OMAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN FRAMEWORK

REPORT

Contents

ACRONYMS

AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
FTI	Fisheries Training Institute
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GCE	General Certificate of Education (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)
GED	General Education Diploma (Oman)
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information (Oman)
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
OAQF	Oman Academic Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OQF	Oman Qualifications Framework
PTI	Private Training Institute
QA	Quality Assurance
QF	Qualifications Framework
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
TVET	Technological and Vocational Education and Training
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USA	United States of America
UK	United Kingdom
VTC	Vocational Training Centre

1. INTRODCUTION

This paper sets out the conceptual basis for the design of a national qualifications framework for Oman, to be known as the Oman Qualifications Framework (OQF).

Starting from the policy decision by the Education Council in March 2014 to develop a comprehensive national qualifications framework, the OQF Development Project began its work in May 2015 under the aegis of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and with the support of the Scottish Qualifications Authority as external expert partner.

The Conceptual Design Framework for the OQF brings together the results of almost a year of intensive project activity, including research into the national qualifications frameworks of several countries, as well as exploration of the characteristics and needs of the Oman education and qualifications systems and the labour market in Oman. The results of this activity are synthesised to form the basis of a rationale for the OQF and to produce proposals for the fundamental design of the OQF: goals and objectives for the framework are set out, the comprehensive scope of the OQF is defined, and a range of design criteria for the framework are outlined. This design specification is the basis for development of the technical features of the OQF. The Conceptual Design Framework is also the basis on which plans for the implementation of the OQF have been made.

2. THE POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OMAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

The policy lines that lead to the development of the OQF are set out in the *Project Proposal for the Development of a Comprehensive Qualifications Framework for Oman and Planning for the Implementation and Maintenance of the Framework* (OAAA Sept. 2014). The concept of a national qualifications framework (NQF) is not new in Oman, as a framework classifying all higher education qualifications is already in place. The Oman Academic Qualifications Framework (OAQF) has been in use since 2004. The OAQF was developed by the forerunner of the OAAA and it is now well established as a component in the comprehensive quality assurance system for higher education in Oman.

The Project Proposal describes the steps that led to the initiation of the OQF development process:

- In 2012 the OAAA developed a proposal to develop a comprehensive qualifications framework, which was submitted to HE the Minister for Higher Education;
- The need for an NQF was identified in Oman's *Education Strategy for 2040;*
- The Ministry of Education / World Bank report *The Drive for Quality* (2012) recommended the development of an NQF;
- The Education Council issued a decision in March 2014 stating the responsibility of the OAAA for the development of a comprehensive 'qualifications framework including academic (Higher Education), vocational education and training, professions and General Basic Education qualifications'.

Acting on the decision of the Education Council, the OQF Development Project began in May 2015.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS FOR THE OQF, 2015-2016

The development of the OQF is taking place in the context of the OQF Development Project. This project is led by the OAAA National Qualifications Framework Department. The key partners with OAAA in this national initiative are the Ministries of Education, Higher Education, Manpower, Defence and Health, as well as Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Each of these partners has allocated Omani experts to support the OQF development project. In addition, the resources of the OAAA NQF Department are enhanced by the support of the external expert partner, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

The OQF Development Project is working to a Project Plan agreed between the OAAA and the SQA. While the Project formally began in May 2015, significant preparation activity had been undertaken in advance. Early discussions about the idea for an Oman Qualifications Framework had been taking place since 2012. Planning for the establishment of the Development Project was on-going throughout 2014. Active exploration of the OQF idea with stakeholders was under way from early 2015. A broad-based Oversight Committee was established in March 2015 to support the OAAA Board in supervising the development process.

Early activity in the OQF Development Project, in May/June 2015, included the development of a Consultation Strategy and an initial short-term Communication Strategy, as well as the assembly and induction/orientation of the OQF Development Team of local experts**.**

The first engagement with the conceptual and technical development of the OQF proper was a Benchmarking activity that began in June 1015. The benchmarking included an investigation of the NQF developments in seven other countries[1] and a study visit to Bahrain in September 2015 where an NQF had recently been introduced. This activity continued until the end of February 2016, resulting in a report that culminates in a set of recommendations for the basic criteria of the OQF, including high-level goals and objectives for the framework, outline design criteria and the scope of the framework. These recommendations were the subject of an extensive structured consultation with stakeholders. This was based on the members of the Oversight Committee and their associated networks; also included were the members of the International Panel of experts established to provide a wider, external perspective on OQF development issues.

An extensive Environmental Scan was undertaken, from July-October 2015, investigating the qualifications systems in the various sectors of education and training in Oman. The data from this investigation enabled the identification of an initial listing of the range of qualifications that will need to be included in the OQF. Further, deeper investigation into the nature of a range of qualifications, representative of the main types of qualifications identified in the Environmental Scan, was undertaken in a Mapping exercise. Both of these studies produced reports in March 2016.

A glossary of terms in English and in Arabic, to be used in the literature defining and describing the OQF, was completed in March 2016.

In February-April 2016 an intensive investigation was undertaken into possible governance arrangements for the OQF and the policy-making context into which the governance of the OQF will need to fit. This began from a discussion paper prepared by SQA, which formed the basis of a consultation with key stakeholders. Building on from this discussion paper and informed by a synthesis of responses to the consultation, a joint OAAA/SQA Discussion Paper[2] was developed, focusing on a small range of specific options, to be presented at the Education Council.

