



A Synoptic View of the Albanian Qualifications Framework

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Level descriptor;
Learning outcomes



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Abstract: *This research addresses a synoptic analysis of the state of play of the qualifications aligned with the Albanian Qualifications Framework (AQF). One of the main features of human resource development is the development of a national qualification framework within which can be obtained all the necessary professional competences. Albania is gradually shifting from traditional qualifications into outcome based modern ones.*

Research methodology includes qualitative analysis, covering legal framework, strategic documents, other research papers related to the focus of this article. The study adopted a qualitative approach.

After 10 years of AQF developments and implementation, there is a need to restart the discussion on the number of AQF levels and, when needed, respective sub-levels in order to have a current common understanding among stakeholders about qualifications types and their relationship to each other. AQF implementation is linked with its contribution to policy goals such as lifelong learning and increasing the quality of education and training in Albania. For better development and implementation of the AQF, the responsible institutions should work in accordance with common principles, practices and criteria for the main respective functions: development of standards and qualifications, accrediting institutions to supply these qualifications; and, quality assuring assessment and certification.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current business climate encourages a focus on the significant role of human resources development, which is increasingly seen as a tool for achieving business strategy. One of the main features of human resource development is the development of a national qualification framework within which can be obtained all the necessary professional competences.

Given the direct impact of education in the overall development of any society, an initiative such as the AQF becomes of crucial importance. The approved AQF is a national instrument that serves to define, coordinate, govern and place the Albanian qualifications into an 8-level structure. These levels measure the learners' achievement in any education and training area, and are underpinned by identical principles for all forms of education and training in the country. The AQF levels should enable the transparency and comparing of the individuals' qualifications given the same level and in line with respective level descriptors. The possibility for the comparison of the qualifications is very important in order that any gained learning experience can be transferred from one level to another within a certain qualification field, leading to a high degree of permeability in education and training.

The labour demand in Albania is driven by changes in the economic structure. Meanwhile, required skills levels have been increasing within each industry due to the modernisation of production techniques. The quality assured qualifications referenced to the AQF levels in line with labour market needs can be an added value for education and training system in Albania. Government's role in education and training is still too dominant. Investments into human resource development

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are not part of the economic strategy of most enterprises. This panorama is not really helpful for developing and implementing AQF, because the AQF success is directly linked to the success in involving stakeholders by clearly defining their roles. Although, some of the social partners' representatives and teachers are part of the working groups in the National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ) for developing qualifications descriptions, frame curricula, etc.; still, there is no clear understanding of the AQF, which, on the other hand, affects their expectations on the tasks and duties that should be performed in order to be an important part of this reform.

Albania became a candidate country for joining the European Union, in June 2014. In the same year, the Government of Albania adopted 'National Employment and Skills Strategy (NESS)' and Action Plan 2014-2020, already revised in 2019 and extended till 2022, which has identified the need for a more holistic approach toward development and implementation of the AQF. Moreover, in 2015, an inter-institutional taskforce was established to prepare the required arrangements for the implementation of the AQF for lifelong learning. The task force, within its 2-year mandate and assisted by different technical groups will improve and complete the necessary legal framework for further AQF development and implementation, and as well support the AQF Referencing process with EQF.

In 2015, the working paper supported by European Training Foundation (ETF), on "Building an Albanian Qualification Framework: Demand-Side Analysis and List of Occupations" introduced a draft list of 182 most demanded occupations in Albania included in around 18 occupational fields.

The scope of this study is to analyse the state of play of the AQF. There were used mainly qualitative methods that have been adopted according to the time and resources available.

This research analyses the state of the Albanian Qualifications Framework. In the course of preparing this study a pool of online and offline relevant literature is analysed according to the purpose of the study. Literature review includes empirical studies on the theoretical context of the development of qualifications frameworks and their role in human resource development, as well as reports and study articles focused on qualifications frameworks operational modalities and related institutions, and their roles in developing this approach; comprehensive policy documents and relevant legislation in Albania, as well existing methodological approaches to design qualifications.

2. ANALYSIS

The Albanian Qualification Framework is operating in the context of a quite centralised education and training system. The AQF includes qualifications made for achievements in all education and training sectors, including general pre-university education, initial and further vocational education and training and higher education. The structure of the AQF intends to be compatible with the European Qualifications Framework, as it consists of 8 levels based on the levels descriptors defined by typical learning outcomes as follows: knowledge skills and wider competences. Three types of qualification are specified in the AQF as follows:

- General qualifications - AQF levels 1 and 4,
- Higher qualifications - AQF levels 5-8,
- Vocational qualifications offered at vocational education schools, vocational training centres and in the workplace – AQF levels 2-5.

