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Conference Sub-Theme 4: National Qualifications Frameworks and their links to Quality Assurance

Title: Aligning the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework, quality assurance, policy directions and regional frameworks

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are views of the authors and not of the Government of Papua New Guinea.

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Abstract

Our paper provides an analysis of the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework and experience to date in considering its implementation. It focuses on identifying implementation strategies and ways to improve the approved Framework. We highlight the challenges in aligning this National Qualifications Framework with existing structural and coordination arrangements, with quality assurance measures, with desired policy directions for higher education, and with regional qualifications frameworks. After some brief contextual background and a sketch of the PNGNQF, we address firstly the different roles and responsibilities of a range of agencies and the challenges of coordinated implementation of the PNGNQF under these circumstances. We also consider the socio-cultural challenge of educating the population about the nature and significance of an NQF. From this discussion, we raise a series of more technical considerations for the PNGNQF, including questions about the links between technical and vocational qualifications and higher education qualifications, the integration of the PNGNQF into existing quality assurance requirements for higher education, the need for a credit-based approach. We also consider the extent to which the Framework, as it stands, facilitates desired Government policy directions for post-secondary education. We discuss as well issues in coordinating the PNGNQF with the regional Pacific Qualifications Framework. In a final section, we summarise ways forward for implementation but also suggest ways to revise and improve the PNGNQF, for its next iteration. The issues and challenges we explore here can be used to improve the system and processes in PNG and may assist other countries.

Introduction

The Government of Papua New Guinea recently approved a National Qualifications Framework [PNGNQF] (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2012).

The approval of the framework is timely, as the national higher education sector and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector face the challenges of greatly increasing the output of skilled workers while at the same time improving the quality and standards of student learning.

The higher education sector is experiencing an increased demand for higher education, as Grade 12 completions are rapidly rising. The national Government is has a major long-term issue as there are increased outputs from the secondary school system every year, and the school-aged population is growing even more quickly.

However, the approval of the PNGNQF presents government agencies with significant challenges and issues in implementation of the Framework. In this paper we explore these challenges, as a contribution on the literature on implementation of qualifications frameworks in the context of higher education quality assurance.

The higher education system in Papua New Guinea is made up of twenty nine (29) institutions including six (6) universities. Four of the universities are state owned and two are church-based. There are also a range of public teachers' and nursing colleges, and public business and technical colleges. These institutions were declared by the Government of Papua New Guinea to be higher education institutions at various times prior to independence in 1975 and after independence.

As well, there are various church-run institutions providing higher education qualifications. A small number of private for-profit providers are making their way into the sector through the accreditation process. Some other these providers also offer TVET qualifications.

The Framework

The Commission for Higher Education (CHE) through the Office of Higher Education (OHE) developed the National Qualifications Framework as an intervention strategy to bring all post-grade 12 qualifications under the oversight of a single State body, the Commission, and in the attempt to create a unified system to better coordinate the whole education sector.

While the NQF sets the timeframe and descriptors for specific programs and qualifications, it also lays down a structure to unify the fragmented system of responsibilities (outlined in the next section) by bringing all coordination under the oversight of a single body.

Approval of the Framework by the National Executive Council recognises its importance to Papua New Guinea part of a global community where there is continuous student and employment mobility.

Figures 1 and 2 below show the structure of the PNGNQF.