Summarising the results of the conceptual and technical development process of the OQF so far, as of April 2016, five reports have been produced:

- Benchmarking Activity Report;
- Glossary of Terms;

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[1] [1] The National Qualifications Frameworks which were reviewed were from: Australia, Bahrain, Ireland; Malaysia, New Zealand, Scotland and United Arab Emirates

[2] Governance, Management and Implementation of the Oman Qualifications Framework: Creating an Enabling Legal and Regulatory Environment

- Environmental Scan of Qualifications Report;

- Qualifications Mapping Activity Report;

- Joint OAA/SQA Discussion Paper on the Governance, Management and Implementation of the OQF.

This paper assembles the results of all of these activities, synthesising the various elements to establish a foundation on which a conceptual design framework for the OQF is developed and proposed as the basis for completion of the technical design of the OQF.

4. THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE OQF

This section sets out the international context in which the development of the OQF is taking place. It draws on the investigation of international models undertaken in the Benchmarking Activity. It also outlines some of the main trends and strands of theory and practice emerging from the commentary as qualifications frameworks have developed in many countries throughout the world in recent decades, and considers how these trends should influence the design of the OQF.

The Benchmarking study is fully explained in the Benchmarking Activity Report. It examined the NQFs of seven countries, looking at the purposes and objectives of the frameworks, their various typologies and their scope. A range of technical features of the seven frameworks was also examined and recorded: the number of levels in the framework structure, the factors used to describe the learning outcomes defining levels, and the main types of qualifications included in each NQF.

4.1 Core Concepts

The development of a national qualifications framework in Oman takes place in the context of a very widespread, global movement towards new approaches to the organisation of qualifications systems[3]. Emerging from this movement is a body of core concepts that are generally understood among the worldwide community of experts and practitioners:

- Classifying qualifications in an array of levels (a 'qualifications framework');

- Levels can be described, or defined, in terms of typical learning outcomes;

Tuck, R. 2007: An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks: Conceptual and Practical Issues for Policy Makers. Geneva: Skills and Employability Department, ILO.

- Learning outcomes can be described in terms of knowledge, skills and the application of knowledge and skills (or 'competence').

4.1.1 Qualifications Frameworks

A qualifications framework (QF) is an instrument for the classification of qualifications. Typically, qualifications frameworks are structures of levels that, with associated procedures and conventions, can be used to describe and compare qualifications. A national qualifications framework (NQF) classifies qualifications on a national basis, integrates and coordinates the qualifications systems of a country, and improves the transparency and quality of qualifications and the mobility of learners within the systems.

There is a strong international trend towards the use of qualifications frameworks. Many countries have already implemented NQFs, including all of the UK countries, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and France. Most of the European Union countries have already developed NQFs, or are in the process of doing so. In the immediate GCC region, NQFs have been introduced in UAE and Bahrain and work is proceeding on NQFs in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar.

Another significant trend is towards the development of 'meta-frameworks' to link national systems of qualifications. Two of these international referencing systems are emerging in Europe:

- The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is an 'interchange' mechanism enabling the alignment of national qualifications systems in Europe. The core element of the EQF is a set of eight reference levels describing at each level what a learner should know, understand and be able to do in order to be awarded a qualification;
- The "Bologna Process' seeks to build a coherent European Higher Education Area, and a key element in this process is the development of a common understanding of cycles in Higher Education and the qualifications types associated with each cycle.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, the idea of developing a GCC Qualifications Framework has been on the agenda for several years and Omani representatives have been closely involved in discussions on this matter. At an international conference organised under the

aegis of the GCC General Secretariat (Abu Dhabi, 2009)[4], the need for a regional meta-framework was traced back to a 1978 Treaty[5] in which 22 Arab states, including Oman and all of the GCC countries, "resolved to organize their co-operation and strengthen it in respect of *recognition* of studies, diplomas and degrees of higher education *by means of a convention* which would be the starting point for concerted, dynamic action carried out, in particular, through national, bilateral, *subregional* and regional bodies set up for that purpose". Since the 2009 conference, NQFs have been introduced in UAE and in Bahrain, and the development of NQFs is proceeding in Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

4.1.2 Learning Outcomes

Each of the NQFs developed so far is a unique instrument designed to address a range of objectives specific to the country involved and to fit the particular education system and labour market in which it is to operate. Nevertheless, a common thread in these initiatives is that all of the qualifications frameworks that have been developed are hierarchies of levels based on descriptions of the 'learning outcomes' that typify qualifications awarded at each level. This trend is closely related to changes that are taking place in the understanding of the meaning of 'qualification'. Cedefop (2010)[6] describes an emerging new general understanding of a qualification as an award certifying that an individual has achieved certain learning outcomes to standards set by an awarding body. This concept represents a shift from previous common understandings that a qualification is awarded on the basis of participation and time spent on a course or programme, or that it represents 'a status endowed by communities of practice'.

4.2 Basic Criteria of National Qualifications Frameworks

From the data gathered in the course of the Benchmarking activity of the OQF Development Project, augmented by the extensive commentary on framework developments in recent comparative studies[7], trends and patterns were identified in the ways that other countries define the purposes and objectives, the range and scope, and the basic technical criteria that characterise the architecture of their NQFs.

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[4] The GCC Qualifications Going Global – Towards Internationally Recognised Qualifications Frameworks in the GCC Countries

[5] "Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States", Paris, 1978

[6] Changing Qualifications – a review of qualifications policies and practices.

[7] For example, Bjornavold and Coles (2007), Cedefop (2009a, 2009b), Coles (2006), Leney (2009), Lythe (2008), Tuck(2007)

4.2.1 Purposes and Objectives of NQFs

An NQF may have many uses; typical applications include:

- Frame of reference for existing qualifications;
- Basis for the design of new qualifications;
- Environment in which processes for the recognition of prior learning can be developed;
- Aid in the recognition of foreign qualifications.

