



## **Oman Qualifications Framework Development Project**

### **Technical Design Criteria for the Oman Qualifications Framework**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Technical Design Criteria for the OQF sets out the foundation technical structures for the framework. As the implementation of the framework proceeds there may be a need to develop further technical criteria.

## 2. CONTEXT: DESIGN PROPOSAL FOR THE OQF

The Conceptual Design Framework for the OQF traces the development process undertaken for the OQF, arriving at the identification of goals and objectives, and setting out a range of basic design criteria for the OQF. 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.

### 2.1 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.

## 2.2 Scope of the OQF

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

- Include all quality-assured<sup>1</sup> 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 programs;
- 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;
- 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

## 2.3 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The quality assurance process for the inclusion of qualifications on the framework is to be developed later, in the implementation of the OQF

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Framework.aspx>

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.

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;
- the 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.

### **3. COMPLETION OF THE TECHNICAL DESIGN**

This paper deals with the technical aspects of the OQF design criteria as described above. It sets out:

- The range of bodies awarding qualifications in the OQF;
- The range of qualifications to be included in the OQF;
- The levels structure of the OQF;
- The basis for description of learning outcomes;
- The level descriptors of the OQF.

This agenda addresses the initial foundation technical structures of the OQF. As the implementation of the framework proceeds there may be a need to develop further technical criteria, such as specifications for qualifications types, conventions on qualification titles, use of credit rating to define the relative 'sizes' of qualifications, classification of qualifications by learning sector.

Other design criteria are dealt with in the context of the initial implementation plan for the OQF, which outlines policies and procedures for the establishment of a range of implementation structures and mechanisms, including:

- Criteria for the inclusion of qualifications in the framework;
- 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;

- Arrangements for the development and maintenance of a register of qualifications in the framework.

### 3.1 Awarding Bodies in the OQF

The Report on the Environmental Scan of Qualifications, which was undertaken in the course of the OQF Development project, lists all of the general types of qualifications awarded in Oman. The data gathered for each type of qualification includes listings of the relevant Awarding Bodies and Supervising Authorities, as well as the ranges of qualifications for which they are responsible. An analysis of this data indicates that the distribution of responsibilities is as set out in the following table:

	Supervising Authority	Awarding Body	Programme Provider
Sultan Qaboos University	x	x	x
Oman Medical Speciality Board	x	x	x
Ministry of Education	x	x	
Ministry of Higher Education	x	x	
Ministry of Manpower	x	x	
Ministry of Health	x	x	
Ministry of Defence	x	x	
Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs	x	x	
Ministry of Justice	x	x	
Royal Oman Police	x	x	
A 'Sharqiya University		x	x
Oman Medical College		x	x
Sohar University		x	x
University of Nizwa		x	x

#### Notes:

- The Ministry of Defence functions as joint awarding body with several military bodies: Royal Air Force of Oman; Royal Army of Oman; National Defence College; Royal Naval Academy; Armed Forces Medical Services School; Command and Staff College.
- The Ministries of Justice and of Awqaf and Religious Affairs supervise just one qualification each; the other Ministries supervise ranges of qualifications.
- The institutions that are both programme providers and awarding bodies come under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education. The exceptions are Sultan Qaboos University, which is autonomous, and the Oman Medical Speciality Board. The overall effect is that responsibility for all Omani qualifications can be traced to a statutory body, in most cases to a Ministry.
- The Ministry of Manpower supervises and awards qualifications for a very wide range of qualifications in the TVET sector, via two General Directorates within the Ministry.

### 3.2 The Range of Qualifications to be Included in the OQF

The Report on the Environmental Scan of Qualifications, which was undertaken in the course of the OQF Development project, lists all of the general types of qualifications awarded in Oman (e.g. Vocational Diploma, or Advanced Diploma) and also many of the specific qualifications awarded (e.g. Advanced Diploma in Military Naval Science, or Bachelor in General Nursing). The range of types of qualifications comprises:

- **School Qualifications:**
  - General Education Certificate;
  - General Education Diploma.
- **TVET Qualifications:**
  - Vocational Certificates;
  - Certificate of Vocational Competency – Semi-skilled;
  - Certificate of Vocational Competency – Skilled;
  - Certificate of Vocational Competency – Craftsman;
  - Vocational Diploma;
  - Diploma of Technology;
  - Advanced Diploma of Technology;
  - Bachelor of Technology.
- **Higher Education Qualifications:**
  - Certificate;
  - Diploma;
  - Advanced Diploma;
  - Bachelor Degree;
  - Graduate Diploma Postgraduate Diploma;
  - Masters Degree;
  - Doctorate.

