



ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework

Referencing Guidelines

October 2015 (2nd draft)

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Acronyms

AANZFTA	ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area
AMS	ASEAN Member State(s)
AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EAS	East Asia Summit
ECWP	Economic Cooperation Work Programme
MRA	Mutual Recognition Agreement
NAC	National AQRF Committee
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training

1. Foreword

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) is a regional common reference framework. The AQRF functions as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across ASEAN Member States. The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework addresses education and training sectors and the wider objective of promoting lifelong learning.

The ASEAN Charter, which was signed by the ten ASEAN Leaders in Singapore on 20 November 2007, provides the basis for an ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF). The Charter aims to: “create a single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive and economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and investment; facilitated movement of business persons, professionals, talents and labour; and free flow of capital” and “develop human resources through closer cooperation in education and life-long learning and in science and technology, for the empowerment of the peoples of ASEAN and for the strengthening of the ASEAN Community”.¹

In 2007, the ASEAN Member States (AMS)² adopted the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint (ASEAN 2007). It called for cooperation, including the recognition of professional qualifications. In addition to Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) in Engineering and Nursing signed in 2005 and 2006 respectively, five MRAs were concluded between 2007 and 2009 in the fields of architecture, surveying, medical and dental practitioners and accountancy. Another important component of the AEC Blueprint was the creation of the free flow of skilled labour through ‘harmonisation and standardisation’ (ASEAN 2007:18), particularly in preparation for the AEC in 2015.

ASEAN is also linked to the Asia – Pacific region through cross membership of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN). Several AMS who participated in the APEC Mapping of Qualifications Frameworks indicated in-principle support for the concept of a regional qualifications framework (Burke, et al, 2009).

The ASEAN region, typical of other global regions, is characterised by varying development and levels of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Some AMS have established comprehensive NQFs, others have sectoral frameworks in place, and others have yet to develop or implement qualifications frameworks.

Within this context the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework aims to accommodate different types of NQFs that are at different stages of development, ranging from those that are initial conceptual proposals to those that are fully developed, functioning NQFs.

The AQRF has been specified following a collaborative process between ASEAN Member States and supported by Australia and New Zealand through the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) Economic Cooperation Work Programme (ECWP).

The initial draft of the concept proposal for the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework was developed through the Project on Education and Training Governance: Capacity Building for National Qualifications Frameworks which was part of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) Economic Cooperation Work Programme (ECWP), specifically under ECWP’s services

¹ Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2007), Chapter 1, Article 1, paras 5 and 10.

² The ASEAN Member States are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

component. This draft concept proposal was considered during the 1st AANZFTA Joint Committee Meeting in May 2010 in Manila and approved inter-sessionally in July 2010.

The draft concept proposal of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework went through various iterations with the support of a multi-sectoral Task Force on ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework (TF-AQRF) (established in 2012) comprising officials from ASEAN ministries of trade in services, labour/manpower development, education, other relevant ministries and qualification agencies was tasked to develop the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF). Representatives of Australia and New Zealand were non-voting Members of the TF-AQRF.

At its 4th Meeting in March 2014, the TF-AQRF finalised the text for ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework. The AQRF was endorsed by relevant ASEAN Ministers (Education, Labour and Economics) in mid 2015.

2. Introduction to the Guidelines and Referencing

2.1 Purpose of this Guideline

The purpose of this Guideline is to support AMSAs they undertake the process of referencing their national qualifications system to the AQRF. The Guideline also supports the process of presenting the results of the referencing process to the ASEAN community. It also aims to support future discussions on processes and methodologies for referencing national qualification levels of the AQRF to the levels of the AQRF.

The Guideline does not aim to prescribe one single process or methodology for the referencing process beyond use of the eleven referencing criteria. The Guidelines acknowledge that the AMS will develop their own fit-for-purpose procedures to meet these criteria.

The success of the AQRF as a tool to enable comparisons of qualifications levels across AMS, to support recognition³ of qualifications and to encourage worker and learner mobility depends on Member States undertaking the referencing process and for this process to be effective, transparent and coherent. The aim of the referencing process is to develop trust within the ASEAN community of each ASEAN country's qualifications. Therefore referencing processes that are hard to understand, or that disguise problem areas, or do not engage all key stakeholders within country, do not build trust across the ASEAN community.

2.2 What is referencing?

The referencing process is an autonomous national process where the relevant national stakeholders and authorities agree on a link between national qualifications levels and the levels in the AQRF. This link between the national qualifications levels and the AQRF levels is outcome of the referencing process and enables further linkage, through the AQRF, to the qualifications levels in other AMS.

Specifically, the referencing process is expected to include consulting stakeholders on the proposed linkages in each Member State, reporting national referencing outcomes to the proposed AQRF Advisory Committee, engaging in peer review with the Committee and finally reporting a single official linkage of a Member State's NQF with the AQRF. This is a potentially complex process and involves technical work with a significant socio-political dimension.

To ensure that the process is carried out effectively, transparently and in a way that is consistent and coherent across the ASEAN community, the AQRF includes eleven criteria that have been agreed to promote a common process. This Guideline expands on each of these criteria to assist countries in conducting their referencing process.

The referencing process should include all education and training sectors (schools, higher education, vocational education and training and other adult learning) according to the AQRF principles. However some NQFs are based on a limited range of learning sectors and the implementation of the AQRF should proceed, in the first instance, on the basis of a partial NQF being referenced to the AQRF

³ The AQRF does not offer automatic recognition of qualifications in other countries. However it offers a useful first step in recognition by indicating the equivalent level of a qualification in another country. Thus it helps the bodies that can offer recognition some useful information about qualifications levels in different AMS.

In summary, the process of referencing involves setting up appropriate committees at national level, making a defensible proposal that links the levels of the NQF to the levels of the AQRF, consulting national stakeholder groups, writing a referencing report and presenting it to the AQRF Committee.

The primary audience for this Guideline is national qualifications experts and national policy advisers in the field of education, training and qualifications within AMS.

3. Introduction to the AQRF

3.1. Overview of the AQRF

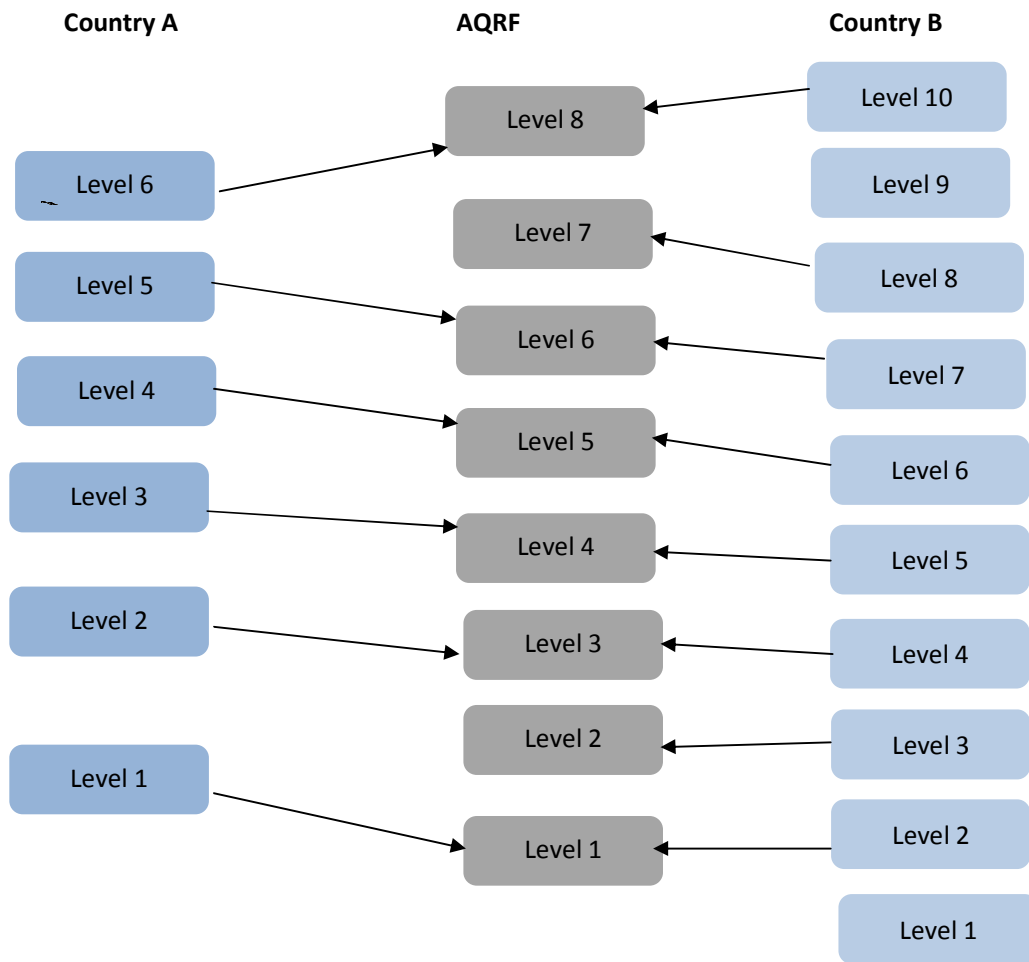
The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) is a common reference framework, functioning as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across AMS. The AQRF addresses education and training sectors and the wider objective of promoting lifelong learning. In the AQRF, education sectors is defined in a broad sense as incorporating informal, non-formal and formal learning. Formal learning includes but is not limited to post compulsory schooling, adult and community education, TVET and higher education.

