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► Report on the Development of South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework



► **Report on the Development of South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework**

Final report

20 September 2023

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List of acronyms

AQRF	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organization
MS	Member States
NQF	National qualifications framework
NQS	National qualifications system
QF	Qualifications framework
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RQF	Regional qualifications framework
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAQRF	South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training

Acknowledgement

This report is being produced as part of the Governance of Labour Migration in South and South - East Asia (GOALS) Programme, which is implemented as a UN Joint Programme by the International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Under the auspices of the GOALS programme, the ILO assisted the South Asian member states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), through a consultative process, with developing a Regional Qualifications Framework. This final report is a documentation of the development and the of the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework. This report was prepared by Ms Andrea Bateman, ILO Consultant and education expert. Ms Bateman assisted the South Asian member states with the development of the regional qualifications framework.

Technical inputs and contributions to the report were made by ILO officials, Mr Gabriel Bordado, Skills and Employability Specialist for South Asia, and Mr Amish Karki, Technical Officer, GOALS programme.

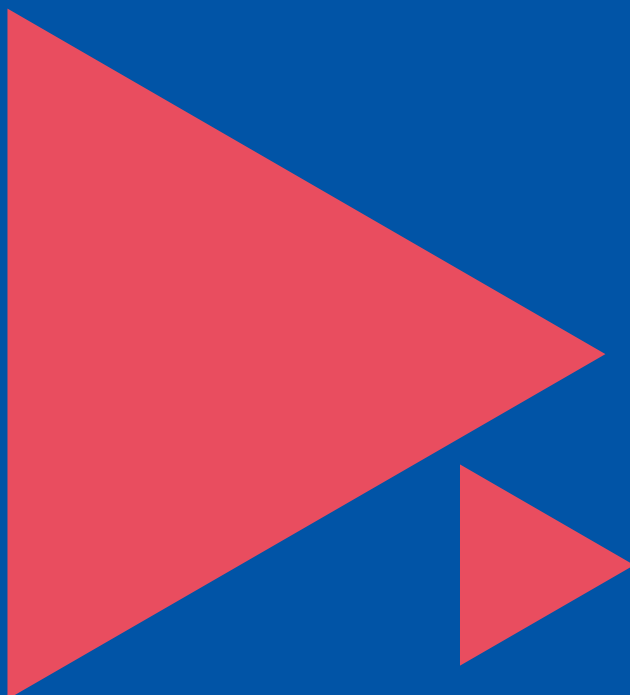


Background

The GOALS Programme aimed to develop a regional qualifications framework (RQF), sometimes referred to as a common reference framework, for South Asian countries.¹ It is envisaged that the framework will provide a basis for qualifications recognition across countries for labour migration and strengthen common understanding and cooperation in the region.

The framework is a response to:

- ▶ the New Delhi Declaration on Education (31 October 2014), which resolved to foster quality education and expand the scope of cooperation;
- ▶ the 18th SAARC Summit of Heads of State or Government (held in Kathmandu in November 2014), where the leaders expressed their strong determination to deepen regional integration and intensify cooperation for peace, stability and prosperity in South Asia;



¹ This included Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Note that, given the current situation in Afghanistan, there were no invitees or attendees throughout the project from the country.

- ▶ the SAARC Plan of Action for Cooperation on Matters Related to Migration (adopted in Kathmandu in May 2016), which endorsed the development of a South Asian qualifications reference framework;
- ▶ the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, which identified skills recognition as one of four priority areas in the strategy proposed for cooperating on skills certification in the Asia–GCC migration corridors (June 2017); and
- ▶ the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), which contained a dedicated section on investing in innovative solutions that facilitate the recognition of skills, qualifications and competences of migrant workers at all skill levels.

The initial development of the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF), supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO), began in August 2020, with a survey and interviews of representatives and culminated in a background report (Bateman 2020a). The report was followed by consultations on a concept proposal (Bateman 2020b), which led to a final draft concept design for the regional qualifications framework (RQF) and a roadmap for finalization/endorsement and implementation (Bateman 2020c).



Meetings

The first technical meeting on the SAQRF was held virtually on 15–16 February 2022 with the participation of MS representatives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. There were three more virtual technical meetings and the fifth technical experts meeting was held in person on 26–27 June 2023 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The final, virtual technical meeting was held on 21–22 August 2023.