NQFs may be used in many different ways. Some are used for very limited and specific purposes, such as international referencing; others have developed into key instruments influencing their national education, training and qualifications systems. Many commentators have noted patterns in the purposes for which NQFs are designed and in the resulting features of NQFs:

David Raffe[8] distinguishes between communication frameworks (also referred to as 'relational' frameworks) which improve the description of existing qualifications systems and, by providing increased transparency, enable better use to be made of what is already there; and reforming or transforming frameworks which aim to bring about change, for example by introducing new types of qualifications, developing new pathways or changing the division of roles and responsibilities in the system.

Stephanie Allais (2010)[9], drawing from a study of qualifications frameworks in 16 countries, identifies three key purposes of qualifications frameworks, leading to a suggested three types of frameworks:

- NQFs that attempt to make the relationships between existing qualifications more explicit;
- NQFs that attempt to make the relationships between occupational entry regulations and qualifications more explicit;
- NQFs that attempt to drive a range of different educational reforms.

Ron Tuck[10] notes how NQF design varies in relation to the extent to which the sectors of education in a country are unified or in separate tracks; he also notes how NQF design relates to

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[8] Cited in *Working Paper No 12: Development of National Qualification Frameworks in Europe,* CEDEFOP, Thessaloniki, October 2011

[9] Allais, Stephanie. 2010: *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*. Geneva: ILO

[10] Tuck R., (2007) *An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks,* International Labour Organisation.

the extent of the regulatory purpose of the framework, introducing the concept of 'tight' and 'loose' NQFs as a typology.

The stated purposes of NQFs are often elaborated to produce lists of objectives. A recent comparative analysis by CEDEFOP[11] has identified a range of objectives that are commonly set by various European governments for their national qualifications frameworks. The list includes:

- Increasing international transparency of education and training and aiding the comparison and transfer of qualifications;
- Increasing the transparency of national qualifications systems;
- Promoting lifelong learning;
- Promoting and speeding a shift towards use of a learning outcomes based approach throughout education and training;
- Improving the permeability of education and training systems to aid transfer and progression;
- Aiding the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- Improving the consistency of national qualifications;
- Providing a reference point for quality assurance;
- Strengthening cooperation between stakeholders and establishing closer links to the labour market.

The range of objectives set by a country for its NQF tends to reflect its purpose, varying on a scale between wholly communication/relational frameworks at one end and strongly transforming frameworks at the other.

4.2.2 Scope of NQFs

The majority of NQFs are comprehensive in scope, designed to include all kinds and categories of qualifications. A few include only post-secondary qualifications. In some countries, two or more qualifications frameworks exist in parallel – in England, for example, there is one framework for Higher Education qualifications and other frameworks for other types of qualifications[12]. The qualifications associated with secondary education are included in NQFs in different ways – for example, the Australian Qualifications Framework includes the secondary school qualification as a type in the framework, but not allocated to a level. Most of the European frameworks are oriented towards a lifelong learning vision: they set out to include qualifications associated with

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[11] CEDEFOP, op. cit.

[12] The Qualifications Credit Framework (QCF) and the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF)

formal and non-formal learning, and in many cases they include policy measures to support the recognition of informal learning. Many frameworks have a level designed to include qualifications, awarded for very basic learning achievements, that enable the recognition of learning achieved by learners such as those with special needs.

4.2.3 The Architecture of NQFs

Virtually all NQFs reflect the core concepts set out in section 4.1 above: they are structures of levels, in which the levels are defined by level descriptors set out in terms of learning outcomes. Framework architecture generally depends on the purpose for which the framework is intended:

- relational NQFs are relatively simple, comprise a set of levels and definitions, and require little regulatory apparatus;
- reforming frameworks are relatively complex; they may include defined qualification types, and rules and procedures for qualifications design, learner progression, credit systems, and more.

The relative complexity of reforming frameworks can typically be seen in the range of factors adopted for the description of learning outcomes in level descriptors. We may compare the three factors (knowledge, skills and the application of knowledge and skills) used in the Australian AQF (a mainly relational NQF) with the five factors used in the UAE Qualifications Framework and the eight factors in the Irish NFQ (both frameworks with reform agendas).

The number of levels adopted for an NQF should derive from the range of qualifications that need to be included therein; however, it may be observed that where the main objective of an NQF is to provide a vehicle for relating the national system to a meta-framework (such as the EQF), the design brief for the NQF may specify from the outset that it should adopt the same levels structure as the meta-framework. In general, the most common number of levels in European NQFs is 8; outside Europe, the most common number of levels is 10.

Most NQFs set out a small number of definitions of key terms. These are not mere explanations of the terms, but statements of the specific meanings adopted for the purpose of that particular framework: for example, the word 'competence' is used in many Anglophone NQFs in a way that is not familiar to the average English speaker.

4.3 Learning from the International Context

Allais (2010)[13] points out the dangers of policy borrowing in relation to the development of qualifications frameworks. She notes that, while official policy documents from all countries use the language of learning outcomes, they do not all mean the same thing and they do not necessarily reflect the different views held about learning outcomes within the country. This is compounded by the fact that qualifications frameworks clearly create tension as they touch on important power relations in each country, whereas official reports tend to be political documents, designed to present a consensus. Chakroun (2010)[14] contrasts policy *borrowing* with policy *learning*. The latter, he suggests, encourages problem solving and reflection and retains an emphasis on the national context.

