



Qualifications Frameworks and their development stages

In response to the request of the sub-group of the EQF Advisory Group on *Comparison of third country frameworks with the EQF*, this paper describes the different developmental stages national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and regional qualifications frameworks (RQFs) tend to go through. The paper is based on the experiences of Cedefop and ETF over the last two decades in relation to the development and implementation of national and regional qualifications frameworks in Europe and beyond. Agreeing on the characteristics and sequencing of these stages is useful for the following main reasons:

- A consolidated description of stages can act as a reference point for national developments by clarifying what has been achieved and by identifying possible future developments.
- A consolidated description of stages can act as a reference point for cooperation and mutual learning between countries.

Following the rapid introduction of qualification frameworks over the last two decades there is a growing need to systematically assess their impact and added value. We believe that agreeing on a set of consolidated stages supports systematic monitoring and feed into the dialogue on the relevance and efficiency of this policy instrument. The identification of NQF stages is also directly relevant to the development of RQFs as these depend directly on the progress in implementation of the involved NQFs.

1. National qualifications framework – a never ending story

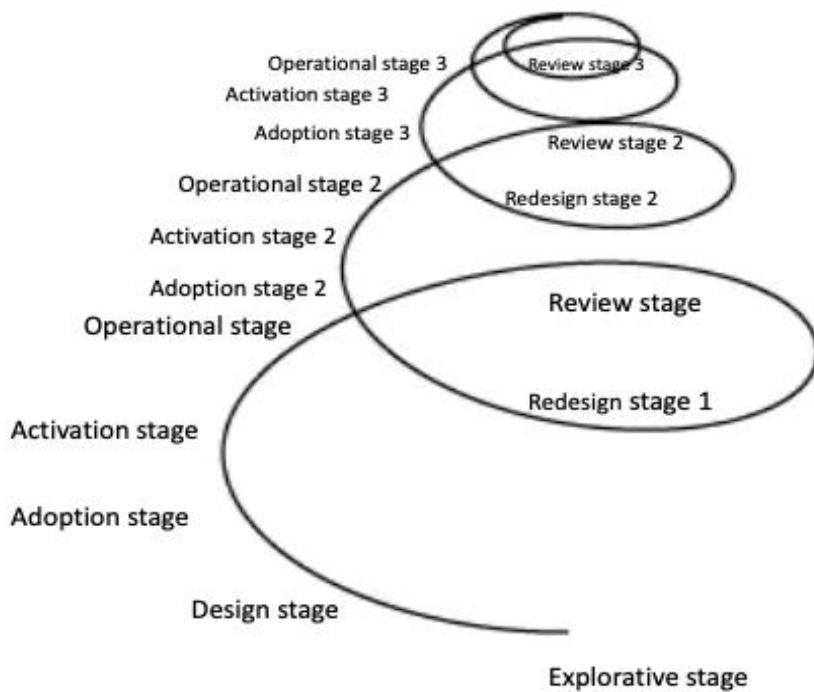
Based on previous work by Cedefop and ETF we suggest using the following six stages to describe the development of national qualifications frameworks:

- (a) Explorative stage;
- (b) Design stage;
- (c) Adoption stage;
- (d) Activating stage;
- (e) Operational stage;
- (f) Review stage.

These stages combine the somewhat different perspectives applied by ETF and Cedefop over the years. While ETF has focussed on the policy process (referring to ad-hoc, initial, structured and defined policy stages), Cedefop has paid more attention to the gradual evolution of frameworks into functioning policy instruments (referring to conceptualisation, formalisation, operationalisation and evaluation/re-design). Given the rapid development of NQFs 'from