The AQRF aims to support and enhance each country's national qualifications framework or qualifications system while providing a mechanism to facilitate comparison, transparency and higher quality qualification systems. The AQRF aims to support lifelong learning and the mobility of workers and learners.

The AQRF aims to be a neutral influence on national qualifications frameworks of Member States. The aim is to make national qualifications systems explicit according to the AQRF and does not require changes to national qualifications systems. The AQRF respects the Member States' specific structures and processes which as these are responsive to national priorities.

The AQRF is a translation device that aims to broaden the understanding of national qualifications systems of AMS for people from other ASEAN countries and from outside the ASEAN region. It will work by using the AQRF levels as a common spine of levels to which all ASEAN NQFs relate. As stated earlier, if a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level for a country links to AQRF level 4 then it will be possible to identify all the other NQF levels that link to AQRF level 4 and make comparisons between national qualifications. In the future it may be possible, if there is a commitment by the responsible bodies, to use the AQRF to link to NQFs outside the ASEAN region and to other common reference frameworks in the world.

The diagram below outlines a simple referencing of two country's NQF levels.



3.2 NQFs and metaframeworks

The key characteristics and purpose of regional frameworks should not be confused with those of any NQF. Overarching or ‘meta frameworks’ have very different functions to that of NQFs and aim to add value to the NQFs. During the referencing process this distinction in functions needs to be clear.

Differences between the types of framework	National qualifications levels	ASEAN framework (AQRf) levels
Main function:	to act as a benchmark for the level of learning recognised in the national qualifications system or the NQF, and possibly an indication of volume and type of learning	to act as a benchmark for the level of any learning recognised in a qualification or defined in an NQF linked to the AQRf
Developed by:	regional bodies, national agencies and education and training bodies	ASEAN Member States acting jointly
Sensitive to:	local, regional and national priorities (e.g. levels of literacy, labour market needs)	collective priorities for transparency of qualifications systems across countries (e.g. globalisation of trade)
Currency/value depends on:	factors within national context	the level of trust between international users
Quality is guaranteed by:	the practices of national bodies and learning institutions	the common application of the eleven referencing criteria and procedures and the robustness of the referencing process linking national and AQRf levels
Levels are defined by reference to:	national benchmarks which are embedded in different specific learning contexts, e.g. school education, work or higher education	general progression in learning across all contexts across all countries

As the AQRf is not a NQF, the Member State’s qualifications are not directly referenced to the AQRf but through their own NQF. However, the AQRf will link the Member States’ NQFs or qualification systems to one another.

3.3 Level descriptors composed of learning outcomes

The AQRf is a hierarchy of levels of complexity of learning which use learning outcomes as the metric for the hierarchy. The level descriptors of the AQRf aim to provide a reference point for the levels in national qualification frameworks and national qualification systems.

The level descriptors include the notion of competence which is the ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. It includes:

- Cognitive competence involving the use of theory and concepts, as well as informal tacit knowledge gained experientially
- Functional competence (skills or know-how), those things that a person should be able to do when they work in a given area
- Personal competence involving knowing how to conduct oneself in a specific situation
- Ethical competence involving the possession of certain personal and professional values.⁴

⁴ Coles & Werquin (2006), p. 23.

The level descriptors do not make explicit reference to personal competence or ethical competence. However, personal competence and ethical competence are valued by AMS as they contribute to the capacity of people to know things, act skilfully, work effectively in different settings, and to show responsibility and accountability. Personal competence and ethical competence includes attributes such as attentiveness, intercultural awareness, active tolerance and acceptance of diversity. The AQRF notes that these attributes could be included in individual NQFs.

The AQRF level descriptors include two domains:

Knowledge and skills	The Knowledge and Skills domain includes the various kinds of knowledge such as facts and theories as well as the skills used, such as practical and cognitive skills.
Application and Responsibility	The Application and Responsibility domain defines the context in which the knowledge and skills are used in practice; as well as the level of independence including the capacity to make decisions and the responsibility for oneself and others.

The level descriptors assume that the learning outcomes are cumulative by level, in other words one level assumes that the knowledge, skills and conditions at one level include those at the lower levels. In addition, the domains must be read together to give a true indication of level.

3.4 Quality assurance principles

As one of the key aims of the AQRF is to build trust in qualifications issued across the region, the framework is underpinned by a set of agreed quality assurance principles and broad standards related to:

- The functions of the responsible approving agencies
- Systems for the assessment of learning and the issuing of qualifications
- Regulation of the issuance of certificates.

The AQRF requires countries to refer to one or more established quality assurance frameworks as the basis for the agreed quality assurance principles and broad standards. These frameworks are to be used as the benchmark for evaluating the quality assurance systems for the relevant education and training sectors. The referencing process also requires that Member States describe their education and training quality assurance systems.

4. Linking National qualifications levels to the AQRF

4.1 Overview of referencing

The national referencing process is an autonomous national process where the relevant national stakeholders and authorities agree on the appropriate link between national qualifications levels and the AQRF levels. The AQRF does not prescribe how the referencing process is to be undertaken but does identify eleven referencing criteria that must be used. The methods used in creating a link between an NQF and the AQRF will vary from country to country. In order to respect national traditions there can be no single right way to reference to the AQRF. However whatever the method chosen it must be explained in a way that creates maximum trust in the link for people outside the country.

4.2 Managing the referencing process

The referencing process aims to link the levels on the national qualifications system to those in the AQRF in a consistent, trusted and transparent way. The transparency of the process in each country is critically important for the way people in other countries to understand and trust the outcomes of the referencing process. The management the referencing process, including the reporting of the process to other countries, needs to be designed to support these aims.

4.2.1 Stages in the referencing process

Each Member State can design the referencing process in a way that suits its normal procedures and institutional structure however whatever design is chosen, the process will involve eight stages:

1. Setting up of the relevant body or bodies at a national level that will manage the referencing process.
2. Making a proposal for the level-to-level linkages between the NQF (or partial NQF) and the AQRF.
3. Carrying out a national consultation with relevant stakeholders on the basis of the provisional proposal.
4. Writing a referencing report based on the agreed eleven AQRF referencing criteria that takes into account the national consultation and the views of international expert(s).
5. Ensuring that the relevant responsible body or bodies within the referencing AMS endorse the referencing report.
6. Presenting the referencing report to the AQRF Advisory Committee and a discussion follows including peer review from other AMS.
7. Providing clarifications and further evidence to questions and comments made by the AQRF Advisory Committee.
8. Updating the referencing report if, over time, changes in the NQF and relationship between the NQF and the AQRF occur.