The development of the OQF has followed Chakroun's approach, which is supported by the advice of the external expert partner (SQA). Consequently, the clear awareness of the many examples of NQF development, in the near region and throughout the world, is strongly conditioned by the need to take account of the local Omani context.

5. THE LOCAL CONTEXT FOR THE OQF

Raffe (2009)[15] acknowledges that an NQF is inherently an agent of change and presents a challenge to many existing institutions; he suggests that the introduction of an NQF is more likely to be successful if, while attempting to implement a logic of change or reform, it recognizes the institutional logics that exist in the country. It is therefore a priority in designing an NQF to ensure that the design process takes into account the context in which it will eventually operate. The key environments in this regard are the systems of education/training and qualifications, the labour market, and the national systems and structures of governance.

The 2012 report The Drive for Quality (Ministry of Education and The World Bank) clearly identifies the rapid and radical development of the education system in Oman since the 1970s, in terms of size and scope but also in terms of quality. The report also identifies challenges to be addressed in the further improvement of the performance of the system. An NQF for Oman

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[13] Allais, Stephanie. 2010: *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*. Geneva: ILO

[14] Chakroun, Borhene. 2010: National qualifications frameworks: from policy borrowing to policy learning. *European Journal of Education,* 45(2)*.*

[15] Raffe, D. 2009: The Action Plan, Scotland and the Making of the Modern Educational World: The First Quarter Century. *Scottish Educational Review,* 41(4), pp 22-35.

should be designed to accommodate the qualifications that are awarded now, within the existing system; but also to be flexible enough to adapt to future needs and the changing context that will inevitably arise.

The Environmental Scan of the qualifications system undertaken as part of the process of developing the OQF indicates a qualifications system that is quite dynamic, with significant recent and on-going changes in the provision of programmes and in the range of qualifications awarded: for example, the recently revised systems of basic and post-basic education in the schools, and the plans to introduce a new General Vocational Education Diploma and a new Certificate of Apprenticeship. The scan further reveals a very wide diversity in the range and variety of providers offering education and training programmes (particularly in TVET, but also in the private higher education sector), and a parallel diversity in the mix of local (Omani), foreign and international qualifications awarded for achievement on these programmes. While this variety and choice is an indicator of the successful development of the system, it presents the Omani learner of today with a challenge: how to evaluate the myriad competing options and navigate a track to qualifications that will support their career ambitions? The Omani employer is similarly faced with the challenge of identifying the qualifications that most accurately address future skills needs.

5.1 Overview of the Education and Training and Qualifications Systems in Oman

The education and training systems in Oman are described in the Benchmarking Report, and the Report of the Environmental Scan of Qualifications sets out in detail the range of qualifications throughout the system. The key features are summarised here.

Education and training in Oman comprises three sectors of activity: school education, higher education (HE) and technological and vocational education and training (TVET). School education is organised and administered under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. HE and TVET are primarily under the remit of the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Manpower, respectively; however, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defence are responsible for significant ranges of education provision that can be classified as HE and TVET.

5.1.1 School Education

The school system in Oman is organised to deliver two consecutive programmes, Basic Education and Post-basic education.

- Basic Education comprises two cycles:
  - 1st Cycle of 4 grades (1-4), aimed at students aged approximately 5-10;
  - 2nd Cycle of 6 grades (5-10), aimed at students aged approximately 11-16;
- The Post-basic Education programme is delivered over two grades (11-12).

Some schools deliver all three programme elements; a more common delivery model is forseparate schools delivering the Basic 1st Cycle and a combination of the Basic 2nd Cycle and Post basic elements. There are a number of schools that specialise in the Post-basic programme.

At present two qualifications are associated with the school system in Oman: the General Education Certificate (GEC), awarded on successful completion of the 2nd Cycle of Basic Education; and the General Education Diploma (GED), awarded at the end of the Post-basic Education programme. A number of private and international schools deliver programmes leading to foreign or international certification. These include including several UK qualifications - the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the General Certificate of Education (GCE, at O Level and A Level) – as well as the International Baccalaureate Certificate/Diploma and the Advanced Placement International Diploma (USA).

There are several certificates that were formerly awarded for programmes in the schools but that have been discontinued at various dates between 1978 and 2008, a period during which the school system has been evolving rapidly. While they are no longer awarded, these certificates are still held by many people in Oman.

5.1.2 Higher Education

Sultan Qaboos University is the only public university in Oman. There is a wide range of other higher education institutions, operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education:
- Private Universities;
- Private Colleges;
- Colleges of Applied Sciences;
- College of Banking and Financial Studies;
- College of Shariya Sciences.

Eight major types of qualifications are awarded in higher education in Oman and these are all included in the existing (2005) Oman Academic Qualifications Framework. They are: Certificate,

Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelor Degree, Graduate Diploma, Postgraduate Diploma, Masters Degree and Doctorate. Sultan Qaboos University makes its own awards and is the only institution that can award Doctorate degrees. The other institutions award qualifications under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, each up to the level to which it is accredited. Many programmes in the private colleges and universities lead to qualifications of foreign and international awarding bodies.

It is noted that Foundation programmes form a preliminary phase in almost all higher education programmes in Oman; however, no qualifications are awarded for the Foundation programmes.

5.1.3 Technological and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

TVET in Oman is a diverse sector, comprising three divisions: Technological Education, Vocational Training and Private Training. All three fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Manpower.

Technological Education is provided through the Colleges of Technology:
- The Higher College of Technology;
- Six regional Colleges of Technology.

All of these colleges deliver programmes that are higher education in character, specialising in technological fields.