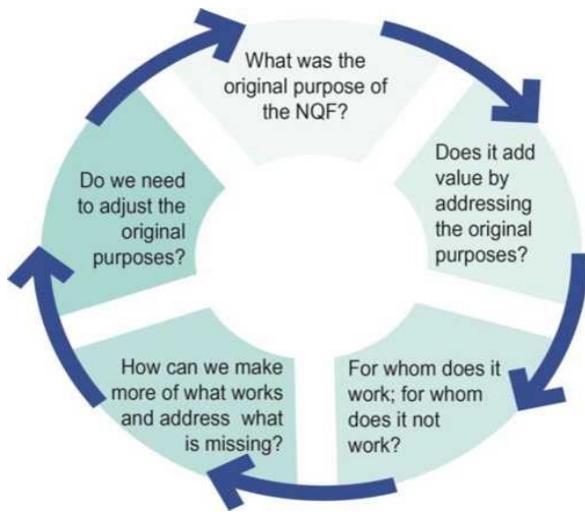
scratch' over a short period of time, paying attention to the policy process has proved necessary. The impact of framework very much depends on the continuous involvement and commitment of relevant stakeholders. However, as frameworks are adopted and mature, the attention to the policy process must be combined with a focus on the functionality of frameworks and their ability to deliver according to set expectations and objectives. This draws attention to the ability of frameworks to introduce and promote technical solutions, to mobilise resources and to provide services to end-users. It is important to keep in mind that qualifications frameworks are instruments, they are not ends in themselves. For frameworks to work optimally, they need to constantly evolve and adapt to changing situations and needs of different stakeholders. Evaluation is thus a constant feature of framework developments. For this reason we present the stages as a cycle; signalling the continuous and iterative nature of NQF developments.

Figure 1. The cyclical character of NQF developments



To be able to deliver according to expectations, frameworks need to continuously adapt to changing context and requirements and to the feedback from involved stakeholders. Evaluation thus forms an intrinsic part of framework developments at all stages. An unchanging NQF is not necessarily a legitimate or efficient policy instrument. Figure 2 illustrates this iterative logic

Figure 2 The NQF feed-back-loop



In contrast to day-to-day iterations, review is periodical and may change key characteristics and orientations of the framework. The NQFs in Scotland, Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia all used reviews resulting in restructuring and evolution of the framework arrangements. When an NQF has reached operational stage, it may be expected that this circular process will be shorter and look differently. A set of stage indicators aims to help monitor NQF development and implementation process. These stage indicators could also be used for self-assessment and bring general understanding on the progress and subsequent steps.

1.1 Explorative stage

The explorative (orientation) stage is characterized by initial discussions on policy challenges and the possible ways to address these. This stage can take several different forms. Countries may have systematically identified clear problems (for example a lack of transparency of qualifications and/or the need for reforming qualification systems) where a qualification framework is seen as a relevant solution (“problems seeking solutions”). In many cases, however, the mere existence of qualifications frameworks in other countries or at regional level influence national policies (“solutions seeking problems”). This latter is illustrated by early European developments where the introduction of the EQF acted as a catalyst for national developments. The same logic may be observed outside Europe where the existence of donor related programs may influence national decisions. The balancing of these somewhat opposing influences will influence this initial explorative stage and the extent to which frameworks are embedded in and owned by national stakeholders. A possible (but so far not frequently observed) outcome of this stage is a decision to not develop a qualification framework.

Stage indicators:

- The role of qualifications frameworks in general is understood;
- International practice and experience on qualifications frameworks has been considered;

- Identification of/agreement on policy challenges and policy objectives, including consultations of main stakeholders;
- Analysis of anticipated benefits (Ex Ante Assessment);
- Clarification of the strengths and weaknesses of the NQF instrument in the national context;
- Clarification of the strengths/weakness of NQFs relative to other instruments in the national context;
- Coalition of stakeholders established.

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these indicators are fulfilled.

1.2 Design stage

At this stage, countries negotiate objectives and design the architecture of the framework, in some cases supported by testing of solutions. The design stage involves the negotiation and design of governance structures, directly influencing the selection of stakeholders and the way these are to be involved. A critical part of this stage is the elaboration of learning outcome-based level descriptors. While normally being inspired by already existing approaches, most NQFs adapt descriptors to national contexts and needs. This elaboration influences the NQF in two important ways: vertically by defining the number of levels and the relationship between these; horizontally by defining the relationship between the key domains of knowledge, skills and competence. The design stage, for the first time, brings together involved stakeholders in a systematic way; triggering dialogue and potentially paving the way for longer term commitment. A design phase leaning too much towards direct 'policy copying', failing to adopt the framework to the national context, may weaken the role to be played by the NQF in national policies.