4.2.2 Pre-conditions for referencing

Prior to conducting a formal referencing processes involving stakeholders, it is necessary to ensure that the conditions are favourable for a successful outcome, for example the AQRF is in the public domain, its key concepts are generally understood, development on work on underpinning concepts (such as learning outcomes) is underway.

Some important preconditions that Member States need to consider are the following:

- The AQRF is seen in the country as an enhancement to regional cooperation: there is a process underway to disseminate and examine perceptions and value (or otherwise) of the AQRF.

- Capacity building is underway with regard to understanding and using the AQRF, including creation of an official portal and a level of consultation with various agencies and bodies.
- Governance and management structures are in place or being formulated: this includes determining responsibility for referencing, the setting up competent committees.
- Quality assurance in the qualifications system is effective: reviewing current quality assurance systems to include the use of learning outcomes and NQFs.
- Ensuring links with other contexts for quality assurance are clear: considering how national quality assurance systems, for example for standards for programme design, interface with the AQRF structure and principles.
- There is a raised awareness of linked projects e.g. MRAs and other alignments: understanding the interdependence of the AQRF with relevant projects, which need to be scoped and understood.

The creation of the right conditions for a referencing process can take time and there will always be more that could be done. In some senses the kinds of activities listed above could be seen as an ongoing process that will ensure the AQRF makes a positive impact on the portability and quality of qualifications. For some countries the preconditions listed above may be considered a barrier to carrying out a referencing process in the short term.

4.2.3 Governance

To determine the responsibilities of the various stakeholders in the AQRF referencing process and in the production of the report, it needs to be clear who is in charge of the process and who makes the final decisions. The various roles and responsibilities should also be described in the referencing reports. Usually one body (often the relevant ministry) will have the final authority in the decision making process however some countries have a highly decentralised structure and the final decisions are based on the principle of decision making by consensus.

At the regional level, the referencing process is overseen by the AQRF Committee. This Committee will undertake peer review of the reports submitted by AMS and offer advice on how they might be made more transparent and trusted⁵. The AQRF Committee is a high level executive committee that can engage with the complex policy and technical issues arising from implementation and evolution of a regional qualifications framework. The Committee is able to draw on its membership for up-to-date information from each AMS and be regarded as an authority in its decision making. The Committee is responsible for building the zone of trust by providing transparency to the public.

4.2.4 Stakeholders and responsible bodies

The referencing process should include all education and training sectors (e.g. schools, higher education, vocational education and training and other adult learning) according to the AQRF principles. The engagement of a full range of sectors and corresponding educational sector groups has proven to be a key factor in making regional frameworks such as the AQRF a success.

For some countries the implementation of the AQRF will proceed, in the first instance, on the basis of a partial or sectoral NQF being referenced to the AQRF. For example, the higher education qualifications framework may be referenced or the qualifications framework for the VET sector. If the NQF does not include qualifications from across a range of educational sectors, it is useful to communicate formally with stakeholders from the sectors that do not have qualifications in the NQF. This is especially the case when the long-term goal for the NQF is for it to become comprehensive of all qualifications to correspond with the breadth of scope of the AQRF. It is important to reflect on the following questions:

⁵ Details of this process of review of national reports is yet to be finalised.

- Who should be involved and contribute to the results to ensure the success of the referencing?
- How should stakeholders be involved (for example, in working groups, advisory boards or in a consultation process)?
- What is the position and role of stakeholders (for example, social partners) in the referencing process?

The range of bodies that could be considered to be legitimate stakeholder groups could include the following:

- A government ministry (or designated agency) in the capacity of leading/managing.
- Education experts (in various education and training sectors and levels – general education, vocational education and training, higher education, further education and training, etc.) including:
 - Curriculum and Assessment
 - Learning providers/institutions
 - Teachers and trainers
 - Learners
- Social partners including:
 - Employers
 - Trade unions
 - Professional bodies
 - Licensing bodies
- Organisations awarding qualifications (if different from the above types)
- Organisations responsible for qualifications recognition
- A wider range of government bodies responsible for qualifications in their area (for example, ministries of youth, agriculture and social security)
- Non governmental organisations including volunteering organisations and charities (in some systems these may be in charge of specific qualifications)
- Education and training funding agencies
- Qualifications agencies
- Quality assurance agencies (or bodies with this role)
- Research community (especially international experts and technical consultants).

It is important that there is open consultation that has enabled other people with an interest in this field to participate. For example through seminars and conferences that were designed to engage stakeholders in the referencing process and allow an interaction between the various stakeholder groups.

4.2.5 National AQRF Committee

The National AQRF Committee is the body that is the interface between the national policymaking bodies and national qualifications agencies and the AQRF Committee. The Committee considers information and issues from the AQRF Committee and is the single source of national information and AQRF implementation progress coming to the AQRF Committee. The Committee is representative of the main stakeholders in qualifications in the country (within the constraints of keeping membership to a manageable level). The discussions in the Committee can be considered to be well informed, expert and cognisant of policy positions in the country. The Committee will be responsible for the Referencing report but it may not be responsible for writing the report or conducting the referencing process

The national AQRF committee is responsible for all aspects of the national link with the AQRF, this includes the process of referencing which is clearly the major task of this committee. This committee will have responsibility for guiding the referencing process and will take responsibility

for the referencing outcome (the level to level linkage and the referencing report). The membership is best made up of the leaders of the main bodies involved or their nominated representatives. In some countries the National AQRF Committee will request that another body carries out the process of referencing, however the Committee cannot devolve the responsibility for the referencing report and the referencing outcome. These must be endorsed by the National AQRF Committee.

The terms of reference for this Committee will vary according to each Member State's preferences. In general terms the Committee will respond to terms of reference such as the following.

1. To discuss the most effective ways to establish the AQRF in the country and promote its use for national and international recognition and comparability of qualification standards and the alignment of qualifications standards and frameworks.
2. To consider the design of a referencing process that will inspire trust in the qualifications and qualifications framework in the country.
3. To discuss and agree a provisional level to level linkage between the NQF levels and the level of the AQRF.
4. To consider the results of a national consultation on the provisional linkage and amend the proposal if necessary.
5. To endorse a draft referencing report so that it may be submitted to the AQRF Advisory Committee.
6. To consider the discussions of the report at the AQRF Advisory Committee and to agree any amendments.

The chairmanship of this committee is an important role. The chairperson may become a public face of the referencing process. In some countries this will be best seen as a government figure, possibly from the ministry of education. In other countries the preference will be for a person independent of government to chair the panel. Possibly the leader of a non-government organisation or an industry leader.

The membership of this committee is the remit of the AMS. The composition of the committee should include representatives of the stakeholders listed in Section 4.2.4. These members should be selected on the basis of their expertise and the role to be undertaken.

The AQRF processes indicate that there should be one international expert⁶ and one to three observers from other Member States on the Committee responsible for referencing. The independent expert will be in a position to inform the discussions of the committee from a non-national position. The role of these experts is discussed later.

A checklist for the referencing process is included in Appendix 1.

⁶ An expert in international qualifications system and/or frameworks and/or referencing.

4.3 The Referencing Criteria

The eleven referencing criteria have been agreed by all AMS and are the means of bringing consistency to the referencing process. Each Member State is requested to address each criterion from a national perspective and report the national position to other Member States in a referencing report. Once all of the referencing criteria have been met to the satisfaction of the AQRF Advisory Committee, the qualifications levels in the country can be said to be formally linked to those of the AQRF – the referencing process for that country is considered complete.

The agreed criteria are included below.

1. The structure of the education and training system is described.
2. The responsibilities and legal basis of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the main public authority responsible for the referencing process
3. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualifications system are transparent
4. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the AQRF.
5. The basis in agreed standards of the national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications is described.
6. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system are described. All of the bodies responsible for quality assurance state their unequivocal support for the referencing outcome.
7. The process of referencing has been devised by the main public authority and has been endorsed by the main stakeholders in the qualifications system
8. People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in the referencing process and its reporting.
9. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies and shall address separately and in order each of the referencing criteria.
10. The outcome of referencing is published by the ASEAN Secretariat and by the main national public body
11. Following the referencing process all certification and awarding bodies are encouraged to indicate a clear reference to the appropriate AQRF level on new qualification certificates, diplomas issued.