Figure 1: Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework

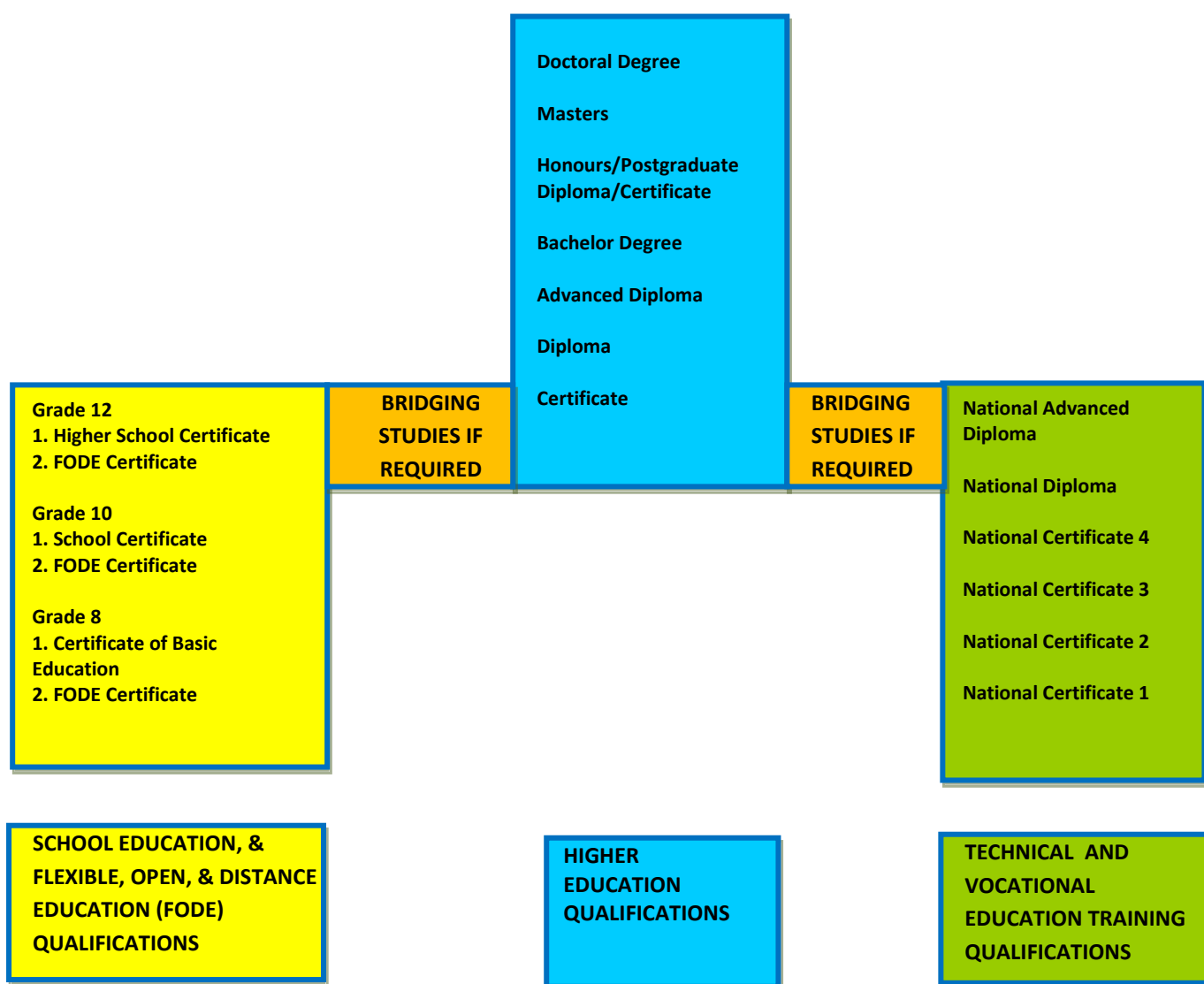
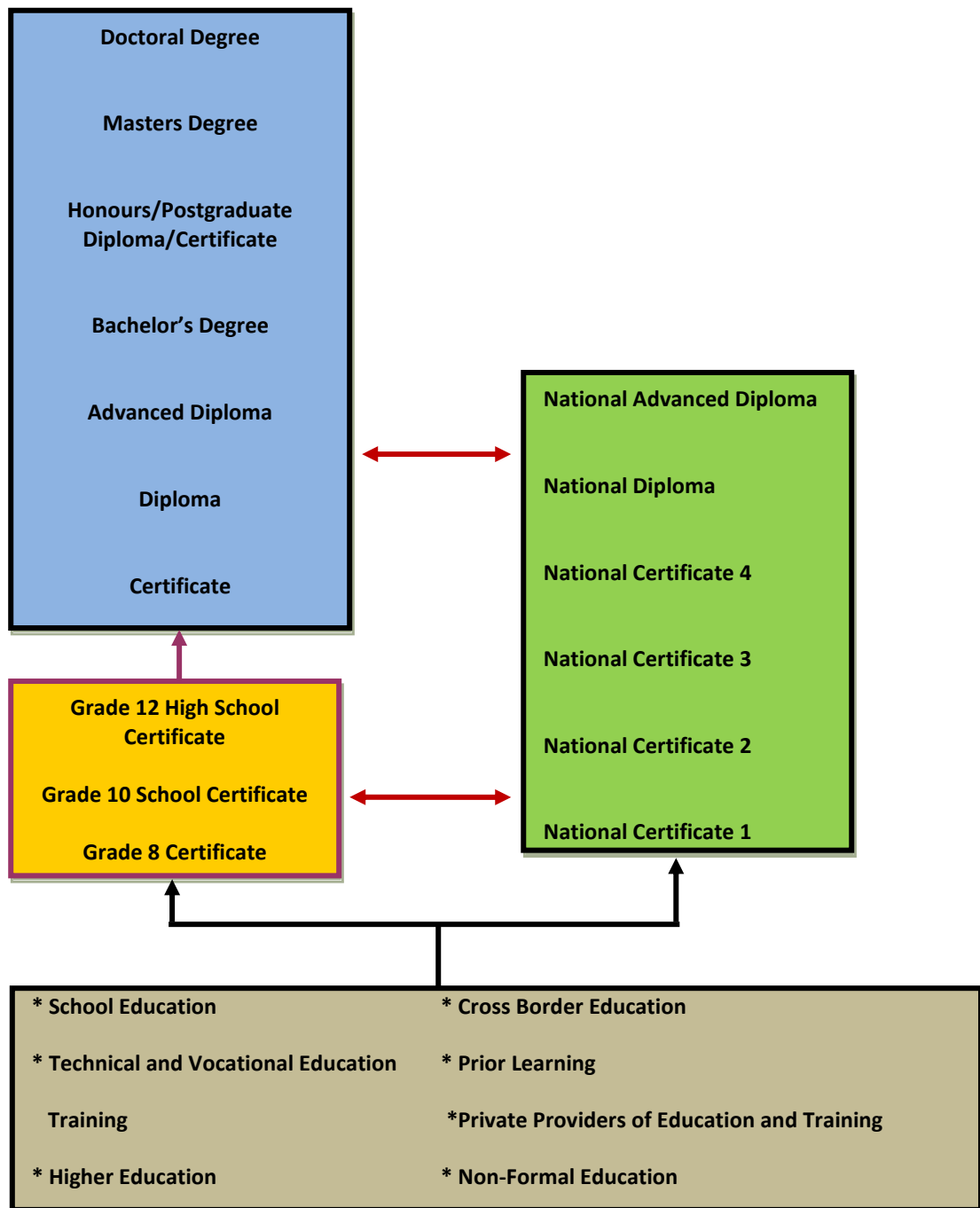