Vocational Training is provided through six Vocational Training Centres (VTC) and two Fisheries Training Institutes (FTI). Programmes in these centres vary widely in length, ranging from two-year to short courses; some programmes are centre-based, others are mainly workplace-based.

The third area of the TVET sector in Oman comprises a range (some 400 in number) of Private Training Institutes (PTI) operating under the supervision of a Directorate within the Ministry of Manpower. Varying widely in size and capacity, and delivering programmes ranging from short courses to one/two year courses, they include:

- Private vocational training institutes;
- Private vocational training institutes inside establishments;
- Private training services offices;
- Training units at private educational institutions.

The diversity in the TVET provision is matched in the range of qualifications awarded through the system:

- The Higher College of Technology awards Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas and Bachelor of Technology Degrees. The regional Colleges of Technology award Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas. All of these awards are included in the Oman Academic Qualifications Framework;

- Vocational Training Centres award Vocational Certificates and Vocational Diplomas. The Vocational Certificate title relates to a wide range of awards, including Certificates of Vocational Competency (Apprenticeships) at Semi-skilled, Skilled and Craftsman levels;

- The programmes of the Private Training Institutes lead to a wide range of awards, some of them for quite small and specific packages of learning outcomes. Some of the Institutes have programmes leading to Certificates of Vocational Competency.

Several new qualifications are under development in the TVET sector: the General Vocational Education Diploma (in collaboration with the Ministry of Education); a new Certificate of Apprenticeship; and a new Vocational Diploma for programmes in the private Training Institutes sector.

As is the case with the schools sector, there are TVET qualifications that have been discontinued at various dates but that are still held by people in Oman and that retain value in the labour market.

5.1.4 Health Sector

In addition to programmes, oriented towards the health sector, provided in the higher education institutions, there are thirteen institutes operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Health that provide programmes in health sciences, including several Nursing Institutes. There are least two professional bodies providing supplemental or up-skilling programmes.

SQU awards qualifications in medical fields up to Master's Degree. Five private universities award medical, nursing or health science diplomas and bachelor degrees under the aegis of the Ministry of Higher Education. The Nursing and Health Science Institutes award diplomas and bachelor degrees under the aegis of the Ministry of Health. Programmes provided by professional bodies lead to small-volume awards at higher education levels, either under the aegis of the Ministry of Health or in association with foreign universities.

5.1.5 Military Sector

There are ten main institutions – colleges, academies and technological colleges – dedicated to providing programmes related to the military sector and operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence. This includes several institutions that provide programmes at higher education levels. In addition, many smaller centres provide programmes in specific skill areas (e.g. language skills training, instructional techniques courses).

A very wide variety of qualifications are awarded for programmes of learning that take place in the military context. The range include all types of higher education qualifications from certificates up to Master's Degree, many certificates that would parallel awards made in the TVET sector, and also many certificates awarded for short learning programmes leading to very specific learning outcomes packages. Some of the higher education qualifications are awarded by associated universities (SQU and University of Portsmouth).

The Royal Oman Police provides education and training for its personnel in the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences. Qualifications awarded range from certificates for short courses to Technical Diploma, Diploma and Bachelor Degree.

5.1.6 The Quality Assurance of Qualifications

In Oman, the bodies responsible for the quality assurance (QA) of qualifications are:

- SQU, in relation to its own awards, with OAAA as the supervisor;
- Ministry of Higher Education, in relation to the awards of the other HEIs: supervisory and coordinating responsibility is devolved to the OAAA;
- Ministry of Manpower, in relation to the whole range of TVET qualifications; quality assurance practices in the technological colleges follow the OAAA model;
- Ministry of Education in relation to the GEC, GED and any other qualifications that may be awarded for learning in the school system;
- Ministry of Health in relation to a range of qualifications in the health sciences;
- Ministry of Defence in relation to a range of qualifications specific to the military.

It is noted that different traditions result in a variety of quality assurance processes in school education, in TVET and in higher education. It is not possible, in this environment, to identify a single process for quality assurance for all qualifications. The quality assurance of the qualifications awarded in the HE sector is normally integrated into the wider body of QA practices of the institution or the awarding body involved. In the case of school and TVET qualifications, it

will be necessary to identify relevant QA measures that apply to the awarding process from among a range of supervisory and standard-setting activities that already take place.

5.2 The Labour Market and Employment Policy in Oman

A labour market comprises employment opportunities and a workforce. Both sides of the labour market make use of the qualifications system: employers use qualifications to define required skills and to set levels at which employees are recruited or promoted; workers seek to use qualifications to improve their prospects of gaining employment or advancing in their careers.

In all of the GCC countries the labour market is characterised by the presence of large expatriate workforces. The Omani labour market shares this characteristic with its neighbours, but to a lesser degree than in, for example, the UAE. Ennis and al-Jamali (2014), in their analysis of the labour market in Oman, identify from official statistics[16] that Oman's population of 3.6 million includes 1.53 million non-nationals. As virtually all of these non-nationals are in the main workforce age-group of 15-64, it can be assumed that the expatriate workforce slightly outnumbers the local workforce (a population of 2 million will produce a workforce of about 1.3 million, based on averages for OECD countries).

Looking at the other side of the labour market, nearly 60% of the jobs available are in the private sector; however, only about 30% of employed Omanis are in private sector jobs[17]. Government sector jobs make up 40% of the market, and these are almost all filled by Omanis. The picture that emerges is that of a strongly partitioned labour market, with most Omani workers engaged in government sector employment. Ennis and al-Jamali continue their analysis to identify that those Omanis employed in the private sector are to be found mostly in mid-range clerical positions and mostly in certain occupational areas such as finance and transport/communications.