How to demonstrate that an AMS can meet the requirements of each criterion is discussed in Section 5.

4.4 Using learning outcomes

The concept of learning outcomes is about what someone knows and can do. In other words it is a statement about what someone has learned. Learning outcomes are increasingly used in describing curricula, qualifications specifications, assessment processes and in NQF levels. Learning outcomes are also of value in the work setting, for example use of learning outcomes in occupational

standards, job profiles, and recruitment and appraisal schemes. Learning outcomes are valued in guidance settings for example in writing course details, job search details and job adverts. Last and not least learning outcomes are valued in the personal context, for example in writing CVs and describing job experience. The AQRF is a hierarchy of levels of complexity of learning which use learning outcomes as the metric for the hierarchy. Thus the descriptors in the AQRF aim to use learning outcomes to facilitate comparisons of and links between qualifications and qualifications systems across Member States.

It is often the case that the learning outcomes approach is implemented in the different educational sectors in different countries to various degrees at the level of individual qualifications, standards, assessment criteria, curricula, etc. This means that the process of describing the referencing may well differ from sector to sector and even from country to country. Some countries will find it necessary to reference to the AQRF on the basis of both inputs and outcomes. This is not surprising since in most practical situations both outcomes and input measures are considered. For example:

Programme specifications can be supplemented with outcome information. For example:

- Competency based systems can be supplemented with input information (e.g. duration of apprenticeship programmes)
- Assessment/evaluation methods can use inputs (completion of programmes) and outcomes (objective/external assessment/evaluation)
- Recruitment processes use both input (the time someone has worked with reputable employers) and outcome information (qualifications, proof of competence).

The task of referencing qualifications levels that are not expressed in terms of learning outcomes will require a different approach. In general the agreement of stakeholders about linkages between types of national qualifications and their levels and the AQRF descriptors will be critically important and therefore more effort will need to be made to produce evidence that supports a referencing position. When no learning outcomes are available for matching with an NQF level or an AQRF level the technical process of referencing is inevitably weakened. There can be no textual analysis for example. The emphasis shifts to standards that are not written in terms of learning outcomes, for example, common progression routes from qualification to qualification and entry requirements for study at specific levels. The views of stakeholder becomes more important and this social aspect of referencing (see Section 5) will need to be taken very seriously in the referencing process and the consultations on outcomes of referencing.

Regional frameworks such as the AQRF also have a strong influence on the use of learning outcomes in education and training. The process of referencing an NQF to the AQRF, the quality assurance of the process of referencing and influence on learning programmes are examples of the ways regional frameworks such as the AQRF can influence NQFs and the curricula, assessment and qualifications that underpin them. By defining the levels in learning outcomes (level descriptors) in the AQRF countries are required in the process of referencing to explain the levels in their NQFs or qualifications systems in terms of learning outcomes. In turn the qualifications that are included in each level will also need to be explained in terms of learning outcomes. Thus the process of referencing to the AQRF is a stimulus to countries to further develop the scope of learning outcomes in the whole qualification system.

By encouraging the greater use of learning outcomes through the referencing process the AQRF can act as a top-level reference point for policies that aim to further develop the use of learning outcomes. The more immediate driver for expanding the use of learning outcomes comes from arrangements in countries, for example through NQFs, through national quality assurance processes, through teacher training, through projects and through developing platforms and tools that require the use of learning outcomes.

4.5 The concept of best fit

The procedure for referencing levels in a national qualifications system to those in the AQRf is likely to be imperfect and require the use of best-fit – finding the linkage which seems the next best option to a perfect fit. This is likely to be the case even if the national levels are described in terms of learning outcomes. In countries where there is an NQF, the descriptors are usually more detailed than those of the AQRf and they are normally closely linked to the specific national context, therefore it is unlikely that there will ever be a perfect correlation to the AQRf descriptors that are necessarily broader and more general. The concept of best-fit is not a new one – it is a long-standing mathematical and engineering idea for finding harmony between two sets of data or two or more devices. Its distinguishing feature is the acceptance that perfect-fit is probably not possible and some judgement or approximation is necessary to make a link and solve a problem. In the case of matching NQF and AQRf level descriptors the concept of best-fit requires a common judgement from a range of stakeholders so that there can be confidence in the outcome of the approximation. It is therefore useful to consider best-fit as a decision that is based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders.

It is important to note that when using best-fit to link a level in one framework to one in another framework that the qualifications in these levels are not necessarily rendered equal or equivalent or carry the same value. Qualifications at the same level can vary in the balance of knowledge, skills and wider competencies, the volume of learning that they require, the routes to the learning and in the opportunities for permeability and progression that are offered.

4.5.1 Differences in categories of level descriptors and numbers of levels in the NQFs

The need to apply the best-fit principle may be most obvious when there are differences in relation to the categories and dimensions used for structuring descriptors and in particular in the number of levels in the national framework and the AQRf. In case of a different number of levels, it is impossible to achieve a single level to single level match.

4.5.2 Description of best-fit in referencing reports

For the sake of confidence in the decisions made about level-to-level linkages it is important to explain in full how best fit has been used and why the best fit is indeed the best fit of level-to-level. The text needs to make these decisions explicit – this includes description of where the best-fit decision differs from what some stakeholders would believe to be perfect-fit. Some questions may be useful to guide the description of best-fit in referencing reports:

- Is the expression of level descriptors in the NQF suitable for the use of best-fit (for example, regarding the coverage of knowledge, skills and competence or the level of detail)?
- Following on from this, what are the main differences in the scope of the NQF level descriptors when compared to those in the AQRf? For example, are there additional elements such as the description of personal values, key competences or aspects of self-management?
- Where does a broad consideration of text in the two sets of descriptors suggest a linkage between the NQF and the AQRf?
- Is there a potential difference between the referencing suggested by a technical approach (e.g. text analysis) and the expected referencing based on the opinion of stakeholder groups such as the social partners – a social approach?
- What evidence sources were available to support the decision making about level-to-level referencing?
- Have stakeholder groups endorsed the best-fit outcomes? Is the evidence of consultation with stakeholders available?
- Finally, is it possible to trust that the final referencing decisions are based on collective professional judgements of stakeholders?

4.6 Using international experts

The development and implementation of the AQRF has already led to opportunities for international exchange through meetings and discussion of the emerging framework. Experts from other countries can contribute to this international exchange by being invited to take part in the referencing process by, for example, offering advice on the transparency of the process, external benchmarks for levels and communicating the outcomes of referencing to an international audience.

The decision about how to best use international experts is for the host country to decide. It is useful for countries undertaking the referencing process to indicate their reasons and motivation for inviting experts from other countries.

A European project concluded that countries could choose experts by considering the following points.

- Should the expert come from a country that shares similar structures to the home country ('like-minded countries') in this case the expert will not need much time to appreciate the qualifications system. On the other hand a country might choose an expert from a country with a very different structure in which case the expert will be able to give feedback on whether the referencing report's information is understandable for someone not acquainted with the system.
- Should the expert come from a country where there is existing cooperation (for example, where there is a lot of learner and/or worker mobility), on the other hand the expert could come from a country where cooperation should be established or intensified.
- Should the expert have specific competence in one or more of these areas - general education, vocational education and training, higher education so that it complements the expertise in the home country experts?
- Should an expert be selected who is familiar with other NQFs or regional frameworks.
- Should an expert have experience in working on the international level, in particular membership of the AQRF Advisory Committee?
- Should the expert have good language skills in the home language?

Ideally the experts should be open-minded and should provide feedback to national referencing bodies as 'critical friends'. The experts also need to exercise professional judgement in balancing transparency and openness with the need to keeping some information confidential – for example, they should take care with the issues or problems arising during the referencing process.