All of these types of qualifications will be included in the OQF. In the TVET sector, a wide variety of Vocational Certificates is awarded, and the mode of inclusion of these qualifications will be established in the criteria for the inclusion of qualifications in the framework.

There are some new types of qualifications under development: a General Vocational Education Diploma; a new Apprenticeship qualification system that will replace the three Certificates of Vocational Competency; a new Vocational Diploma for programmes in the Private Training Institutes sector. These qualifications will be included in the OQF.

#### 3.2.1 Foreign and International Qualifications

In addition to these Omani qualifications, many programmes in education and training in Oman lead to foreign qualifications, or the qualifications of international awarding bodies. These include:

- **School Sector**
  - International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE);
  - General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE);
  - General Certificate of Education (GCE, at O Level and A Level);
  - International Baccalaureate Certificate / Diploma.
- **TVET Sector**
  - ACCA Certificates;
  - Foreign and international Vocational Certificates.

- **Higher Education Sector** - Many higher education programmes in Oman, particularly in the private colleges and universities, lead to qualifications of foreign and international awarding bodies. These include ACCA certificates, and awards equivalent to all levels of the Oman Academic Qualifications Framework up to Masters from institutions in UK, Austria, Spain, Ireland and India.

Protocols for the inclusion of foreign and international qualifications in the OQF will be developed in the criteria for the inclusion of qualifications in the framework, in the course of the implementation of the OQF. It will be necessary to agree these protocols with the relevant awarding bodies or, where appropriate, to establish the alignment of these qualifications to the OQF levels through a process of international referencing of the OQF. The initial listing of qualifications on the OQF will not include foreign and international qualifications.

### **3.2.2 Former or Obsolete Qualifications**

Several types of qualifications have been identified that are no longer awarded, but that are still held by citizens in Oman; apart from their value to the individual as recognition of their learning achievement, many of these qualifications still have value in the workplace. These qualifications will not be included in the primary listings of the OQF, but an alternative mode of inclusion of these qualifications will be established in the criteria for the inclusion of qualifications in the framework.

## **3.3 The Level Structure of the OQF**

The basic deciding factor in establishing the number of levels in an NQF is that it should be sufficient to accommodate all of the qualifications deemed relevant for inclusion. Other factors may influence decisions about the number of levels – for example, a policy of ensuring easy referencing to a meta-framework (such as the EQF), or a policy of alignment to the qualifications systems of neighbouring countries or countries with a shared labour market. Most countries introducing a qualifications framework take into account the need to include new qualifications that are planned. Some countries insert levels to encourage the development of new qualifications where there are perceived gaps in the system.

In the case of the OQF, an analysis of the range of qualifications to be included indicates that a framework of eight levels could provide appropriate classification and differentiation between the types of qualifications. However, this approach does not take account of the need to accommodate new qualifications that are under development. Also, while it has not yet been possible to differentiate between the many Vocational Certificates awarded in the TVET sector, it is anticipated that these may require several levels to ensure accurate classification. A further issue is that the Benchmarking activity, and its associated consultation process, identified a desire that the OQF should be able to accommodate qualifications that could be developed to recognise the achievement of very basic learning outcomes. Taking all of these factors into account, a framework of ten levels is identified as the optimal structure for the OQF.

While there is clear agreement among stakeholders that the OQF should be the single structure for the classification of all qualifications in Oman, there were some responses to the Benchmarking consultation that advised that the OQF should have multi-strands for different categories of qualifications. Another consideration is that there is an established classification of higher education qualifications in Oman, the Oman Academic Qualifications Framework, and there was strong agreement in the Benchmarking consultation that this



should be embedded in the OQF. Taking account of this guidance from stakeholders, the level structure of the OQF is to be presented as a multi-stranded structure, as in the diagram on the following page.

This table is for illustrative purposes only.

ACADEMIC NQF	OQF	H.E QUALIFICATIONS	T.V.E.T QUALIFICATIONS	GENERAL EDUCATION/ SCHOOL QUALIFICATIONS
6	10	Doctoral Degree		
5	9	Master's Degree Postgraduate Diploma		
4	8	Bachelor's Degree Graduate Diploma	Bachelor of Technology	
3	7	Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma of Technology	
2	6	Diploma	Diploma of Technology Vocational Diploma	
1	5	Certificate	Certificate of Vocational Competency – Craftsman <sup>1</sup>	
	4		Certificate of Vocational Competency – Skilled <sup>2</sup>	
	3		General Vocational Education Diploma <sup>4</sup>  Certificate of Vocational Competency – Semi-Skilled <sup>3</sup>	General Education Diploma
	2		Vocational Certificates	General Education Certificate
	1		Access Certificate <sup>5</sup>	

**Notes:**

1,2,3 - These three qualifications are to be replaced by a certificate of Apprenticeship in accordance with bylaw of September 2015