Figure 2: Educational and Training Articulation Pathways of the PNGNQF



As can be seen, the PNG NQF is a 'linking' framework (Tuck, (2007) for different categories of educational qualification rather than an integrated framework for all levels of education.

The framework only indicates the number of years for each program leading to a higher education qualification, that is, the 'volume of learning' indicators are not credit based. For example the number of years for a bachelor program to be undertaken is a period of four to five years. There are no 'volume of learning' indicators at all for TVET qualifications.

The next section of this paper discusses some structural matters affecting implementation of the NPGNQF that will need to be worked through. Subsequent sections discuss communication issues, specific points relating to the incorporation of the Framework into

quality assurance mechanisms for higher education and the effect of the Framework on attempts to more closely link higher education and TVET in PNG. We discuss emerging challenges in aligning the PNGNQF and the Pacific Qualifications Framework. Finally, we outline some improvements for the future.

Structural matters and responsibilities for implementation

The neat and logical structures for coordination and approval of qualifications set out in the PNGNQF do not yet reflect the on-the-ground reality. There are thus implementation challenges, especially as for some public institutions there is as yet little differentiation between responsibilities for funding and management and responsibilities for quality assurance against the PNGNQF.

Papua New Guinea has a system where different government bodies have responsibility for institutions providing different levels of qualifications. The Department of Education has responsibility for all qualifications from elementary to secondary education. It is also in charge of all teachers colleges and public TVET, including the technical and business colleges.

All nursing colleges come under the oversight of the National Department of Health. The universities on the other hand, are autonomous bodies created and declared by an Acts of Parliament.

The National Training Council (NTC) under the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations (DLIR) accredits all private providers of TVET and their programs, under the *National Training Council Act 1991*. The National Apprenticeship Trade and Testing Board (NATTB) under the same Department plays this role in respect of trade testing.

The *Higher Education Act 1983* gives responsibilities to the Commission for Higher Education for oversight of post-secondary education. The CHE's roles and functions include advising the Minister on all matters concerning higher education and making recommendations on the development of the National Higher Education Plan, broad areas of responsibility and objectives that should be assigned to the various declared institutions, appropriate arrangements for the coordination and management of declared institutions, general policies in relation to higher education of citizens resident abroad and of non-citizen student enrolled in programmes in declared institutions and financial allocations needed for declared institutions having regard to the finances available for higher education.

The Office of Higher Education is the Secretariat to the Commission for Higher Education but over time its activities and function have expanded considerably, to the extent that the lines between CHE and OHE's responsibilities have become somewhat blurred. Initially the main additional role of the Office of Higher Education (OHE) was the coordination of scholarships under the Tertiary Education Student Assistance Scheme (TESAS) policy. Over the years, the role of the OHE has extended to policy and a greater focus on regulatory functions in respect of higher education (non-TVET) providers.

Authority and responsibility for the quality assurance of public and private providers of higher education does not have strong legislative underpinnings. The national Departments of

Education and Health, the agencies responsible for public teachers' and nursing colleges respectively, arguably have responsibilities for quality assurance in these institutions. However, institutional accreditation and program accreditation of some providers is being carried out under the auspices of CHE.

Given these divided responsibilities, coordination of the implementation of the NQF becomes difficult and will require close cooperation among the various agencies. The NTC is now considering the PNGNQF requirements in its registration and accreditation processes and the OHE is working through a plan for implementation of the NQF among higher education providers. However, overall responsibilities for implementation of the NQF are not yet clear, so plans for overall coordination and monitoring of the NQF implementation across the different agencies will need to be developed.

Communications challenges

A communications strategy for the public about the PNGNQF will also need to be developed, as there are cultural challenges in developing appropriate public awareness. There are also challenges for providers in distinguishing between certain TVET and higher education qualifications.

In PNG, an absence of proper effective regulatory processes in the past has led to cases of bogus qualifications and bogus institutions. However, many citizens and employers are not aware of the difference between bona fide and bogus providers. As yet, PNG has only a tiny proportion of citizens who are university graduates and a comparatively small higher education sector. There is thus not an informed public that can readily appreciate the difference between NQF-compliant and accredited qualifications and other 'awards'.

As noted above, the PNGNQF uses certificates and diplomas as the titles for NQF qualifications, but it cannot protect the use of these titles. In this situation, there is a fear of the public not being well informed of why a NQF matters and an even greater concern that the public will continue to demand 'certificates' or 'diplomas' of ever shorter duration, expecting these to be recognised in the same way as NQF-compliant and accredited programs. There may also be a need to ensure that employers and industry are better-informed about the NQF and the accreditation of qualifications.