In addition, three task force meetings were held with key representatives from each MS. The

task force meetings provided for opportunities, outside the formal technical meetings, to discuss various aspects of the draft SAQRF and further its development.

The technical meetings were held over five sessions, with Technical Meeting #4 divided into two sessions. Technical Meeting #4B was held in hybrid mode in Colombo, Sri Lanka. A summary of each technical meeting is provided in the following table.

Number	Date	Meeting objectives
1	15–16 February 2022	• receive an update from the representatives of MS on the status of their national qualification frameworks or systems (NQFs and NQs, respectively); • enhance MS's understanding of RQFs and the strategic purpose of referencing; • introduce the various components of an RQF; and • introduce the first draft of the SAQRF.
2	27–28 June 2022	• receive updates from MS representatives on the implementation of their NQF/NQS – specifically in relation to the implementation of learning outcomes, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer; • start a discussion in relation to the governance arrangements of the SAQRF; and • introduce the second draft of the SAQRF.
3	26–27 September 2022	• enable MS to present an overview of their self-assessment, addressing their ability (with documentation) to prepare a referencing report; • discuss the referencing process; • discuss the governance arrangements of the SAQRF; • consider the next draft of the SAQRF; • secure nominations of two or more MS to prepare a partial referencing report for Criterion 1; • discuss the option to have a 2.5-hour in-country workshop on the RQFs and the draft SAQRF; and • brief the MS on obligations to provide written comments on the two or more partial referencing reports prior to the next technical meeting in 2023.

Number	Date	Meeting objectives
4A	29–30 May 2023	• model the referencing process as a group; • review and provide feedback for two or more partial referencing reports; • reflect on the referencing process, protocols and templates; • consider the fourth draft of the SAQRF; • discuss proposed governance options of the SAQRF; and • brief MS on Meeting #4B, the finalization of the SAQRF draft and the endorsement process of the SAQRF.
4B	26–27 June 2023	• develop and refine the draft SAQRF further and facilitate discussions on governance arrangements and processes for endorsement; • discuss an implementation and sustainability plan for the SAQRF; and • lead preliminary discussions for common guidance on mutual recognition of skills and qualifications. • (This meeting included an in-depth review of the SAQRF and the endorsement letter; the latter two items on the agenda were deferred.)
5	21–22 August 2023	• present these final documents: • SAQRF, and • endorsement letter; • reflect on the SAQRF guidelines and templates; • consider the draft sustainability and implementation plan; • discuss proposed governance options of the SARQF; and • discuss the next steps and provide closing remarks.

The MS showed strong attendance and participation across all meetings, with only Technical Meeting #5 involving only six of the seven MS. In general, MS representatives were mainly from technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education-competent bodies (for example,

quality assurance agencies, peak policy, or funding bodies). Additional representatives were from agencies responsible for labour and, in some instances, civil society and education and training providers.



Achievements and issues

► SAQRF

The majority of work within the project was conducted between February 2022 and August 2023, and a particular success was the consensus among the MS that the SAQRF would be a common reference framework that will aim to enhance regional understandings of South Asian MS's NQFs/NQSSs. It is thus a framework based on common principles and has the following structure:

- eight level descriptors based on the following three domains: knowledge, skills and application;
- seven referencing criteria to inform the referencing process;
- three referencing obligations that are to be implemented after the initial referencing; and
- eleven quality assurance (QA) criteria to support the response to Criterion 2.

The SAQRF underwent multiple iterations throughout the project and came under intense scrutiny in Technical Meeting #4B. At the final meeting – Technical Meeting #5 – MS agreed to minor changes to this document.

► Referencing

The project funding required at least two MS to undertake a referencing process. Given that the referencing criteria were in development throughout the project, it was determined that the referencing activity would be limited to Criterion 1, which was unlikely to change. In Criterion 1, the structure and profile of the broader education and training system are described, along with an overview of the NQS and its NQF.

Support was offered to MS in the referencing activity; at least one accepted this offer. Prior to Technical Meeting #4A, five MS submitted a partial

referencing report, which was reviewed by three MS and the Project Consultant. One additional MS was drafting a response to Criterion 1 but did not complete it in time for the meeting.