Stage indicators:

- Formal working group or equivalent is established;
- Agreement on the stakeholders to be involved in development and implementation and how these will contribute in governing the NQF;
- Rationale/purpose, scope and objectives of the NQF have been agreed;
- Involvement of international experts/donor funded projects if applicable;
- Technical and conceptual work linked to the development of level descriptors and how this influences the relationship (vertically and horizontally) between types and levels of qualifications;
- Awareness raising to ensure buy-in and commitment of key relevant stakeholders;
- Possible testing of NQF design in restricted areas.

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

1.3 Adoption stage

At this stage countries officially establish or formally adopt a NQF. Formal adoption means different things in different countries, reflecting the respective national, political and legislative context and culture. It can range from the introduction of specific NQF acts or government decisions to amendments of existing laws and regulations or stakeholder agreements. The NQF can be the focus or part of the law that is e.g. addressing the establishment of an executive body, or the reform of qualifications. While formats vary across countries, formal adoption is generally a prerequisite for releasing funding and for triggering necessary technical and human resources. This stage in some cases marks a shift from limited project-based work towards more permanent arrangements.

Stage indicators:

- NQF policy has been officially established/formally adopted (by NQF act, government decision, stakeholder agreement, etc.);
- Roles and responsibilities between different stakeholders have been formally agreed and defined in legal acts or other documents;
- Some clarity regarding financial and human resources has been reached,
- An implementation strategy has been adopted (including a roadmap, capacity building needs, financing, etc.);

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

1.4 Activation stage

The activation stage, also to be referred to as a preparatory operational stage, is characterised by the consolidation of governance and the concrete building up of administrative and technical capacity and expertise. Experience shows that this phase requires time and that not all capacities will be available at the same time. During this stage we see the gradual but distinct shift from an internal focus (on the design and adoption of the framework) to an external focus where end users of different categories are addressed. During this stage the practical interaction of the NQF with the existing qualification system(s) and qualifications is determined.

Stage indicators:

- Implementation structures in place (stable and agreed governance structures, day-to-day administrative capacities in place, predictable financing);
- Main working methods and instruments being put in place (databases, communication strategies, quality assurance arrangements, by-laws and administrative regulations);
- End-users are being made aware of the existence and the services of the NQF;
- The NQF is a reference point for the use of learning outcomes and for the continuous revision and renewal of qualifications;
- Criteria and procedures for allocation of qualifications to levels in place and allocation of qualifications continue;

- The NQF is gradually playing a role in improving **transparency** and **comparability** of qualifications at national and international level;
- The NQF is gradually supporting **reform and renewal** of education, training and qualifications systems at national level.

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

Completion of this stage is a precondition for the comparison of frameworks with the EQF.

1.5 The operational stage

The operational stage is the stage of full implementation. The NQF adds value and contributes to meeting the objectives identified and negotiated during previous stages.

Stage indicators:

- The NQF is a permanent and visible feature of the national education, training and qualifications system, improving **transparency** and comparability of qualifications by:
 - providing a map of, and reference to, all nationally recognised qualifications; this is the case for comprehensive frameworks (implemented in most European countries); including all levels and types of qualifications (VET, HE, general education, adult education and adult learning);
 - indicating NQF levels on certificates and diplomas and/or supplements, for example Europass in the European context;
 - qualifications registers or databases include all relevant information on the content and profile of single qualifications, including NQF/RQF level and learning outcomes, directly supporting end-users (learners, employees, employers) to progress in learning and work;
 - quality assurance mechanisms for the design, registration, renewal and the award of qualifications are in place;
 - providing a platform for cooperation of stakeholders across education, training and employment;
 - providing a reference point for development and review of standards and curricula;
 - providing a reference point for assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning;
 - supporting teachers, trainers and guidance/counselling staff;
 - support recognition of qualifications for further learning and the labour market;
 - support cross-border mobility of students and workers.
- The NQF is a permanent feature of the national education, training and qualifications systems, supporting **reform and renewal** by:

- assuring that qualifications are fit for purpose;
- promoting learning outcomes as a common language bridging institutions and stakeholders in education and employment;
- including all types of qualifications, certificates and credentials; including private and international qualifications;
- reducing the barriers to transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes; encouraging lifelong and life-wide learning;
- encouraging a learning outcomes-based dialogue between stakeholders to facilitate the review and renewal of qualifications;
- helping to structure information on skills supply and demand;
- assisting guidance and career development;
- helping to identify learning pathways;
- facilitating certification of experiences gained at work.