A further difficulty is caused by currently unclear responsibilities between CHE through OHE and the National Training Council for accreditation of certificates, diplomas and advanced diplomas. Both higher education and TVET qualifications in PNG use the titles 'diploma' and 'certificate'. In these circumstances, there are potential confusions and misunderstandings between higher education and TVET qualifications. In particular, there are many institutions across the country that offer diploma programs.

Providers are not always sure which agency should take responsibility for accreditation of a qualification, and even the agencies themselves have not always been certain. There are currently cases of institutions registered with the Investment Promotion Authority (IPA) as a business and then with NTC to offer training programs. The same providers are also offering higher education programs using their NTC Registration.

One the face of it, the presence of the PNGNQF should clarify the differences, as it would be possible to consider a TVET diploma as one that is described as a TVET qualification under the NQF and similarly for higher education diplomas. And, although the use of the title diploma cannot be protected, the existence of the NQF gives an opportunity to distinguish between diplomas that are NQF compliant and those that do not meet the NQF requirements.

However, the PNGNQF does not offer a clear basis on which to make a distinction between TVET and higher education diplomas. The Office of Higher Education and the NTC have formed a working party to attempt – as an interim solution – to articulate a reasonable demarcation between TVET and higher education diploma qualifications. If this is not feasible, the two agencies will need to come to a sensible arrangement for which agency accredits qualifications at diploma level (this could be a joint process), which can be clearly communicated to providers and institutions.

Incorporating the NQF into higher education quality assurance requirements

A second, but much more straightforward, set of challenges, lies in incorporating PNGNQF requirements into the existing – and planned processes – for higher education accreditation. Qualification frameworks should closely link with quality assurance and one common element to be present is learning outcomes (ENQA, 2012) The PNGNQF does address the learning outcomes for each qualification level through its broad level descriptors.

There are as yet no separate standards for program accreditation for higher education awards in PNG, but there are standards for institutional accreditation, some of which are used for program accreditation.

The current system is a voluntary process that does not require all institutions to go through the process of institutional accreditation. The process can be undertaken by those institutions that wish to be accredited by the CHE.

There are a number of existing quality assurance policies and guidelines that outline the process of accreditation in collaboration with the Guidelines for Institutional Like institutional accreditation, program accreditation is essentially a voluntary process at present. There is however an incentive for providers and institutions in the form of student government scholarships. The Tertiary Education Students Assistance Scheme (TESAS) Policy requires institutions to have their programs accredited before a scholarship can be awarded. As soon as the program is approved by the CHE, the program is able to be allocated scholarships for the following academic year.

The existing PNG Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation are based on nine standards, as follows.

1. Integrity
2. Purpose (Including Mission Statement)
3. Governance and Administration
4. Educational Programs
5. Academic and non-academic staff
6. Learning resources (ICT, and library)

7. Student activities (including services to students)
8. Physical Resources
9. Financial Resources

This set of standards is globally recognisable and is similar to those used by other countries.

Under Standard 4, on Academic Programs, the requirements of the PNGNQF can be reflected into curriculum design quite readily, although there is no specific requirement under Standard 4 in respect of the volume of learning.

A program specification document has been adopted by OHE for use by applicants for program accreditation, and this includes requirements relating to PNGNQF compliance, including learning outcomes. (For overseas providers, these requirements could refer to consistency with the PNGNQF.) The Office of Higher Education is conducting a series of awareness workshops around the country, to ensure that providers understand the NQF and how it is important for quality assurance.

While the PNG NQF does not preclude the development of credit-based approaches, it does not facilitate them (Coles, 2006). There is currently no uniform credit system in place for higher education institutions in PNG and many institutions do not use a system of credit points. As said earlier the NQF only outlines the duration of the programs in the number of years. It is therefore difficult at this time to integrate into the curriculum a standard set of notional student learning hours because of the absence of a credit based system in the NQF.