4 - This qualification is under development

5 - Access certificates may be developed to provide certification for certain elementary learning achievements

### 3.4 The Description of Learning Outcomes in the OQF

The Basic Design Criteria for the OQF set out that it is to be a structure of levels with level descriptors that describe the expected learning outcomes at each level. The first step in addressing this requirement is to establish the basis on which learning outcomes are to be described. The Benchmarking Report (in Appendix 3) compares the approaches taken in the seven NQFs that were reviewed. In all seven, the level descriptors are made up of statements about the nature of the learning outcomes required at each level; the statements are set out under headings. All seven NQFs adopt 'knowledge' and 'skills' as headings, and also one or more headings that describe aspects of 'competence'.

The starting point for the development of a methodology for the description of learning outcomes in the OQF is a consideration of how this is done in the Oman Academic Qualifications Framework (OAQF). This framework classifies the qualifications awarded in higher education in Oman, and in the Colleges of Technology from the TVET sector. As outlined above, there was strong agreement in the Benchmarking consultation that the OAQF should be embedded in the OQF. Also, the (2014) decision of the Education Council, directing that a comprehensive national qualifications framework be developed, recommended that this be done by further developing the existing OAQF.

#### 3.4.1 Learning Outcomes in the OAQF

The OAQF was designed with two purposes, to provide:

- Consistency in programme design and award titles, and;
- Equivalence of standards in comparison with respected international institutions of Higher Education.

The OAQF level descriptors are suitable for these two purposes. The OAQF sets out that "the (expected learning outcomes) statements are generic descriptions grouped under the headings: Knowledge, Cognitive Skills, and General Competencies." The descriptors developed on this basis are richer and more complex than this three-heading definition would suggest. They include statements under a fourth heading, Qualities of Holders of the (Bachelors) Degree, which further describe the learning outcomes for each type of qualification. In addition, each OAQF descriptor has a preamble that sets out information about the credit rating of the qualification, refers to the nature of typical programmes, and includes some (mostly summary) statements about expected learning outcomes. The OAQF descriptors are generally very suitable as a basis for promoting consistency of programme design in higher education.

The OAQF descriptors are generally similar in structure to the descriptors in higher education qualifications frameworks that are found in many Anglophone countries, for example the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>4</sup>. The OAQF descriptors would support the comparison of standards with other higher education qualifications frameworks.

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<sup>4</sup> The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf>

### 3.4.2 Learning Outcomes in the OQF

The objectives of the OQF are quite different from the purposes of the OAQF:

- To classify all qualifications in Oman;
- To provide an international reference point for Omani qualifications, and;
- To support the development of new qualifications in the future.

The objectives are elaborated in section 2.1 above. The key word in the original design brief for the OQF is that it should be a comprehensive framework, and this is reflected in the very broad scope of the OQF as described in section 2.2 above. The OQF levels therefore need to function as a classification instrument for a wide range of types of qualifications, to be used by a diverse community of awarding bodies, supervising bodies, programme providers and institutions. In particular, it is necessary for the OQF level descriptors to be able to reflect learning outcomes associated with qualifications from the TVET sector that emphasise practical skills and professional competence. The international referencing function of the OQF is focused on relationships with other national and meta-frameworks of qualifications. The OQF is also intended to provide a basis for the development of new qualifications. The key features required of the level descriptors for a qualifications framework to fulfil this range of functions are clarity, consistency of language and comparability in the description of learning outcomes.

Taking into account the needs arising out of the objectives of the OQF and also the desire to embed the OAQF into the new framework, the approach to the development of level descriptors for the OQF is to adopt the core OAQF categorisation of learning outcomes under three headings, with modifications to enable the descriptors to fulfil the wider functions of the OQF. These modifications are as follows:

- The Cognitive Skills heading is simplified to Skills; under this heading, statements will refer to levels of cognitive skills and technical skills;
- The General Competencies heading is amended to General Competence; under this heading, statements will refer to learning outcomes under four sub-headings:
  - Autonomy and responsibility;
  - Learning skills;
  - Communication skills;
  - Employability.
- The description of program features in the preamble to each OAQF descriptor is removed, and this information could be included in the Qualification Type specifications that may be developed for the OQF in the course of implementation of the framework; instead, the OQF descriptors provide a brief summary of the Qualities of Holders of qualifications at each level.

Summarising, the OQF level descriptors comprise statements defining the learning outcomes required for the award of a qualifications at each level, set out in terms of:

- Knowledge;
- Skills (incorporating cognitive and practical skills);
- General Competences (incorporating autonomy/responsibility, learning skills, communication skills and employability).

For each level there is a non-definitive, brief summary of the overall learner achievement associated with the level, under the heading of Qualities of Holders.

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