1.6 Review stage

While qualifications frameworks need to be continuously monitored and evaluated, some countries organise periodical independent reviews. Although the review is running in parallel with the operations, it is proposed here as a separate stage as it has a separate focus from the implementation. During the review the added value to set objectives, the functionality of the framework, the commitment and involvement of stakeholders is evaluated. Recommendations from reviews frequently lead to bigger adaptations in the arrangements of NQFs. Reviews might consider the following aspects:

- The extent to which the NQF stated objectives and design (structure) respond/ continue to respond to stakeholders/ country needs, policies and priorities, including in the context of wider policy goals (NQF relevance);
- The extent to which other policies at national and regional levels support or undermine the NQF implementation, including consistency with other actors/ stakeholders interventions and/or the relevant external (RQF) norms, tools and initiatives (coherence);
- The extent to which the NQF objectives have been achieved, including with regard to the use of learning outcomes, validation on non-formal and informal learning, referencing qualifications, quality assurance and recognition arrangements (effectiveness);
- The extent to which the NQF has achieved the outputs and results within the intended timeframe and in relation to its supporting structures and other associated resources (pilot projects) (efficiency);
- The extent to which the NQF is contributing to wider policy goals making a difference to individual citizens, learners and employers (impact);
- The level of continuing commitment at national level to support the NQF implementation (future programme of work), including to secure institutional stability, appropriate funding and the necessary human resources (sustainability of the NQF).

Evaluation questions for this stage:

- Is there political commitment? NQFs need to be backed by politicians at national and regional levels who can secure institutional stability, appropriate funding and the necessary human resources;
- Is there a clear vision of NQFs' perceived usefulness for different beneficiaries? Is there a need to step up communication efforts? Is there a need for a stronger 'branding' to raise end-user awareness?
- Is there sufficient involvement of stakeholders? Are the right stakeholders involved? Is there a need to involve some stakeholders more? Are roles clearly defined?
- Is the NQF systematically facilitating the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning, acknowledging the key role played by learning outside education and training, for example at work?
- Is the NQF generating trust between institutions and systems? Are there quality assurance arrangements in place ensuring trust?
- Learning outcomes are still a relatively new approach; to what extent is this approach influencing and changing institutions, standards, curricula, assessment and teaching, training and learning approaches?
- Are NQFs making a difference to individual citizens and learners?

Completing the circle of NQF developments requires systematically asking the above (and other) critical questions regarding the impact of frameworks. Although much progress has been made over the last two decades, the future relevance of NQFs depends on our willingness to adjust frameworks in line with the above questions. For NQFs to add value we also need to identify and acknowledge their limitations; not only their potential strengths.

2. Regional qualifications frameworks and their stages

The guide of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) describes a RQF as "A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a geographical region. A means of enabling one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for a qualification in one country to be compared to a qualification from another country." ¹

The ETF study on Transnational Qualifications Frameworks from 2011 identified the following characteristics: 'Regional qualifications frameworks usually (i) have less regulatory and more communicative purposes; (ii) include a wide range of sectors of education and training, if not all; (iii) have a range of national and regional policies, accords, conventions and protocols supporting them, but are not underpinned by enforceable legislation; and (iv) have limited, often voluntary, institutional arrangements for governance and management' ²

¹ ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework, A Practical Guide and All you Need to Know. p. 33

² Transnational Qualifications Frameworks, ETF, 2011

There is limited comparative analysis of RQFs, much less than on NQFs. The Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks provides biannual short descriptions on the progress of RQFs but does not go into comparison. ETF has therefore recently conducted a comparative study with 3S on Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around the Globe 2020³. The research partially coincided with the mapping study undertaken in the context of the process of development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF). As you can see many RQFs are being developed on the African continent. The ACQF mapping study provided rich and updated information on the state-of-play and dynamics of national and regional qualifications frameworks on the continent.

It shows that besides the EQF many RQF initiatives exist in the world.