The decision on whether or not to include a formal statement from each international expert in the referencing report depends on the message the national authority in charge of the referencing report wants to communicate. For example, positive statements of international experts could be used for underlining the credibility of the report. Nevertheless, a statement of an international expert pointing out critical issues could also be used for enhancing credibility of the report because it enhances transparency. It is in each country's decision whether and what kind of statements to include in the report.

It is helpful if international experts are given a briefing and documents that will help them understand the qualifications system and the intentions for the referencing process. Meeting the main national stakeholders in a referencing meeting is also important so that the different perspectives are fully understood.

4.7 Using observers

To facilitate mutual trust and build capacity within the region, the referencing process includes at least one to three representative from other Member States in the committee carrying out the referencing process. The decision about how to best use Member State observers is for the host country to decide. As in the case of the use of international experts:

- It is useful for countries undertaking the referencing process to indicate their reasons and motivation for inviting observers from other Members States.
- It is helpful if observers are given a briefing and documents that will help them understand the qualifications system and the intentions for the referencing process. Meeting the main national stakeholders in a referencing meeting is also important so that the different perspectives are fully understood.

4.8 The Referencing Report

Criterion 9 of the AQRF referencing process indicates that there is to be one comprehensive report that sets out the referencing and the evidence supporting it. The report should contain all the relevant information on the results of the referencing of national qualifications levels to the AQRF and refer to further resources for evidence if necessary including the quality assurance system.

This report is to be published via the AQRF website.

The AQRF outlines the structure of the report.

1. Information on the state of the report – a short statement that specifies the basis for the report (for example, is it a first version or an up-dated one) or how long it will be valid.
2. Executive summary – a short overview of the results of the referencing process and, in particular, a summary of the information related to the eleven criteria and procedures.
3. Description of the national qualifications system and the NQF – a short presentation of the national qualifications system (including quality assurance arrangements, qualifications pathways, access to programmes, etc.) and the NQF (design features, aims and functions, stage of the development process) – the description should focus on information relevant for understanding the answers to the eleven criteria and procedures.
4. Background information – a short description of the process used for preparing the report (referencing process).
5. The eleven criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the AQRF – the main part of the report, addressing each criterion separately.
6. Further information – a short presentation of, for example, plans, intentions and next steps regarding the NQF development and implementation, challenges expected or already met in this process, the expected impact of the AQRF implementation (What will change on a national level?), any intentions for evaluating and revising the decisions presented in the referencing report.
7. Annexes - for example, list of institutions or experts involved in the preparation of the report, examples of qualifications (that will also be presented at the AQRF portal), statements from national stakeholders and/or international experts, relevant legal texts.

5. Meeting the requirements of the Referencing Criteria

The referencing criteria are written in general terms and require interpretation by each country carrying out a referencing process. To support countries in their work of referencing the following amplification of each criterion is offered.

Criterion 1. The structure of the education and training system is described

The purpose of this criterion is to help outsiders understand the systems better – too much detail can confuse.

For people from other countries to appreciate the national response to the other referencing criteria it is essential that they understand how the national qualifications system is currently structured and how it operates. The national qualifications systems are always complex as they have evolved for many years and this makes the creation of a simple yet comprehensive description of the current position a challenging task. A historical account of the evolution of the education and qualification system is only useful here if it explains what outsiders might consider anomalies in structures and terminology.

The description should cover the essential basic structure of the qualification system covering ages, stages, institutions and pathways of education and training, including formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Linkages between these pathways and major progression routes should be clear. If possible some general statistics should be included that shows the number of people and qualifications that are involved in the different stages and pathways. A diagrammatic representation of the education and qualification systems is often useful.

Criterion 2. The responsibilities and legal basis of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the main public authority responsible for the referencing process

The purpose of this criterion is to show the breadth of (official) support for the outcome of the referencing and the report itself.

Different countries have different institutional structures. It is necessary to take into account all of the bodies that have a legitimate role in the referencing process and to clarify (for international readers) their roles. Bodies with these types of functions are generally considered as having a legitimate role:

- those bodies responsible for governing the processes through which nationally recognised qualifications are designed and awarded
- those bodies that support the labour market relevance of education and training
- those in charge of quality assurance in relation to design and award of qualifications in the NQF
- those managing and maintaining a qualifications framework (if one exists)
- those responsible for the recognition of foreign qualifications and providing information on qualifications in the NQF
- representatives of institutions awarding qualifications
- representatives of those using qualifications (employers, learners).

The report needs to make clear that all of the bodies have been consulted and had an opportunity to engage with the referencing process. It follows that the national referencing panel should include members representing these types of bodies.

Criterion 3. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent

The purpose of this criterion is to make it clear to people outside the country how a qualification is allocated to a level in the qualifications framework or a place in a hierarchy in the qualifications system.

The qualifications that exist in the country are described in terms of the education provision in the country and how they are located at an NQF level where one exists. Allocating specific qualifications to an NQF level brings meaning to the NQF level for citizens and, through the referencing process, to the AQR level. It is therefore critically important for the referencing process that the way a qualification is located at an NQF level is described in full and examples are provided that illustrate how the rules governing the process are applied. The NQF level of all the major qualifications (or types) needs to be evident in the report.

The referencing report needs to describe in full the logic that allows a levelling outcome to be made. The following questions may be helpful.

- What criteria and procedures are used to make the decisions on the inclusion and the level of individual qualifications in the NQF? This might involve legal arrangements, other regulations or quality assurance committees.
- What is the technical evidence that supports such decisions? This might involve the use of analysis of learning outcomes in qualifications and in level descriptors.
- What other evidence is used to support such decisions? For example the views of business sectors, the national traditions in qualifications levels or the analysis of progression pathways.
- How is all the evidence combined to formulate a single decision about the level of a qualification?

The principles and the methodologies of the technical analysis of the relationship between the descriptors of individual qualifications and the NQF levels may not only differ from country to country but also may be different in the different education and training subsystems in a country as they follow the logic of the subsystem concerned. Thus, the principle of best-fit may also be interpreted differently. Therefore, the referencing report should also reflect on the following question:

- How is the principle of best-fit applied when the qualification level of a certain qualification is determined and does this differ across the range of education sectors?

National qualifications and national registers

Information on the (legal) status of implementation, scope, guiding principles of the framework and its qualifications is crucial for a better understanding of the NQF that is referenced to the AQR. All countries include qualifications awarded in the formal education and training system in their NQF. However, NQFs do not always cover all subsystems of the education and training system and similarly not all qualifications from a specific subsystem may be included in the framework. Therefore, referencing reports need to present clear information on whether general, vocational education and training, higher education and other subsystems that are part of the formal education and training are all covered by the NQF. The referencing report needs to present information on what kind of qualifications remain outside the formal system and the NQF and describe any future steps that are planned.

NQFs (established and newly formed) are part of the quality assurance arrangements and are usually considered to be a tool to support quality. For example, the NQF can be used as a 'gateway' for

approved (quality assured qualifications). Phrases such as ‘this qualification is in the NQF’ arise from this quality assurance function. Entry to such frameworks is governed by criteria and transparency of the referencing process is enhanced if such criteria are included in referencing reports.

In many countries national registers, catalogues or databases are in use, which store information on qualifications, qualifications standards, certificates, degrees, diplomas, titles and/or awards. International enquiries about qualifications are likely to refer to these databases, especially if they are available through a website. The databases usually include definitions of all officially recognised qualifications and it is common for each one to be ascribed an NQF level. Information in the register or database, where one exists, needs to be included in the referencing report.

In most countries the NQF is still developing at the time of the referencing processes. Ideally the NQF would be fully established to that it is clearly a public statement of qualifications levels in use in the country. In a partly established NQF the level-to-level linkage with the AQRf may be more difficult to establish (see criterion 4). For these new NQFs the report should make clear what the state of the implementation of the NQF is and what the next stages are expected to achieve. Looking at the referencing process for new NQFs, the most important task remains the development of the NQF and wherever possible attention needs to be focussed here at first without the possible distraction of referencing. It should also be borne in mind that the attention of the international experts involved in referencing may be directed towards the new NQF design and issues arising. This can be partly justified since the levels that are established are important for the AQRf referencing process.