The meeting aimed to model the process for the presentation of the draft reference report to the MS. The process adhered to the following format:

- The Project Consultant was invited to summarize the collated feedback of the MS.
- MS were invited to make additional comments.
- The referencing MS had the option to comment.
- The Chair or Vice-Chair made the final comments.

Two MS undertook the roles of Chair and Vice-Chair, respectively, with the Project Consultant assisting as Vice-Chair due to the unavailability of one of the MS for the full meeting. The referencing activity demonstrated the MS' commitment to the proposed RQF, and it provided an opportunity for the trial of the methodology, templates and meeting protocols.

► Governance

The overarching issue facing the MS was that of governance. It was demonstrated early in the project that the RQF should sit under the umbrella of SAARC. However, all members acknowledged that the timing did not suit and that SAARC may require changes to its Charter to accommodate the RQF.

A discussion took place and ideas were honed over the period of the project. The four options proposed were that:

- the initiative would sit under the SAARC umbrella;

- ▶ it would take a collaborative approach – MS would take control of the RQF and its associated functions;
- ▶ it would take a collaborative approach – supported by the Colombo Process; or
- ▶ the initiative would be a collaborative approach supported by an international agency.

By Technical Meeting #4A, options 1 and 4 remained and were discussed at Technical Meeting #5.

At Technical Meeting #5, an additional clause was added to the endorsement letter, indicating that the ILO would provide interim support on the basis that the SAQRF Secretariat would be moved to SAARC whenever possible.

It was noted at this meeting that the endorsement letter was agreed upon at the previous meeting in Sri Lanka, and that an additional clause was to added:

The Member State agrees for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to provide interim support to the implementation of the SAQRF and its Secretariat. This support will be on the basis that the SAQRF Secretariat will be moved to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) whenever possible.

This clause, which was added for clarity, was included in relation to where the interim Secretariat will be based. At the meeting, the ILO representative, Mr Karki noted that if the ILO was to support the SAQRF in the future, it would need to have the agreement of all MS. As such, the MS would be requesting the ILO to support the initiative. It was also noted that at Technical Meeting #4B, India was to confirm whether it was agreeable to the Secretariat being based in the ILO. Once India declared its agreement, this clause could be formally added. India's representatives at Technical Meeting #5 indicated that early discussions had occurred and a note prepared, and that they were awaiting approval.

The discussion paper, as presented at Technical Meeting #3, with all four options, is included in Appendix 1. The proposed endorsement letter is included in Appendix 2.



Key documents

A series of key documents were developed for the proposed RQF including:

- ▶ SAQRF;
- ▶ endorsement letter;
- ▶ governance discussion paper;
- ▶ guidelines;
- ▶ report template; and
- ▶ MS response template.

The two main documents that required the agreement of MS before endorsement from relevant MS ministers were the SAQRF and the endorsement letter. It was anticipated that finalizing ministerial endorsement in each MS would take until the end of November 2023.

The governance discussion paper is not a formal SAQRF document, as its purpose was to initiate discussions among the MS on the potential options for overarching governance arrangements. This discussion paper has been addressed in the previous section and is included in Appendix 1.

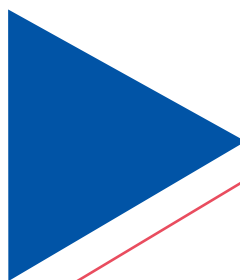
The SAQRF Guidelines are currently in the draft stage and will be finalized and agreed to at the inaugural meeting of the SAQRF Technical Committee after the endorsement of the SAQRF. They are envisaged to be internal documents for the MS.

The purpose of these guidelines is to support the MS, the SAQRF Technical Committee, and each MS's national committee, in their application of the SAQRF. The Guidelines address the role of the Technical Committee, which involves the terms of reference and structure and the protocol referencing process, including:

- ▶ the approach to referencing;
- ▶ SAQRF criteria and obligations;
- ▶ SAQRF quality criteria; and
- ▶ SAQRF report submission process.

The Guidelines link the two templates that were also developed to support the referencing process. The first helps MS draft a referencing report and the second enables MS to respond to a reference report.

As it was proposed that the Guidelines and templates will not be made public; they have not been included in this final report.