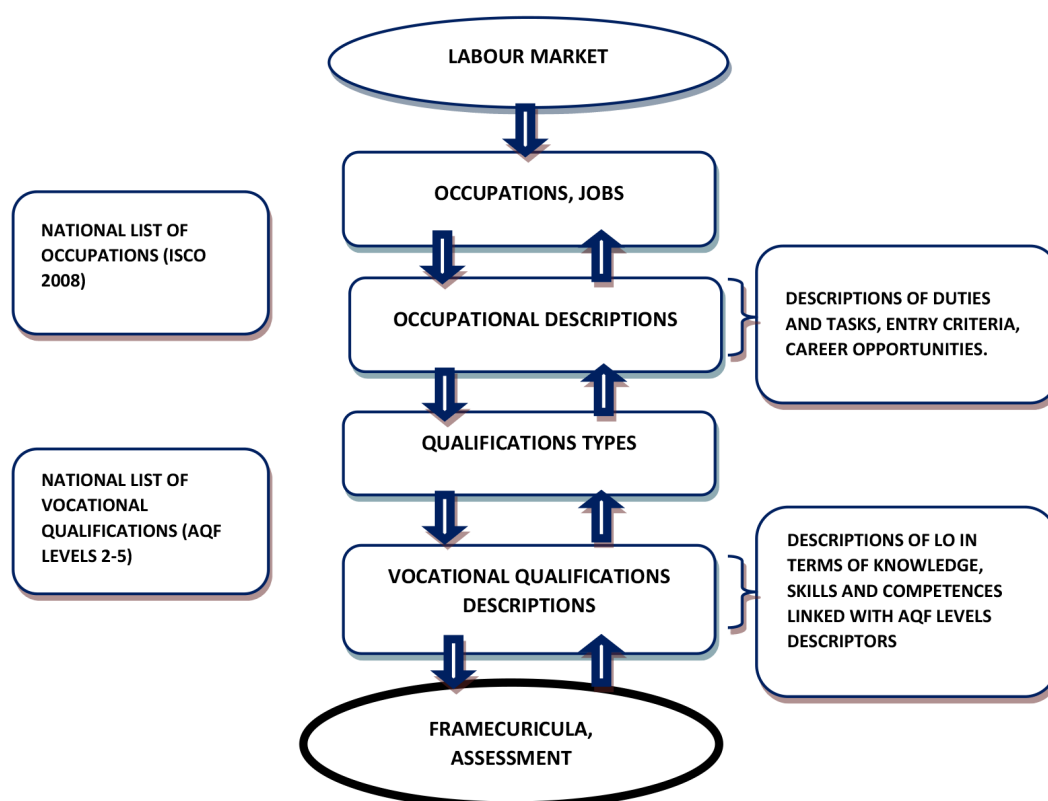


Figure 1. Designing vocational qualifications

Source: Gishti et al. (2009)

The AQF is designed aiming to facilitate vertical, horizontal and diagonal progression. In this context, the vocational education (VE) qualifications are provided by harmonizing among others the AQF structure with the educational structure of Vocational education and training (VET), in the following AQF levels: (i) 2nd level of AQF, programs for semi-qualified workers, 2 years duration, giving access to employment or second level; (ii) 3rd level of AQF, programs for qualified workers, 1 year duration, after the second AQF level, giving access to employment or the forth AQF level; (iii) 4th level of AQF, programs for technical-managerial, 1 year, or 2 ears durations after the second AQF level or 4 years in block after the first AQF level, giving access to employment or valid for university education; and (iv) 5th AQF level, postsecondary programs, up to two years, giving access to employment or valid for university education. There is no any existing framework to relate vocational training courses and HE qualifications with AQF levels descriptors. The transfer and progression pathways are quite rigid especially between VET and HE qualifications.

In VET sector there is a clear distinction between concepts of occupations and vocational qualifications. While qualifications may prepare individuals for one or more occupations, they play a wider role beyond preparing individuals to work in a specific occupation and beyond providing employers with skilled workers. Meanwhile, the occupations are associated with particular tasks and duties with a division of labour within an economic sector.

In VET, the NAVETQ implements a quality cycle to develop vocational qualifications in line with labour market needs and based on the occupational and qualifications descriptions. Up to date qualification description have been linked to formal system of the VE and preparation of individuals for broad rather than narrow fields of practice for the labour market.