Criteria for expected student hours of learning and credit points are under development as a benchmark for higher education programs. Further, the universities are now working to put together a coherent credit transfer system that will facilitate access of students across institutions in the country.

Moreover, the OHE has embarked on a series of changes to improve the existing higher education quality assurance mechanisms, to better protect the public and students in respect of higher education programs. These changes include proposed new legislation, to better address the regulatory as well as the development aspects of quality assurance. A reviewed quality assurance system also calls for a better monitoring of cross border providers and those domestic providers offering franchised programs from overseas. The timing of approval of the new PNGNQF is fortunate in this sense, as its requirements – even if imperfect – can be included readily in these new standards and regulations (ENQA, 2012).

Desired policy directions for post-secondary education

As in many developing countries, the school education sector in PNG is such a big sector that it makes the tertiary education sector seem even smaller. The success of policies focusing on school education is now causing a bottleneck at entry into the tertiary sector: only a small proportion of the total Grade 12 output enters colleges and universities.

Desired directions for post-secondary education in PNG include much more emphasis on the role of TVET as the entry point to further studies and work. For many people, TVET studies are more affordable, realistic and appropriate, given the employment opportunities that are available, than higher education.

Other, related, directions involve an expansion of pathways between TVET and higher education, and much stronger arrangements for credit transfer, advanced standing, articulation among programs and recognition of prior learning. Clearly, pathways between the TVET and higher education sectors should create flexibility for mobility of students between these sectors.

The PNG NQF, although valuable as an initial framework, does not fully support these desired directions. Firstly, as noted above, the PNG NQF is a ‘linking’ rather than an integrated framework, so there are barriers between TVET and higher education qualifications, rather than well-defined pathways. The framework links the different sectors together through some vague references to ‘bridging studies’.

Secondly, also as noted above, the absence of any specified volume of learning in the TVET qualifications descriptors and the lack of a credit base also limits the usefulness of the PNGNQF as a supporting tool to foster these desired directions. As mentioned, a common credit system is now being developed. This should allow for student mobility between different institutions.

An obvious next step for a subsequent iteration of the PNGNQF is to integrate a credit-based system into the Framework, to properly spell out the requirements in terms of credit points to complete a program leading to a qualification. The Framework could also clarify for providers the different titles being used for units and programs used across different institutions in the country. The terms credits, units and course are used interchangeably which also creates confusion.

Building bridges to regional compatibility and labour mobility

One further important consideration is the extent to which the PNGNQF is consistent with other national qualifications frameworks in the region and particularly the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) (SPBEA, 2011). Alignment with regional or meta-frameworks will be important for future labour mobility. Efforts to establish an ASEAN qualifications framework (ASEAN, 2012) are also relevant, as PNG looks also to Asia, as well as to its traditional Pacific partners (including Australia and New Zealand), for models for its tertiary education system.

One issue that has already provoked discussion, not surprisingly given PNG’s Pacific context, is the extent to which there is compatibility between expectations of the volume of learning in bachelor degrees across the Pacific region. Papua New Guinean institutions are required under the NQF to offer a bachelor’s degree of 4 to 5 years, while many other countries in the region have qualifications frameworks that set a volume of learning of 3 years.

To assist in considering how the PNGNQF and the PQF might be better aligned, the Office of Higher Education accepted an offer from the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) in Fiji to ‘map’ or reference the PNGNQF against the Pacific Qualifications Framework. This task has now been completed and will be considered soon by relevant committees in PNG.

It should be remembered that the PQF is only a translating device, which is there to unify various national qualifications frameworks from the different countries in the Pacific. However, the PQF provides a sound basis against which to consider the PNGNQF, as it is similar to the qualifications frameworks used in Australia, New Zealand and a number of other countries.