The strong preference among Omanis for government sector employment is confirmed in the results of the 2015 Omani Youth Work Trends Survey[18] conducted by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). This survey showed a strong majority of young people who prefer working in the government sector: 92% in the current year, a slight decrease from 95%

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[16] Monthly Statistical Bulletin 2013', December 2013, http://www.ncsi.gov.om/NCSI_website/book/mb/Dec2013/contents.htm. Total population at mid-2012 was 3.623 million, of which 2.093 million were Omanis and 1.530 million were expatriates.

[17] Oil and gas companies and most public-private partnerships are included in data on private-sector establishments. Labour Market Survey, Oman Ministry of Manpower, 2008; *Statistical Year Book 2011*, Oman Ministry of National Economy, November 2011.

[18] https://www.ncsi.gov.om/News/Pages/NewsCT_20151017183754630.aspx

recorded in 2014. Stability and job security were the key determinants quoted in the reasons for this preference.

Apart from the concentration of the local workforce in the non-productive government employment sector, a further cause for concern is the fact that Omani unemployment remains stubbornly at around 100,000[19], despite the apparent opportunity to divert employment opportunities in the private sector from the expatriate workforce. It is government policy to change this situation in the labour market, and successive economic plans have identified the need to diversify the participation of Omani workers in economic activity. This objective was further stressed in the 1996 action plan, *Vision for Oman's Economy 2020,* in which a section deals specifically with human resource development and sets targets for intensified Omanisation in the labour market. This policy has had successful outcomes, although more so in the government jobs sector than in the private sector. Apart from the known preference of Omani jobseekers for government jobs, Ennis and al-Jamali identify level of education and type of skills as key factors that limit the employment opportunities for which Omanis are competitive in the private sector.

5.3 The Legal and Regulatory Environment

In any country, the insertion of an NQF into the existing systems of education and training and labour market regulation presents challenges. Apart from the need for the NQF to fit into the existing technical environment, it is always necessary to identify suitable arrangements for governance of the NQF and to establish how it should fit into the matrix of existing legal structures and systems. The development process for the OQF has addressed this issue. Intensive collaboration by the OAAA and SQA in early 2016 resulted in a joint Discussion Paper: 'Governance, Management and Implementation of the Oman Qualifications Framework: Creating an Enabling legal and Regulatory Environment'.

The Discussion Paper represents a collation of viewpoints from a range of stakeholders in regard to how the governance, management and implementation of the future Oman Qualifications Framework could be addressed. It provides an explanation of the current legal and regulatory framework in Oman and a synthesis of information on NQF governance arrangements in other countries gathered from the Benchmarking activity. It goes on to identify five founding principles that should underpin the design of a governance and legal environment for the OQF:

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[19] *Manpower from 1970–2010*, Oman Ministry of Manpower, 2010.

- Principle 1: Once a decision has been made as to the organisation/s that will be authorised to govern, manage and implement the OQF, some preliminary laws will have to be created to provide the necessary enabling legal framework for the OQF;

- Principle 2: Oman should use the existing structures in the education system as far as possible to govern, manage and implement the OQF rather than creating an entirely new authority, especially at the start of implementation of the comprehensive framework;

- Principle 3: In the context of Oman, it is important to promote the OQF as a quality enhancement tool to build trust in the qualifications listed on the OQF, and for this to take place, all qualifications that are placed on the OQF need to be quality assured;

- Principle 4: The Educational Council should become responsible for the governance of the OQF. As an interim measure, this paper adopts the principle of coupling (licencing and listing) and (accreditation and validation) until such time as central authority has been established with responsibility for listing and validation;

- Principle 5: The relevant awarding bodies should continue to be responsible for awarding qualifications that have been accredited. Eventually, the awarding body should be independent of the programme licencing body and the framework implementing (i.e. listing and validation of qualifications) authority.

Finally, it provides three options for approaches to governance, management and implementation that can be considered, in the light of the founding principles. These options propose models of governance that are decentralised or linked, to varying degrees, with various bodies taking responsibility for the different functions in different sectors. In all of the options proposed, the Education Council is the overall governing body.

The arrangements for the governance, management and implementation of the OQF are of particular significance in planning for the implementation of the framework.

6. A RATIONALE FOR THE OQF

The core rationale for the OQF is that it is the response to the (March 2014) decision of the Education Council that a comprehensive qualifications framework be developed for Oman. The development process arising from this decision has proceeded through a careful and thorough

analysis of the relevant international trends and practices, and has taken into account the relevant features of the Omani education and training systems, as well as aspects of the current and anticipated future labour market situation in Oman and in the GCC region. In looking at the international context, the approach was to seek to learn from the experience of other countries rather than to adopt policies or features of foreign NQFs.

From all of the foregoing analysis of the international and local contexts in which the OQF is being developed, a range of needs and issues have been identified that should be taken into account in the design of the OQF. These needs and issues, interpreted against the background of the international context, establish the rationale for the recommendations made in the following section about the basic design criteria for the OQF.

6.1 A Qualifications Framework to Suit the Education and Training Systems in Oman

The exploration of the education and training systems and their associated qualifications suggests that the framework architecture will need to be able to classify a broad range of qualifications, derived from different philosophies and traditions in the school, TVET and higher education sectors. There is an evident need to be able to differentiate between qualifications that are at the same level but that differ in terms of the volume of learning outcomes involved or in the balance of factors in their outcome specifications. In some sectors there are ranges of qualifications of widely varying sizes, and it will be a challenge to develop criteria for the inclusion of such qualifications in the OQF alongside the familiar major qualifications; the criteria for inclusion of qualifications in the OQF will also need to be open to new qualifications that will be introduced as the education system in Oman continues to develop.