► Sustainability and implementation plan

As part of the project, a sustainability and implementation plan was developed and provided to MS for comment. This plan considered the following:

- financial sustainability, including the cost of meetings, the number of representatives per MS, expert project consultant, capacity development and additional expert speakers and support for a Secretariat, website and travel expenses;
- community sustainability, including linking the SAQRF to other national and regional initiatives; and
- operational sustainability, including developing the expertise of the Technical Committee.

The plan was developed for a ten-year period, with the proposal that all MS would complete the referencing activity by Year 7, followed by a review of the Guidelines and templates in Year 8 and a review of the SAQRF in Year 9. The finalised sustainability and implementation plan is included in Appendix 3.

► Concluding comments

The SAQRF provides a platform for change both within the country and across the region. The effects of its introduction have already been realized, with two MS reviewing either national or sectoral frameworks within their countries.

Throughout the development of the SAQRF, MS have shown a commitment to refining key documents and sharing ideas and initiatives. They will need to continue to support the initiative and each other's involvement to ensure that the RQFs have a future beyond this project.

References

Bateman, A. 2020a. *Feasibility Study on the Establishment of Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF): Report #1 Status in SAARC*. ILO.

Bateman, A. 2020b. *Concept Paper for the Establishment of Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF)*. ILO.

Bateman, A. 2020c. *Feasibility Study on the Establishment of the SAARC Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) in SAARC: Final Report*. ILO.

Cooperating on skills certification in Asia-GCC labour migration corridors, Abu Dhabi Conference, January 2017

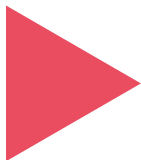
Global impact for safe, orderly and regular migration, Heads of State and Government and High Representatives, Morocco, final draft July 2018

Inter-Regional Expert Forum on Skills and Migration in the South Asia – Middle East Corridor, July 2017, New Delhi

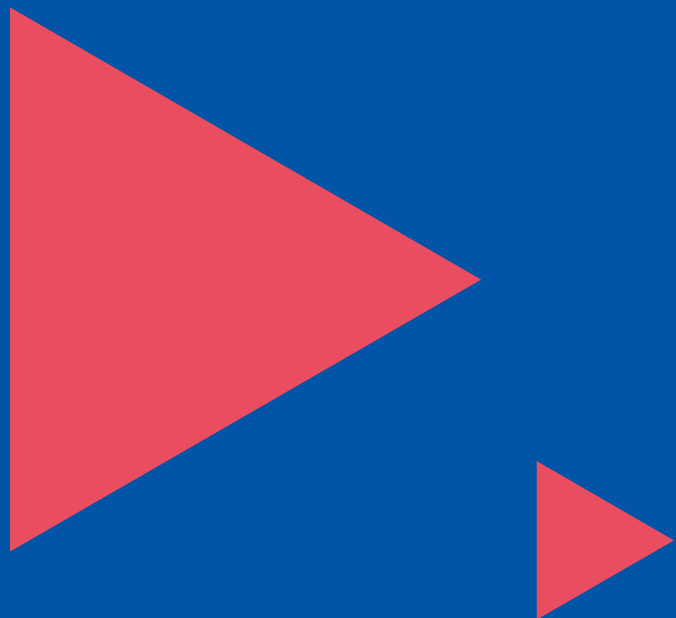
SAARC New Delhi Declaration on Education, October 2014, New Delhi

SAARC Plan of Action on Labour Migration, November 2014, Kathmandu

SAARC Plan of Action on Labour Migration, May 2016, Kathmandu



Appendices



Appendix 1:

Governance discussion paper

- ▶ **The following discussion paper was presented at multiple meetings. The version attached here was presented at Technical Meeting #3.**
-

Governance of the SAQRF: Discussion paper

Draft 19/09/2022

▶ Preamble

The purpose of this paper is to provide the starting point for a discussion on the overarching governance arrangements of the proposed regional qualifications framework (RQF) currently referred to as the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF).

There are 3 levels of governance related to the SAQRF. Two levels are proposed within the SAQRF policy instrument:

- ▶ SAQRF Technical Committee – which has representation from each member state
- ▶ National SAQRF Committee – which is the national link between the member state and the SAQRF Technical Committee, and is under the remit of each member state.