RQF initiatives existing in 2020	
1. African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)	10. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa
2. Arab Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (AQF; ANQAHE Model)	11. Marco de cualificaciones Alianza del Pacífico (Pacific Alliance) (MCAP)
3. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)	12. Marco de Cualificaciones para la Educación superior centroamericana (MCESCA)
4. CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF)	13. Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards/Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF)
5. Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement supérieur (CAMES) ⁴	14. Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF EHEA)
6. ECOWAS Regional Qualifications Framework of West Africa	15. Southern African Development Community (SADC) Qualifications Framework
7. East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE)	16. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Regional Qualifications Framework

³ Regional Qualifications Framework Initiatives around The Globe 2020, ETF 2020 forthcoming

⁴ CAMES is an intergovernmental institution for the harmonisation of policies and integration of the Higher Education Systems of Western and Central Africa and the Indian Ocean. In respect to the implementation of the Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) system CAMES plays a role of support, advice, and monitoring. CAMES is Regional Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency and thanks to its Programme of Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas (PRED) – it can also be considered as a regional qualifications framework (in higher education).

8. European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)	17. Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (TQF VUSSC)
9. Gulf Qualifications Framework (GQF)	

Most of the RQFs are developed and implemented in the framework of Regional Economic Communities. A number of initiatives have been developed by non-state actors in particularly quality assurance agencies and networks in higher education. Most RQFs address the cooperation between middle and low income countries and are linked with the enhancing and developing economic cooperation, mobility, education and training provision and qualification systems. Lack of capacities and resources and the COVID-19 crisis is often hampering progress in implementation. Donors and international organisations often support the development and implementation of these frameworks, but this support is limited in time.

The scope of regional qualification frameworks initiatives vary. Some frameworks initially focused on higher education, or on vocational education, but the trend is towards comprehensive frameworks, and widening the scope. Many of these RQF initiatives are still in an early stage of development, and the focus of the research was limited on understanding the context, features, the commitment and ownership of these initiatives.

Most regional qualifications frameworks share many characteristics with the EQF as frameworks of frameworks, facilitating transparency but regional frameworks can also be tools for integration and harmonization of qualification systems and can have common sets of qualifications and quality assurance arrangements. Some regional frameworks are explicitly focused on facilitating labour mobility and migration.

Although there is an important number of RQF initiatives, most are not yet as advanced in implementation as the EQF.

RQFs can not advance without progress in the qualification systems of members. Given the importance of the interplay between the implementation of NQFs and RQFs, RQF implementation could be understood using the same stages but with different stage indicators.

- a) Explorative stage
- b) Design stage
- c) Adoption stages
- d) Activation stage
- e) Operational stage
- f) Evaluation and review stage

These stages are still to be discussed with RQFs and further developed, but using these stages on RQFs can help us to understand the conditions for cooperation between RQFs.

2.1. Explorative stage

Stage indicators:

- Regional Development Strategy refers to human capital development, including cross-border cooperation aspects in the region. There is the intention to increase labour mobility and/or cooperation in education and training;
- Identification of, and agreement on policy challenge(s) and policy objectives across involved countries (e.g. increasing regional cross-border cooperation; supporting social and economic development processes, need to improve transparency and comparability of qualifications);
- Consultations of main stakeholders;
- A platform for cross-border dialogue between member states on qualifications and recognition is established;
- Possibility of a regional qualifications framework is discussed;
- International experiences are considered;
- Level of Understanding of the value of RQF for cross-border cooperation;
- Analysis of implications and anticipated benefits, strengths and weaknesses of a RQF as a policy tool to address the defined policy challenge.

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

2.2 Design stage

Stage indicators:

- Decision in principle in favour of RQF;
- Regional/international steering group/committee with agreed political mandate established, representation of all member states is assured;
- Formal working group or equivalent is established at a regional level to develop a blueprint of a RQF;
- Rationale/purpose, scope and objectives of RQF are agreed among member countries;
- A development project is launched with or without support of an international donor
- Technical and conceptual work linked to the development of key concepts and level descriptors (vertical as well as horizontal dimensions);
- A sample of existing qualifications are compared and reviewed
- Blueprint developed and widely consulted among the member countries;
- Mapping of cross-regional dimensions of the framework based on existing qualification systems and frameworks;
- Benchmarking of the RQF model with existing RQFs and sometimes NQFs
- Roles of key stakeholders and implementation arrangements considered;
- Awareness raising and capacity building to ensure buy-in and commitment of key relevant stakeholders at regional and national level;
- Possible testing of RQF design in restricted areas, e.g. in mapping qualifications in one economic sector or comparing qualifications at a presumed common level against RQF level descriptors;

