. understands the nature of different forms of assessment,
4. understands the language of the field,
5. be sensitive on language issues,
6. asks learners for feedback on assessment,
7. Knows the curriculum and trainers through regular contact,
8. demonstrates a broad understanding of outcomes-based forms of assessment and the NQF,
9. Ensures that learners are clear about what is expected of them in the assessment process.

**Re-Assessment Administration**

The procedure for re-assessment is one of the key elements to be addressed in the assessment policy of ENQF. The assessment policy must have clear statements that indicate the ways by which re-assessments are administered. The policy must address the following questions about re-assessment:

- The need for assessment, feedback, guidance and counseling Dynamic & formative assessment.
How many times can a learner be allowed re-assessments for a qualification? (What are the limits?)

How often re-assessment can be taken?

What will be the length of time between the original assessment and the re-assessments?

What kind of methods and assessment tasks to be used during the re-assessment?

How is feedback given after failure in the original assessment?

How do the successful aspects of a failed assessment taken into account (credited / recognized)?

What care will be taken to minimize the wash back effect of assessment on the provision of education and training (testing skills). If assessment fully drives the provision of education and training it will be dangerous for it exerts negative influence on the permanence of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed about the key issues of assessment, which have to be considered and used in the stipulation of the assessment policy required for an ENQF. In fact, the lists of assessment issues discussed in this paper are not exhaustive. Coverage is given only to the key ones that have to be necessarily addressed in the assessment policy of ENQF. The reviewer of this article perceives the importance to give a special emphasis and priority to assessment policy matters and elements in the ENQF because the success of introducing qualifications framework in the education and training system of the country will largely depend on the extent to which assessment procedures to be followed in the awarding of part qualifications, qualifications, and professional designations are designed, understood by stakeholders, and implemented. Without the stipulation of an effective and workable assessment policy, the design and implementation of National Qualifications Framework is unthinkable. Therefore, the stipulation of assessment policy for ENQF should be one of the prioritized tasks in the process of developing the framework.

REFERENCES