Where there is no explicit NQF with descriptors that are detailed and tailored to national qualifications it is necessary to demonstrate how the learning outcomes for main qualifications, sometimes called reference qualifications, correspond to AQRf level descriptors.

Criterion 4. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the AQRf

The purpose of this criterion is to establish a convincing and trusted links between the NQF or qualification system levels and the levels in the AQRf.

Where an NQF exists the levels in the national framework should be used to make a clear statement of the agreed relationship between the national qualifications system and the AQRf levels. The procedure for the linking of levels needs to be described in detail; this procedure should be robust and transparent, probably including a careful explanation of assumptions, approximations and professional judgements.

Together with Criterion 3 this Criterion is possibly the pivotal point of what makes a quality referencing outcome. For a clear and demonstrable link to be established there needs to be an understanding of AQRf levels and NQF levels and how they relate. When this understanding is established the procedure for linking levels needs to be described: this procedure should be robust and transparent, probably including a careful application of a ‘best-fit’ process (see Section 4.5).

The general nature of the AQRf

The AQRf levels are a general model of progression in learning that may, in some circumstances, appear to be limited – for example, the AQRf level descriptors do not make reference to personal qualities or transversal skills. The AQRf is necessarily general as it has to accommodate a range of descriptions national qualification levels. NQF level descriptors might include additional categories than the two domains of the AQRf. An NQF can be much more specific and the level descriptors often reflect a country's traditional view of what is valued in qualifications.

To gain a good understanding of each level in the AQR and in NQFs it is necessary to appreciate that a level is probably more than the sum of the parts (domains) that make it up (e.g. knowledge, skills and application/competence). An appreciation of level comes from reading across the descriptors. This creates a narrative meaning – for example – this is the knowledge (facts, principles and concepts) that can be used with these skills (cognitive and practical) in this kind of context (indicating levels of autonomy and responsibility).

AQR levels are also in a hierarchy where the content of one level is assumed to include the content of lower levels. Each level descriptor therefore describes the new demands for that particular level of learning.

Having established a clear and demonstrable link from each national level to an AQR level, it is important that this link is explained to a wide audience – all assumptions and approximations should be made clear. In demonstrating the link between the levels referencing reports might usefully contain examples of qualifications that make the link clearer to national and international readers of the report.

The creation of an NQF that meets national expectations well may present a challenge in the referencing process. The following differences will require the application of the best-fit principle.

- Differences in levels: countries may have more levels than the AQR or fewer levels.
- Differences in categories of descriptors: countries may have defined the domains of level descriptors in a different way to that used for the AQR.
- Differences in descriptors: descriptors of qualification levels need to reflect accurately the common understanding of the users of the qualifications. This is likely to require that as an NQF is interpreted by a sector the descriptors will become more specific to that sector.

Different kinds of qualifications: comprehensive NQFs usually also reflect the different kinds of qualifications that are used in countries.

Where there is a problem with the process of allocating qualifications to the NQF there may be a tendency for it to be considered as an issue with the NQF-AQR process instead of being resolved at the NQF stage. For example, where a qualification is comfortably located in an NQF but the consequential AQR level is problematic.

Technical and social approaches to referencing

Technical aspects of referencing involves detailed analysis of the text of the level descriptors of the NQF and the AQR. The process aims to show the similarities or differences between the sets of level descriptors for a particular level. It can also involve the analysis of any supportive documentation for a qualification type where a qualification type defines a level in the NQF, for example the specifications of Bachelors degrees where these are a main qualification at a NQF level.

The technical approach to referencing works best when the NQF descriptors are based on learning outcomes. Sometimes this is not the case and technical referencing does not properly reflect the way a country understands the ways its qualifications link to the AQR levels. In this case the major stakeholder groups can be consulted about the ways the levels relate to one another. Sometimes data from recruiters for jobs and courses can give indications of how they see the best level to level relationship. This approach is termed social referencing.

This social approach may lead to different level to level linkage than the technical analysis of descriptors and qualification types. In the social analysis it is especially important to consider evidence gathered from stakeholders and published literature on the value and status of key qualifications and present this evidence in support of the proposed referencing. Whilst the results of

this social analysis might appear more ephemeral than those of a technical process the value added by the social analysis is critically important to trust amongst stakeholders, especially citizens.

If the links between the NQF levels and the AQR levels are derived from technical and social considerations it leads to different outcomes and the process of best-fit (see Section 4.5) may be necessary. This will include deciding on the weighting given to the technical and social dimensions in coming to the final referencing decision.

Criterion 5. The basis in agreed standards of the national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications is described

The purpose of this criterion is to give insights to people in the country and from outside into how agreed standards of qualifications are fixed and maintained.

Understanding how the NQF or the qualification system supports the consistent quality of qualifications is crucially important to people outside the country who want to compare qualifications through the AQR mechanism. The basis in agreed standards is likely to involve:

- national educational standards which are used for teaching in schools and colleges;
- standards which specify outcomes of learning programmes;
- validation standards which are used to specify how validation should be carried out;
- standards which show how a modular programme and unit based assessment (sometimes called credit systems) should be carried out.
- national occupational standards which are used for specifying jobs, work processes, vocational qualifications and training programmes;
- standards designated by trade organisations which are used to unify products and services used or produced in the industry; and
- standards defined by higher education institutions which include programme content and assessment processes.

These standards can be expressed in different ways, however the AQR supports the use of learning outcomes and as more standards are expressed as learning outcomes (see Section 4.4) or competencies⁷ it is likely that the trust shown in the standards will increase. Describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes is part of reforms in many countries. This means these countries, sectors and institutions are in transition from learning inputs to using learning outcomes and will be referencing to the AQR using national benchmarks or standards that are not yet explicit in terms of learning outcomes. In some cases they will be using benchmarks (level descriptors) based on learning outcomes but without these being fully implemented at the level of qualifications. These countries will therefore need to develop trust by explaining these implicit standards carefully to users outside the country. The conditions that need to be met in terms of standards and quality assurance will need to be included in referencing reports so that they reassure others that the country is moving towards a generalised use of learning outcomes.

Some countries have national systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and some have national credit systems. The functions of systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the ways credit systems work need to be made explicit in the referencing report as they are important for opening up qualifications systems to national and international users. Of particular importance is to explain the ways validation processes and credit systems are related to the NQF.

⁷ Competencies can be considered as a type of learning outcomes. When a competence is defined the learning outcomes are expressed in a context of application or learning and is assessed in that context.

Some countries may also have agreements or processes around recognition of formal learning such as credit transfer arrangements that are unrelated to national credit system.

Criterion 6. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system are described. All of the bodies responsible for quality assurance state their unequivocal support for the referencing outcome

The purpose of this criterion is to help drive up trust in national qualifications and provide confidence to users of the AQRF.

Referencing reports need to explain the main national quality assurance systems that operate in the education, training and qualification system.

Presenting quality assurance processes for international readers is a challenging task. There are several reasons for this such as the fact that much quality assurance is based on implicit agreements and processes and are therefore difficult to describe formally. A second reason is that there is sometimes no single body with responsibility for all quality assurance – several bodies that manage the process over a specific sector or a subsystem often carry out this function. A third reason is that documentation is usually a diverse corpus of texts with little obvious linkage between them. The countries that have already referenced their qualifications systems confirm that the referencing process is an opportunity to bring coherence to quality assurance arrangements – this is possible because all of the main quality assurance bodies have been involved in referencing.

Other quality assurance measures that could be addressed include, for example, qualification requirements for teachers and trainers, accreditation and external evaluation of providers or programmes, the relationship between bodies responsible for quality assurance from different levels and with different functions.