After close analysis of the PNGNQF against the PQF, there are a number of critical issues which stand out in comparing the PNGNQF and the PQF. The report by SPBEA points out these outstanding issues, such as the fact that it is not possible to define qualification types and a credit profile for each level from the existing PNGNQF (SPBEA, 2013).

From the analysis by the SPBEA, the inclusion of 'Job Level' in the TVET level descriptors in the PNGNQF may require some discussion as it may suggest a more direct link between learning and eventual job placement than is warranted. The report notes that this may not have been intentional but that inclusion of information on work titles and levels is not the function of a qualifications framework (SPBEA, 2013)

A further issue for PNG concerns cross-border provision under its dual system of TVET and higher education qualifications. Mobility of students and employment in Papua New Guinea has increased in the past decades. Movement of students and employment within the region should be easier with the PNGNQF assessed against the PQF. However, this will require minor improvements to be made to the PNGNQF.

The use of the PQGNQF is crucial to monitor the qualifications of foreigners seeking employment within the country (Burke, 2009) and Papua New Guineans undertaking studies across borders. However, as yet no consideration has been given to which PNG agency monitor these qualifications against the PNGNQF. We suggest that the Foreign Employment Division within the Depart of Labour and Industrial Relations (DLIR) might work together with the OHE and the NTC to closer monitor different qualification types before awarding employment to foreigners. There is currently a shortage of skilled labour in PNG and, as a result, there is an influx of persons entering the country to work in the mining industry. Consistency with the qualifications levels in the PNGNQF could be taken into account in assessing the qualifications of those seeking employment in Papua New Guinea.

Future actions and improvements

The discussion in the previous sections has highlighted some areas for further work and improvement of the PNGNQF. These, and some further suggestions for improved coordination, are summarised in this final section of the paper.

Firstly, there should be closer collaboration between the different coordinating and accrediting bodies (NTC and OHE) in charge of the different levels of qualification, as there is still a need for a whole of Government Implementation Plan to apply the requirements of the PNGNQF. Those responsible for assessing overseas qualifications will need to be involved also. The socio-cultural challenges of effective public communication of the PNGNQF should be one element of this Plan.

Secondly, there should be a clear demarcation between coordination roles of the different agencies responsible in implementing the PNGNQF at the different levels: schools, TVET and higher education. The PNGNQF gives considerable emphasis to higher education and there is no clear indication on which agency or agencies should accredit all TVET institutions and their programs.

From observation, it will be very difficult to get all agencies to be accountable to a single body taking into consideration the cultural context. However, by working together, the various agencies may be able to come to workable arrangements. It is suggested that a revision of the PNGNQF could exclude from the main document the existing lengthy account of potential coordination structures. A separate Implementation Guide, reflecting actual agreements reached between agencies, could then be developed, to more clearly specify roles and responsibilities for coordination and implementation.

Thirdly, the PNGNQF should be revised to include a credit base for the volume of learning. If it remains as a 'linking' framework, it will need to clarify the differences between TVET and higher education qualifications, and especially diplomas. The nature of 'bridging studies' could also be explained. Other amendments as suggested by the referencing against the PQF should be included. Given the desired policy directions of the PNG Government, and the need to bridge the gap between TVET and higher education, it would be preferable for a revised PNGNQF to be developed as a fully integrated framework.

A revised PNGNQF might also give consideration to the place of Indigenous knowledge and skills, a feature of the Pacific Qualifications Framework that is directly applicable to PNG, with its rich and diverse cultural heritage, but which is not present in the existing PNGNQF.

Lastly but not the least is a review of the revised PNGNQF, to ensure it is as consistent as possible with regional qualifications frameworks.

We are pleased that Papua New Guinea has taken the first steps towards a codification and articulation of the recognised qualifications in the country, through the PNGNQF. This analysis of experience to date and our suggestions for improvement are offered to this Conference to share with others who may need to update their qualifications frameworks. We hope our analysis will also be of benefit to PNG for the next version of the NQF.

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