In addition to establishing the relative levels of all qualifications in Oman, the OQF will have potential as a means of clarifying the routes by which learners can progress through the system of qualifications; an extension of this application of the framework could be its use as a driver for the establishment of new progression routes for learners, particularly between TVET qualifications and Higher Education qualifications.

Many qualifications have been noted that are no longer awarded but that are still held by Omani citizens and that still have value in the labour market: to ensure that the holders of these qualifications are not disadvantaged in the OQF, it will be necessary to identify appropriate arrangements for the inclusion of these qualifications alongside current awards.

In most NQFs it is necessary to establish protocols for dealing with the issue of qualifications awarded by international and professional bodies and qualifications that belong to the systems of other countries. This is an issue of particular importance in the case of the OQF, because of the significant number of foreign, professional and international qualifications awarded for programmes undertaken in Oman, and the OQF policy apparatus will need to include appropriate criteria and procedures to address this. The OQF will potentially be a significant resource for bodies engaged in processes of licensing and accrediting providers of education and training.

While adopting the basic premise that all qualifications included in the framework should be quality assured, the OQF will need to frame its policies in relation to quality assurance requirements to take account of the differing practices that apply in the various sectors of the education and training system.

The Oman Academic Qualifications Framework is a long-standing and well-established classification of the qualifications in the higher education sector in Oman. The architecture of the OQF should build on this framework.

6.2 A Qualifications Framework to Meet the Needs of the Labour Market in Oman

While an NQF can be a powerful change agent, it is not in itself the simple solution to labour market issues. Accepting this limitation, the development of the OQF offers policy-makers the opportunity to create a closer interface between the qualifications system and the labour market. The OQF should reflect important national policy objectives such as Omanisation of the labour market: the framework and its learning outcomes approach offer a basis for the rapid design of new qualifications targeting future skill needs; the framework should also serve to enhance the profile of TVET qualifications, many of which can lead to employment opportunities in the private sector.

The broad objective is to ensure that the anticipated rapidly-changing employment-opportunity scenario is matched by a qualifications system that allows the worker to build and maintain qualifications profiles suited to more varied career models: features of such a system would include qualifications that can be upgraded and extended; qualifications that can be attained through in-career learning; credit systems and unit-based qualifications. The OQF should be able to accommodate all of these features. Building on the improved clarity that an NQF inherently brings to the qualifications system, the OQF should be designed to actively support the

development and identification of flexible progression opportunities for learners throughout the qualifications system.

Particularly in a rapidly-changing labour market, it makes sense to enable workers to recycle their already-acquired skills in new employment opportunities. The issue is how to make these skills visible in qualifications. A qualifications framework based on learning outcomes inherently facilitates processes to recognise prior learning, but the OQF should go further and become the lead agent and focal point for the development of an effective RPL strategy in Oman.

The key interface between the labour market and the qualifications system is at the point of recruitment to employment. It is an essential requirement of the OQF that it should improve the quality of this interface. On the employer side of the market, the framework should result in significantly improved understanding of the meaning and value of Omani qualifications. The OQF will have significant potential in the targeting of skills requirements in the expatriate labour force, and therefore needs to offer an effective benchmark for the evaluation of foreign qualifications for labour procurement purposes.

On the jobseeker side, the framework should make it easier for the citizen to plan and navigate a track though the myriad opportunities available in education and training, and identify and achieve the qualifications necessary for their career ambitions. These requirements suggest the need for the design of the framework to emphasise clarity, simplicity, and ease of use.

A particular issue to be taken into account is that eligibility to apply for ranges of jobs in the government sector is tied to certain specific qualifications: the General Education Diploma, the Diploma and the Bachelor Degree. It is important to ensure that the relativity between these qualifications is maintained and made visible in the levels of the OQF.

A national qualifications framework should enable citizens to make the best possible use of the qualifications they hold to support their careers. In this regard it is essential that the OQF be able to include the many older Omani qualifications that are now obsolete or no longer awarded, but that still recognise the achievements of the holders and that still have value in employment. The OQF should also be designed to include as far as possible the many certificates awarded in various sectors for small or narrow learning achievements: these certificates often relate to specific occupational areas and have value for employment and promotion purposes.

6.3 Recommendations from the Benchmarking and Consultation

The Benchmarking Report, following its analysis of the NQFs developed in other countries and of the indications from Omani policy sources as to expectations from the OQF, identifies a list of key features that should characterise the OQF. It should:

- Be a statutory entity;
- Be a comprehensive NQF which:
    - can recognise basic achievement; and
    - includes qualifications from all sectors of education and training;
    - includes professional qualifications and awards made for learning achieved through continuing professional development;
- Use a credit system;
- Be designed with procedures to include foreign qualifications (awarded in Oman) or otherwise align such qualifications to the framework;
- Facilitate the Recognition of Prior Learning;
- Be a single reference point within Oman for all qualifications;
- Facilitate international referencing (comparison) of international frameworks and qualifications (not awarded in Oman);
- Be used as the basis for qualifications design.

Building on from these key features, the Benchmarking Report makes a range of recommendations that relate to:

- Objectives of the OQF;
- Scope of the OQF; and
- Basic design criteria for the OQF.