Quality assurance bodies

A range of competent quality assurance bodies are important to the referencing process, such as the following but not limited to:

- the government ministries
- qualifications bodies, particularly those with national oversight of the system or of the major sectors (general, vocational, higher education) but also those bodies that assess learning, validate non-formal and informal learning, issue awards and certificates
- quality assurance bodies such as those that set standards for learning in general, vocational and higher education and those that evaluate institutions or programmes
- bodies that set occupational, vocational and educational standards in a country or employment/education sector
- bodies that manage the development and implementation of NQFs, especially the NQFs that regulate standards in sectors and nationally
- bodies that disburse public funds to learning institutions and require compliance with quality criteria.

International quality assurance frameworks

Benchmarks for evaluating quality assurance processes for all education and training sectors may be based but not limited to the following quality assurance frameworks:

- East Asia Summit Vocational Education and Training Quality Assurance Framework (includes the quality principles, agency quality standards and quality indicators)

- the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice for Quality Assurance (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education)
- ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network).

Quality assurance in action

In addition to explaining the scope or breadth of the quality assurance system(s) in the country some attention should be paid to how they work, some examples can be provided. For example, in relation to learning outcomes they might refer to:

- planning: defining learning outcomes and making sure they are relevant
- implementing: using learning outcomes in teaching, learning and testing and grading individuals
- reviewing the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved
- feedback: evaluating if the planned learning outcomes are relevant for users including the labour market, teaching, assessment and updating learning outcomes based on this data.

Quality assurance bodies are key stakeholders in the referencing process and are required to agree the level to level referencing and the way the quality assurance system in the country is described. This includes the laws, regulations, procedures and any points of discussion for improvements.

Criterion 7. The process of referencing has been devised by the main public authority and has been endorsed by the main stakeholders in the qualifications system

The purpose of this criterion is to provide users of the AQRf with the confidence that the national approach is indeed national and is endorsed at the highest level of government and the key high level actors in the qualification system.

A statement is required that describes the management process used to provide a valid, reliable and trusted outcome of referencing. The statement needs to describe the body (the national AQRf Committee) with overall responsibility for the referencing process and its official link with government in the country.

One body may lead and manage the referencing process but this body will need to work with a range of bodies that have a legitimate interest in the qualification system. These have been identified in the response to Criterion 2. These bodies need to make a clear statement of support for the outcome of the referencing work and the way it is reported.

Criterion 8. People from other countries who are experienced in the field of qualifications are involved in the referencing process and its reporting.

The purpose of this criterion is to provide additional transparency in the referencing process and the reporting of it through the engagement of an international expert.

The referencing report should clarify the relationship between the AQRf and the national qualifications system for a person without particular understanding of the qualifications system concerned. To support this process an international expert/s is involved in the referencing process to act as an adviser and supporter of the referencing process. The advice of the external person should be given with a view to optimising the trust in use of the AQRf as an instrument for transparency.

International experts (see Section 4.6) do not need to be involved in all stages of the referencing process. However they can be involved productively when concrete levelling issues begin to arise and as a draft version of the report becomes available.

Different possibilities exist for involving international experts, for example, they might be invited to meetings of the national referencing panel or they are asked to provide written feedback and recommendations. The level of engagement is for the national authorities to decide. There is also no obligation on the part of the host country to accept the advice of the international expert.

The referencing report should state which international experts were involved and explain why these experts were invited and how they were involved in the process (roles, activities) and at what stage and how their feedback was taken into account.

Criterion 9. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies and shall address separately and in order each of the referencing criteria

The purpose of this criterion is to insist on a single point of authoritative reference for those using the AQRF to compare qualifications.

Whatever the scope of the referencing process this report should be written by the competent bodies in consultation with stakeholders and agreed by the national committee responsible for carrying out the referencing. The single report should contain all relevant information on the results of the referencing of national qualifications levels to the AQRF and refer to further resources for evidence if necessary. The centrality of the set of eleven criteria in the referencing report is underlined in this criterion. A response to each criterion needs to be included in the report.

There should be no supplementary or minority view reports.

Criterion 10. The outcome of referencing is published by the ASEAN Secretariat and by the main national public body

The purpose of this criterion is to make public the process of referencing and its outcome.

A significant part of AQRF implementation, particularly for employers, is the building up of a central resource⁸ that provides information on the results of the referencing process to a wider public.

Criterion 11. Following the referencing process all certification and awarding bodies are encouraged to indicate a clear reference to the appropriate AQRF level on new qualification certificates, diplomas issued

The purpose of this criterion is to raise the public profile of the AQRF and its added value. It also shows in an explicit way that the AQRF is a force for cooperation and mobility of direct relevance to citizens of the ASEAN region.

Indicating an AQRF level on a certificate would help stakeholders to judge the level of a national qualification and facilitate comparison of qualifications from different systems (for example in case of mobile workers). Once the level-to-level agreements are in place and qualifications are linked, through NQFs, to the AQRF levels, the AQRF can be seen as adding international currency to national qualifications. For this added value to be clear to all users, all qualifications in NQFs need to be associated with an AQRF level.

⁸ The precise nature of this central resource is yet to be determined.

6. Questions arising in the referencing process

Questions will arise in the course of the referencing process; some of the more common ones, identified by AMS, are included below. Answers to these questions are provided.

Questions	Answers
How long does a referencing process take?	There is no one way of carrying out a referencing process. The criteria are common but countries will have different ways of showing how its referencing process meets each criterion. Some countries need to spend longer than others consulting and building consensus. Institutional structures are more complex in some countries. As a guideline the process might take 6 months in some countries and two years or more others. Having the preconditions for referencing in place before the process begins will speed up the process also having a well-prepared referencing committee helps shorten the time needed.
Why does a country have to have an NQF before the referencing process can begin?	<p>An NQF is extremely helpful for referencing and can help make the process transparent and more trusted. It is possible to link a qualifications system to the AQR levels by considering the hierarchy of major qualifications in the country. However this will entail a lot of consultation with stakeholders and gathering together robust evidence to support a match between major qualifications and the level descriptors of the AQR.</p> <p>It is better to spend time on developing an NQF and making sure it is properly populated with qualifications than to rush into a referencing process before the NQF is built and well understood by stakeholders, including citizens.</p> <p>Countries developing an NQF at the same time as referencing it to the AQR have to judge the optimum time to spend on these two processes.</p>
Is it easier to reference one sector at a time or reference all education and training sectors at once?	<p>Much depends on the NQF. Countries aiming to make a comprehensive approach to referencing will have developed a national qualifications framework that is comprehensive in covering all the education and training sectors. The level descriptors will be meaningful and accepted by all education and training sectors and the sectors will have qualifications associated with certain levels of the NQF. This is the basic position. Aiming for a comprehensive approach to referencing without a comprehensive NQF is challenging as it presumes that each sector will see the position of other sectors in relation to its own qualification structure.</p> <p>If an NQF is a sectoral one then it is better to reference this sector first and take care to disseminate the results to other sectors.</p>
In order to start referencing is political commitment necessary?	<p>Yes. The NQF is a national entity and a referencing position is also important national information that will be used internationally. Political endorsement enhances the status of the referencing outcome and supports a better level of trust.</p> <p>The added value an NQF that is referenced to the AQR brings to a country is significant. Political commitment makes it easier for stakeholder groups to capitalise on this added value, for example in developing trade agreements and use of the NQF for supporting recognition.</p>
There may be resistance to the referencing process from specific stakeholder	Sometimes it is possible to trace the resistance to an earlier stage of NQF development. Possibly one group feels its position is undermined by another group, or possibly has a sense of bias towards one sector or another. Clearly it

Questions	Answers
groups. How can this resistance be overcome?	<p>is best to start from a position where this resistance is not given a chance to develop.</p> <p>The root of the problem needs to be identified – this could be poor management structures, poor communications, poor understanding of the need for full engagement, protection of privileged positions. Solutions clearly depend on the nature of the problems identified.</p> <p>A general response is to dissolve existing consultative arrangements and establishing new membership and terms of reference for the committee carrying out referencing.</p>
Is it possible to reference without a referencing committee?	<p>Yes. However a referencing outcome which has been determined without consulting the main stakeholders is unlikely to command high levels of trust. If a referencing committee is not use much work will be needed with stakeholders and the international community to establish trust in the outcome.</p>
Does referencing lead to automatic recognition of qualifications in another AMS?	<p>No. The AQRF simply links qualifications levels between countries and helps understanding of the levels of another countries. Recognition of a qualification by a body in another country may be easier with after referencing but it is not guaranteed. More information about the qualification than its level is often needed before any recognition can be given.</p>
What triggers a review of a country referencing report?	<p>The country decides when its report needs to be updated. There is no schedule for review or shelf life of a report. The decision to update may be based on a significant change in the NQF, a development in the education, training and qualification system or a growing appreciation that the current report does not adequately describe the country’s position with the AQRF.</p>

Appendix 1: Checklist for the referencing process

Preconditions for referencing

Have the preconditions for successful referencing to the AQRf been established?