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

2.3 Adoption stage

Stage indicators:

- RQF policy is officially established/formally adopted (by joint RQF decision of member states in regional body, shared recommendations, interministerial agreement, etc.);
- Common principles are adopted (e.g. on learning outcomes, quality assurance, mutual recognition, sharing of information on qualifications);
- Regional priorities across member countries agreed in policy document (e.g. enabling mobility of learners and workers across borders);
- Roles and responsibilities between different stakeholders at regional and national level are agreed and defined in legal acts or other documents;
- Joining up national, regional and donor budgets are agreed for implementation;
- An implementation strategy is adopted (including a roadmap, capacity building needs, financing).

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

2.4 Activation stage

Stage indicators:

- Resources for RQF implementation identified and made available;
- RQF implementation and decision-making bodies are identified or established; their roles and responsibilities in relation to RQF are clear;
- Main working methods, procedures and tools are being put in place (meetings, communication strategies, quality assurance criteria, arrangements and databases, monitoring processes);
- Inclusion, referencing, alignment, articulation or harmonisation procedures and criteria to link a national qualification system or framework, and/or specific qualifications to the RQF established and agreed among member countries;
- Member countries are supported to relate their NQF to the RQF, by comparing NQF levels and RQF levels and other criteria;
- Earliest experiences with inclusion, referencing, alignment, articulation or harmonisation completed;
- Formalisation of the linkages between the national qualification system, NQF and/or qualifications with the RQF

The completion of this stage is reached when most of these criteria are fulfilled.

Completion of this stage is a precondition for the comparison of frameworks with the EQF.

2.5. The operational stage

Stage indicators:

- Most member countries have progressed with developing their own NQF or qualification system;
- Depending on the role and function of the RQF (transparency/ communication, quality assurance, standards and curriculum design function etc) the RQF is contributing to the respective policy areas in involved countries;
- Participating countries have established a link between the national qualifications levels and the RQF levels;
- Quality assurance and recognition processes are streamlined;
- RQF levels and services are used by end-users;
- The relationship between qualifications and the RQF have been clarified. National qualifications registers are increasingly connected through the RQF, including all relevant information on the content and profile of qualifications (RQF/NQF level, learning outcomes etc,) directly supporting end-users (learners, employees, employers) to progress in learning and work across borders.

2.6. Review stage:

Reviews of RQFs are sometimes taking place before they have reached a fully operational stage, in order to increase their potential functionality. Reviews could take into account considering the following aspects:

- The extent to which the RQF stated objectives and design (structure) respond/ continue to respond to member states/ stakeholders needs, policies and priorities, including in the context of wider policy goals (RQF relevance);
- The extent to which other policies at national and regional levels support or undermine the RQF implementation, including consistency with other actors/ stakeholders interventions and/or the relevant external norms, tools and initiatives (coherence);
- The extent to which the RQF objectives have been achieved, including with regard to the use of learning outcomes, VNIFL, referencing member states NQFs and/or qualifications, QA and recognition arrangements (effectiveness);
- The extent to which the RQF has achieved the outputs and results within the intended timeframe and in relation to its supporting structures and other associated resources (pilot projects) (efficiency);
- The extent to which the RQF is contributing to the NQF development in member states and wider policy goals, including coordination and collaboration across education, training and work, making a difference to individual citizens, learners and employers (impact);
- The level of continuing commitment at national and regional levels to support the RQF implementation, including to secure institutional stability, appropriate funding and the necessary human resources (sustainability of the RQF).

Evaluation questions

- Is there (sustained) political commitment for the RQF implementation?
- Is there a clear vision of RQFs' perceived usefulness for different beneficiaries?

- Is there a need to step up communication efforts; is there a need for a stronger 'branding' to raise end-user awareness?
- Is there sufficient involvement of stakeholders?
- Are there technical issues to be resolved (eg. concepts, terminology, level descriptors)?