These recommendations were the subject of an extensive structured consultation with stakeholders in early 2016. This was based on the members of the Oversight Committee and their associated networks; also included were the members of the International Panel of experts established to provide a wider, external perspective on OQF development issues. The consultation is described in detail in the Benchmarking Report. It set out 33 questions based on the recommendations; responses indicated agreement with all proposals, ranging from 100% to 72%. Four Guiding Questions were asked, offering respondents the opportunity to advise on aspects of the OQF development that were not directly proposed in the recommendations. The responses to these questions are particularly relevant to planning for the implementation of the OQF: the need for care in the manner of inclusion of the school qualifications; the need to

introduce and communicate change carefully; the need for capacity building. The need to match decisions on prioritising objectives to available resources was particularly stressed, with further suggestions that the OQF be developed step-by-step and phased in over a number of years.

7. DESIGN PROPOSAL FOR THE OQF

The design proposed for the OQF takes into account the results of intensive research into the national qualifications frameworks developed in other countries; analysis of available policy and strategy documents in Oman that are relevant to the objective of developing the OQF; the characteristics and needs of the Oman education system and labour market; and the advice and guidance of the consultative bodies established to support the development of the OQF. Goals and objectives for the OQF have been identified and are presented here, and the comprehensive scope of the OQF is defined. To meet these objectives a range of basic design criteria for the OQF are set out.

The overall proposal is for a framework that:

- Classifies all qualifications in Oman;
- Provides an international reference point for Omani qualifications, and;
- Supports the development of new qualifications in the future.

This can be described as a comprehensive, relational NQF with reforming potential.

7.1 Objectives of the OQF

The key overarching objective is that the OQF should be the leading element in a process of building a more integrated system of qualifications in Oman, capable of responding to the changes that will arise from globalisation, the modernisation of the economy in Oman and emerging labour market trends. This future-oriented system should be focused on meeting the various needs of learners and employers.

To meet this broad objective the OQF should:

- provide a clear and consistent means of describing and comparing all qualifications in Oman, inclusive of basic education, school education, technological and vocational education and training (TVET), higher education and professional sectors;
- provide a benchmark and reference point for the recognition in Oman of foreign qualifications and for the recognition of Oman qualifications abroad;

- provide a structure that can support:
    - the development of new qualifications to consistent standards, based on learning outcomes;
    - the recognition of qualifications awarded for the achievement of relatively small sets of learning outcomes; and
    - the revision of existing qualifications as required;
- Support and strengthen the on-going development of processes for quality assurance in education and training;
- Provide a frame of reference for a wide range of TVET qualifications;
- Provide a design basis for new qualifications;
- Support the parity of esteem between qualifications awarded for learning in TVET and in higher education;
- Clarify the routes by which learners can progress through the systems of qualifications in Oman, and supports the development of new, more flexible progression possibilities for learners;
- Support the reform of the qualifications systems in Oman so that they will provide appropriate recognition of learning outcomes achieved. Such reforms could include the use of credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) and processes for the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

While these direct objectives should be the primary influence on the design of the OQF, it is also important to take account of the many potential wider uses and benefits of a national qualifications framework in Oman:

- The OQF will be a significant resource for the bodies engaged in the processes of licensing and accrediting providers of education and training;
- The OQF will have significant potential in offering an effective benchmark for the evaluation of foreign qualifications.

7.2 Scope of the OQF

As the single structure for the comprehensive classification of qualifications in Oman, the OQF will:

- include all quality-assured[20] qualifications in school education, TVET and higher education and professional qualifications;

- allow for the recognition of international qualifications and it is proposed that these are included in, or aligned with, the OQF, as far as possible;

- allow for the development and inclusion of unit-based or credit-based qualifications designed to suit modular education programmes;

- allow for the development of qualifications that provide appropriate recognition for the learning achievement of those with special needs and adults returning to basic education;

- will support lifelong learning in Oman as it will relate to all qualifications, including those awarded for learning achievements in schools, training centres, the workplace, and higher education institutions from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning. Also, the framework sets out to encompass recognition for learning in all settings: formal learning; non-formal learning and informal learning.

The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education[21] is already well established within the higher education sector in Oman, under the aegis of the OAAA. It is envisaged that this framework will be embedded in the OQF and the qualifications awarded in higher education in Oman will be incorporated into the overall structure of OQF levels.

7.3 Basic Design Criteria for the OQF

To meet the objectives outlined, the proposed model for the OQF is for a framework with reforming potential, designed to address multiple functions. The OQF will provide a frame of reference, domestically and internationally, for existing qualifications, and a basis for the design of new qualifications of widely varying specifications. The OQF will be a statutory entity and it will be mandatory for all qualifications offered in Oman to be included in the framework, or aligned to it. It should meet the following design criteria:

- The OQF should be a structure of levels with level descriptors that describe the expected learning outcomes at each level;

- The OQF should have an associated table of definitions of key terminology.

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[20] The quality assurance process for the inclusion of qualifications on the framework is to be developed later, in the implementation of the OQF

[21] http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Framework.aspx

The OQF should have policies and procedures to define and regulate its establishment and implementation in the education and training systems of Oman, to address:

- Additional classification and descriptive instruments that may be employed in the OQF, such as conventions on qualification titles, use of credit rating, classification by learning sector;

- Mechanisms for the inclusion of qualifications, including professional qualifications, in the framework;

- Arrangements for the maintenance of a register of the qualifications in the OQF;

- Policies to promote learner mobility and progression through the system of qualifications, including arrangements for the recognition of prior learning, for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and for the use of credit systems.

8. COMPLETION OF THE TECHNICAL DESIGN OF THE OQF

The technical design of the OQF will be completed in a further paper, which will set out:

- The range of bodies awarding qualifications in the OQF;

- The range of qualifications to be included in the OQF;

- The basis for description of learning outcomes;

- The level structure of the OQF;

- The level descriptors of the OQF.

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