Vocational qualifications in VET refer to the structure of jobs and the way they interlink with each other. In this perspective, linked occupations which share common practices, knowledge, skills and attitudes, allow individuals to move vertically by specialising within a broad field of practice, or horizontally, into related occupations. VE qualifications prepare students for a broader range of occupations rather than focusing on specific workplace tasks and roles or specific jobs. The development of such qualifications provide VET graduates with more transversal skills, enabling them to better adapt to changing labour market conditions. By doing this, both businesses and individuals are benefiting from better connections between qualifications and the labour market changes, because learners are prepared for a wider range of occupations.

In the qualification description, results must have a clear division between knowledge, skills and broader competences rubrics which are filled with relevant learning outcomes (LO). This makes easier to compare the LO expression of qualifications with the respective AQF level descriptor.

The template of the qualification descriptions contains the following information: general information (Title of the vocational qualification-field of vocational qualifications/profile, duration of qualification, level and respective code); Approving institution and the respective year; Entry criteria; Opportunities for employment or further education; and, the structure of the qualification which comprises the description of learning outcomes in terms of Knowledge, Skills, and Broader competences.

Level descriptors have acted directly as a guide in writing learning outcomes for the qualification. The selected qualification defines detailed knowledge of major theories and facts linked with the field, and as well transferable and practical skills which will make the learners able to act with increasing responsibility and autonomy, with reduced need for supervision, within defined instructions. Usually, the qualification descriptions are richer in terms of knowledge, skills and competences compared to respective AQF level descriptors.

The learning outcome statements usually contain the following components: a verb that indicates what the learner is expected to know or be able to do at the end of the period of learning; an object that indicates on what or with what the learner is acting, and in some cases, words can be found that indicate the nature of performance, which are really important to provide links with the assessment criteria. The direct link between qualification descriptions and assessment standards is still missing. Bloom taxonomy has been widely used for the purposes of the identification of the descriptors in terms of the learning outcomes.

Legal, ethical and communication considerations relate to the regulatory and ethical requirements of the function or task in a workplace, and respective application in different organisational contexts. These statements overlap and differ depending on work function, job role and sector, and are contextualised accordingly.

The analysis of non-formal vocational training courses shows that the programs of courses are quite diverse, both in terms of the profiles as well as their teaching/learning loads (durations). Duration of the courses varies from 2-5 months. The focus in the vocational training course is on procedural tasks. Theoretical contents account for about 20-30% of the learning volume and practical contents occupy about 60-70% of it, depending on the degree of difficulty of the course. While, usually 10% of the learning volume is dedicated to trainees' assessment.

In the last 10 years it is evidenced a shift towards Learning Outcome (LO) based approach of vocational training courses. The LO are not derived from the consideration of level descriptors. Formative and summative students' assessment in VET usually refers to official instructions and guidelines. In vocational training courses, there is not a clear model of the trainee assessment, particularly concerning the final exams. In most cases, VTC have developed internal regulations for setting out general rules for the final examination.

In HE, the respective qualifications are developed by the higher education's institutions and afterwards are accredited by the Public Agency for the Accreditation of Higher Education due to a predefined procedure for the accreditations of study programs. The study programs are mostly written in terms of teaching objectives rather than in terms of LO. This makes it difficult to argue its relation and to assess the mismatches of this qualification descriptions with AQF respective level descriptors.

3. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In order to facilitate horizontal and vertical progression and transfer, a unique program model (format) for vocational training courses, with modular structure based on learning outcomes should be developed, regardless of their profile/level. In order to have quality assured qualifications the development process should be guided by the level descriptors.

Also, HE qualifications should shift towards learning outcomes approach, and moreover, develop mechanisms to better build relationships with VET to facilitate educational pathways.

The value of an AQF stands in its potential to support policy goals such as qualitative education and lifelong learning. For the better development and implementation of the AQF, the responsible institutions should work to the common principles, practices and criteria for the main respective functions: development of standards and qualifications, accrediting institutions to supply these qualifications; and quality assuring assessment and certification. Skills development is not the sole preserve of education and labour ministers, teaching professionals and their administrators. Most of the learning occurs on the job as well. A future key challenge is linked with ensuring the active participation of the various stakeholders necessary to make possible a sustained development and implementation of the AQF. Furthermore, supporting the NAVETQ in capacity development in terms of human resources, technical, and financial resources, is crucial considering the added responsibilities foreseen in NESS 2019-2022.

4. CONCLUSION

After 10 years of AQF development and implementation, there is a need to have a common understanding among stakeholders about qualifications types and their relationship to each other. Types and titles of qualifications and occupational nominations should be as clear and consistent as possible, in order that qualifications' users (individuals, businesses and others) can link a qualification to other qualifications of the same type, with a clear reference to the AQF level to which the qualification belongs.

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