The National Referencing Committee

How will members be identified?

How will their individual contributions be optimised?

Who will be the chairperson, will they need to be seen as an independent voice or a representative voice?

What exactly is the chairperson's role and authority?

Managing the process

What will be the managing agency?

What will be the management structure?

How will the parts of the management structure operate and interface?

What will be the timeline for the process?

What finances will be needed, for example for consultation, experts, gathering and analysing evidence)?

Will there be a national ambassador for the AQRf work?

How will the work on this project tie in with other projects in the qualifications system (national and international)?

Stakeholders

What is the understanding of the AQRf/NQF by stakeholders and does it need to be improved in view of making consultation meaningful?

What are the main stakeholder bodies in the qualifications system?

How will each body's contributions be optimised?

What will be their role in managing their own constituencies?

Making a proposal for the referencing

Who will generate the first proposal: an expert, a small group of experts?

What methodologies will they use?

How will the social and technical dimensions be married together?

How will best-fit be used?

How widely will the first proposal be tested?

International experts

How many international experts will be used?

At what stage of the process will they be engaged?

What are the priorities for their contribution?

What will be the profile of the experts and reasons for their selection?

Communication

What is the level of awareness of AQRf/NQF issues in the country?

Has sufficient communication towards stakeholders been carried out before consultation?

What needs to be communicated (what are the key stakes for the country/ different types of actors)?

How to communicate these issues in an accessible manner?

What resources are available?

Consulting

Will the first proposal be the focus of a full national consultation or a more limited process?

What forms will the consultation take (surveys, events, face-to-face meetings)?

How will the results be analysed and reported?

Are there key groups or organisations which you know must respond to provide the appropriate validation of the referencing?

Decisions on a final level-to-level referencing

How will a firm proposal for referencing level to level be made?

Are there key stakeholders who must be given priority for agreement?

How will referencing issues be resolved?

Reporting the outcome of referencing

Who will structure the report?

Who will write it?

How will it be signed off as a national agreement?

Who will present it to the AQRf Advisory Committee?

How will comments from the Committee be taken into account?

General communications and dissemination

What events and publications will be needed?

What web-based information will be made available?

How will the referencing (and examples of qualifications) be included in the AQRf portal?

Who will deal with questions on the Referencing process and outcomes?

What international dissemination is needed?

Appendix 2: Useful resources

Below are some useful resources for ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN publications

ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (2015). ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta.

ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework Concept Note #1: Learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks. ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta.

ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework Concept Note #2: Non formal and informal learning. ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta.

EQF Guidance notes

Note 1 – Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong

Learning http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/brochexp_en.pdf

Note 2 – Added value of National Qualifications Frameworks in implementing the EQF –

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note2_en.pdf

Note 3 - Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF (2011 version)

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf

Note 4 – Using learning outcomes

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf

Note 5 – Referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF Update 2013

https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-efq/files/EQF%20131119-web_0.pdf

CEDEFOP

Understanding Qualifications:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/understanding-qualifications/index.aspx>

The selection of CEDEFOP publications relevant for EQF and NQF implementation is available here:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19313.aspx>

ETF papers

A selection of ETF documents related to qualifications systems, VET quality assurance and VET governance is available here:

http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/publications_by_topic

UNESCO papers

Toolkit for the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/news/article/toolkit-for-the-recognition-of-foreign-qualifications-a-reference-for-asia-pacific-practitioners-2/>

Bologna Process

Qualifications Frameworks in the EHEA

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/qf.asp>

Information on mobility and lifelong learning instruments

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/mobility_en.htm

Appendix 3: National AQRFC Committees

The following National AQRFC Committees are established within each Member State. The focal point could be:

- An existing responsible body or agency
- A unit within an existing responsible body or agency.
- A separate unit established for the purpose of being the focal point and answerable to a responsible body or agency.

Their details are noted below.

Country	National AQRFC	Legal status and supervision of National AQRFC	Main policy making bodies of the National AQRFC	Roles and Functions
Brunei Darussalam				
Cambodia				
Indonesia				
Lao PDR				
Malaysia				
Myanmar				
Philippines				
Singapore				
Thailand				
Vietnam				

The above table is to be completed by Members states.

Glossary of terms relevant to the referencing process

Achievement standards	<p>Statements approved and formalised by a competent body, which defines the rules to follow in a given context or the results to be achieved.</p> <p>A distinction can be made between competency, educational, occupational or certification standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • competency standard refers to the knowledge, skills and/or competencies linked to practising a job; • educational standard refers to statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements and resources required to meet learning objectives • assessment standard refers to statements of learning outcomes to be assessed and methodology used; • occupational standard refers to statements of activities and tasks related to a specific job and to its practise; • certification standard refers to statements of rules applicable to obtaining a qualification (e.g. certificate or diploma) as well as the rights conferred.⁹
Common ReferenceFramework	A meta framework, or regional framework such as the AQRF, the levels in a NQF can be linked to those in a Common Reference Framework.
Learning outcomes	Learning outcomes are clear statements of what a learner can be expected to know, understand and/or do as a result of a learning experience.
Level descriptor	A general statement that summarises the learning outcomes appropriate to a specific level in a qualifications framework. Level descriptors are usually grouped in domains of learning.
National Qualifications Framework (NQF)	National qualifications framework (NQF) is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria or criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector, for example initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. ¹⁰
Sectoral or partial qualifications framework	A NQF that includes qualifications from one education and training sector, for example VET or higher education.
Social aspect of referencing	This process links the NQF levels to the ARQF levels according to evidence from stakeholders and data on the understandings of the value of qualifications in the country.

⁹ CEDEFOP (2011), p. 109.

¹⁰ Coles & Werquin (2006) p. 22.

Technical aspect of referencing	This process links the NQF levels to the ARQF levels after detailed examination of the descriptors.
Qualification	Qualification is recognition that an individual has been assessed as achieving learning outcomes or competencies to the standard specified for the qualification level or title, usually a type of certificate, diploma or degree. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place through workplace experience and/or a program of study. A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training. ¹¹
Qualifications framework	Instrument for development and classification of qualifications (at national or sectoral levels) according to a set of criteria (such as using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes. ¹²
Qualifications system	Qualifications system includes all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications. ¹³
Quality assurance	Quality assurance is a component of quality management and is 'focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled and continuously improved'. ¹⁴ In relation to education and training services, quality assurance refers to planned and systematic processes that provide confidence in the design, delivery and award of qualifications within an education and training system. Quality assurance ensures stakeholders interests and investment in any accredited program are protected.
Referencing criteria	A set of 11 criteria that each AMS must meet to reference its qualification system to the AQRF.
Referencing process	Establishing a relationship between the national qualifications framework levels and the levels in a regional qualifications framework such as the AQRF.
Reference qualifications	Mainstream qualifications that are well known, used commonly and which can be regarded in the country as benchmarks for levels of learning in the qualifications system.
Regional framework	A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a geographical region. A means of enabling one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for a qualification in one country to be compared to others that are located in another country.

¹¹ Coles & Werquin (2006) p. 21 & 22.

¹² CEDEFOP Glossary (2011) p. 82.

¹³ Coles & Werquin (2006), p. 22.

¹⁴ AS/NZS ISO 9000:2006, p. 9.

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