MAKING NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS COMPARABLE ACROSS ASEAN
The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is one of a series of Policy Briefs issued by the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme, a four-year initiative by EU and ASEAN to support harmonisation and raise the quality of higher education (HE) systems in Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) development is at a pivotal point between the design phase, with both political and technical dimensions, and the implementation phase.

The essential elements are in place, including:
- an agreed eight-level framework,
- a commitment to using learning outcomes in the future,
- a commitment to validating learning outcomes achieved outside of formal education and training systems,
- an agreed process for referencing national qualifications systems to the AQRF, and
- an agreed position on quality assurance for the AQRF.

Agreement is still needed for the finishing touches on governance arrangements and transition plans, from concept design to substantive, permanent architecture. The establishment of a secretariat to manage and sustain the development of the AQRF is also a priority. Additional work needs to be done on international and national communication strategies to raise awareness of AQRF and its potential to add value. One aspect is the clarification of the linkages between the AQRF and related initiatives/agreements (e.g. mutual recognition arrangements).

It is important to continue to clarify and disseminate the roles of the AQRF and identify how the AQRF can extend the operationalisation of learning outcomes.

The referencing process will generate the need for National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels to be substantiated. In some countries, producing evidence to show how levels correspond with those of the AQRF will be challenging since the levels are based on generations of experience and traditional (national) values. In the long term, the AQRF needs to become part of a wider set of tools for recognition; its added value depends on it.

MAIN FINDINGS

The report on the state of play of the AQRF and of NQFs within the ASEAN region aimed to serve three distinct functions:

1. Describe the status quo of the development and implementation of the AQRF and NQFs, and detail efforts to link national systems to the AQRF.
2. Assess the NQFs and the AQRF against the European Union experiences.
3. Make recommendations for the future development of the AQRF and NQFs, with a focus on capacity building needs.

The status report included two key sections related to the AQRF and to NQFs, supplemented with a summary of each country's NQF (including one education sector qualifications framework) or proposed NQF.

1. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)

The AQRF is a regional common reference framework that functions as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across ASEAN Member States. The scope of the framework addresses all education and training sectors and a key objective is the promotion of lifelong learning.
The AQRF is based on a set of principles, especially that it invites voluntary engagement from ASEAN Member States; it aims to be a neutral influence on NQFs.
The AQRF endorses the notion of learning outcomes and requires ASEAN Member States, in time, to have NQFs or qualifications to be demonstrably based on learning outcomes. The framework is based on eight levels of learning complexity, within two domains:

- knowledge and skills, and
- application and responsibility.

The referencing process aims to provide a common approach to referencing and ensure that the process is transparent and the reporting structure is consistent. It includes eleven referencing criteria and a proposed structure for a national referencing report. The referencing process requires that ASEAN Member States to describe their education and training quality assurance systems and refer to established quality assurance frameworks. These frameworks are to be the benchmark for evaluating those quality assurance systems for the relevant education and training sectors.

The broad architecture of the AQRF levels corresponds with that of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). However, there are significant differences in the domains of achievement covered by the AQRF and the level descriptors themselves. In addition, there are some differences in the referencing process, although they are not substantial. The governance of the AQRF is likely to be characterised by a lighter touch than that of the European frameworks.

The report on the state of play of the AQRF and of NQFs within the ASEAN region notes that the ASEAN representatives do not support the need for a regional sectoral framework, such as the QF-EHEA. This is in part due to the fact that the AQRF was designed, at a minimum, to meet the needs of all education and training sectors, especially Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education.

Subsequent to the drafting and publication of the report on the state of play of the AQRF and of NQFs within the ASEAN region, the AQRF governance arrangements were endorsed by the ASEAN Labour Ministers and ASEAN Education Ministers in May 2016, and ASEAN Economic Ministers in August 2016. This endorsement provides the basis for the establishment of the AQRF Committee to implement the AQRF.

2. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

Across the ASEAN Member States, NQFs are at

different stages of planning or implementation. At the time of drafting the report the following was identified:

Country	Level of establishment
Brunei Darussalam	Implemented
Cambodia	Initial stages of implementation
Indonesia	Initial stages of implementation
Lao PDR	Planned
Malaysia	Fully implemented and at review stage
Myanmar	Planned
Philippines	Initial stages of implementation
Singapore	Established (educational sector QF)
Thailand	Initial stages of implementation (although sub frameworks are implemented)
Vietnam	Planned

Source: Bateman & Coles 2015

The NQFs across the region vary in legislative basis, governance arrangements, purpose, and structure. In addition, NQF processes, such as recognition of prior learning and credit transfer, are generally not fully implemented, and credit point systems are not utilised at this stage for credit transfer arrangements.

One of the key purposes cited by ASEAN Member States for an NQF is the potential for linking to international qualifications frameworks for learner and labour mobility purposes. However, in general ASEAN Member States are focussing on mutual recognition agreements, and some countries (e.g. Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) note individual agreements or arrangements with other countries. Not all countries have processes in place to assess incoming individual qualifications or to assess the quality of incoming providers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following key areas for further development in all ASEAN Member States were identified, including:

- expanding the use of learning outcomes,
- continuing to develop NQFs, as not all countries have them yet, and
- planning the referencing to the AQRF, as all countries need to do it regardless of whether or not they have an NQF.

The report notes that higher education's engagement in using the AQRF and the NQFs will be critically important to the wider development of frameworks across all sectors of education and training. Part of this engagement will be the development of practices in higher education that can serve as models for other sectors, such as in applying quality assurance, referencing higher education qualification types, and leading credit/recognition between sectors.

For the SHARE programme, assisting in creating the right pre-conditions for referencing will be critical to the success of the AQRF. The following specific areas of support were identified:

- *Learning outcomes*. There is a clear need for dissemination of good practice, exchange of ideas and high quality authoritative input.
- *NQF development*. Countries will value support in areas such as: devising and maintaining good governance arrangements; developing quality assurance for higher education approaches that an NQF enables; capacity development related to internal and external quality assurance in higher education; revising higher education qualifications to better fit a qualifications framework; and, devising new and valued progression routes.
- *Referencing to the AQRF*. Countries will need support in the process of referencing. All evidence to date suggests that they see this as challenging, even in countries with more advanced NQFs. Work is needed to familiarise countries with possible approaches and planning a referencing process.

REFERENCES

ASEAN Secretariat, accessed April 2017, at [http://asean.org/asean-economic-community/sectoral-bodies-under-the-purview-of-aem/services/asean-qualifications-reference-framework/]

Bateman, A. & Coles, M. (2015) *ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and National Qualifications Frameworks: State of Play*. European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) and DAAD, Jakarta, Indonesia.

PREVIOUS SHARE POLICY BRIEFS

Policy Brief 1 – Towards Greater Harmonisation of Higher Education in ASEAN. May 2016. [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PB1-190516.pdf]

Policy Brief 2 – Enhancing Internationalisation in ASEAN: Credit Transfer Systems and Student Mobility. October 2016. [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SHARE-Policy-Brief-2_October-2016.pdf]

Policy Brief 3 – Towards a Shared Understanding of Quality Assurance: Policy Recommendations for Implementing a Regional QA Framework in ASEAN. January 2017. [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Share-Policy-Brief-3-January-2017.pdf]

Policy Brief 4 – Degree Structures and the Harmonisation of Higher Education in the ASEAN Region. February 2017. [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Policy-Brief-4_final.pdf]

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40 YEARS OF ASEAN-EU RELATIONS IN 2017

SHARE, the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region, is a four-year initiative by the EU and ASEAN. Launched in Jakarta in May 2015, SHARE aims to support ASEAN in harmonising regional higher education by sharing European expertise. It does this through strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education for institutions and students, and thereby contributing to a closer ASEAN community. SHARE is implemented by a consortium of Europe's major international education agencies, led by the British Council and comprised of Campus France, DAAD, Nuffic, ENQA, and EUA. More information on SHARE at www.share-asean.eu