The third level relates to overall governance of the SAQRF, that is:

- ▶ Who will have oversight; and sign off as a representative of the member state on the SAQRF and associated high level governance papers e.g. education, labour, economic?²
- ▶ Where will it be housed?

² Refer to AQR as an example of high level governance paper. Refer to endorsed papers, <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/services/>. Note that multiple ministers in-country were identified and each had to 'sign off'.

- ▶ How will it be supported by a small secretariat?
- ▶ How will a dedicated website for Member States (MS) and sections for public for international access be maintained?

Additional concerns include:

- ▶ How will implementation be funded and planned for long term sustainability?

The third level of governance cannot be divorced from that proposed in the SAQRF. This governance information is included in Appendix 1, which also needs to be finalised as part of the SAQRF.

▶ Options

There are a number of potential models that could be applied.

Option 1: SAARC

The SAQRF initiative could sit under the SAARC and the SAARC Charter.

The advantages of this approach include:

- ▶ SAARC protocols could be applied, e.g. time period of Chair and Vice Chair of the technical committee, voting protocols

- ▶ A small secretariat (team) could sit within SAARC secretariat under one of the areas of cooperation
- ▶ Provides for the uniqueness of the MS and seen as a SAARC initiative
- ▶ Provides for a long-term base for the SAQRF.

Issues:

- ▶ How can SAARC be brought into the discussion and provide a platform for support for the SAQRF?

Option 2: Collaborative approach

This approach would mean that the South Asia MS³ take control of the RQF and its associated functions/structures, e.g. website and support team. For example, a member state will host the website and the support team (secretariat) for potentially 2 years, and could be aligned to the Chair's terms of sitting.⁴

This model is similar to that used for APQN, <https://apqn.org/>. Noting that the APQN is an incorporate company, and there is a constitution and a board (members are elected), <https://apqn.org/constitution/governance-and-constitution>.

Advantages:

- ▶ MS can manage this approach in line with an agreement
- ▶ Rotation of hosting is in line with the Chair's

Issues:

- ▶ Costs of website and support team is borne by the host MS
- ▶ Requires a high level of cooperation
- ▶ Requires additional documentation similar to a 'heads of agreement' or 'constitution' (whatever is allowed at this level of engagement within each member state) and would require specialist input to design the agreement

³ SAARC member states

⁴ Currently the terms include 1 year as Chair's. Advice is sought how other technical committees under SAARC are determined.

- ▶ May require incorporations as a company, and a constitution and a board; and would require specialist input to set up.

Option 3: Collaborative approach – extended, Colombo Process

There is the potential that a collaborative model be supported through the Colombo Process⁵.

Advantages:

- ▶ MS can manage this approach in line with an agreement
- ▶ Rotation of hosting is in line with the Chair's
- ▶ Provides a support mechanism for a collaborative model, whereby the Colombo Process infrastructure (website) could be used and human resources could be housed.

Issues:

- ▶ Would using the Colombo Process affect the membership of the SAQRF? Membership of the SAQRF through the Colombo Process is less clear. For example:
 - Colombo Process membership goes beyond South Asia
 - Bhutan and Maldives are not MS of the Colombo Process
- ▶ Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia (an observer) are members of the AQRF
- ▶ Italy (an observer) is a member of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
- ▶ Consideration as to whether the Colombo Process would support a RQF that does not include all of its MS, and include additional members who not members of the Colombo Process, would need to be resolved.

⁵ Member States include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. The eight Observer States include Bahrain, Italy, Kuwait, Malaysia, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.

- ▶ Colombo Process is labour mobility focussed and may marginalise schools and higher education sectors (if not others, e.g. monastic) from supporting the South Asia RQF which may limit its strength.
- ▶ Requires a high level of cooperation
- ▶ Requires additional documentation similar to a 'heads of agreement' or 'constitution' (whatever is allowed at this level of engagement within the MS) and would require specialist input to design the agreement.

Option 4: Collaborative approach – extended, international agency

This model is similar to Option 3 but an international agency could provide interim support to the implementation of the SAQRF. For example, UNESCO, ILO, ETF, GIZ. This support would be on the basis that it will be moved to SAARC whenever possible.

Advantages:

- ▶ MS can manage this approach in line with an agreement

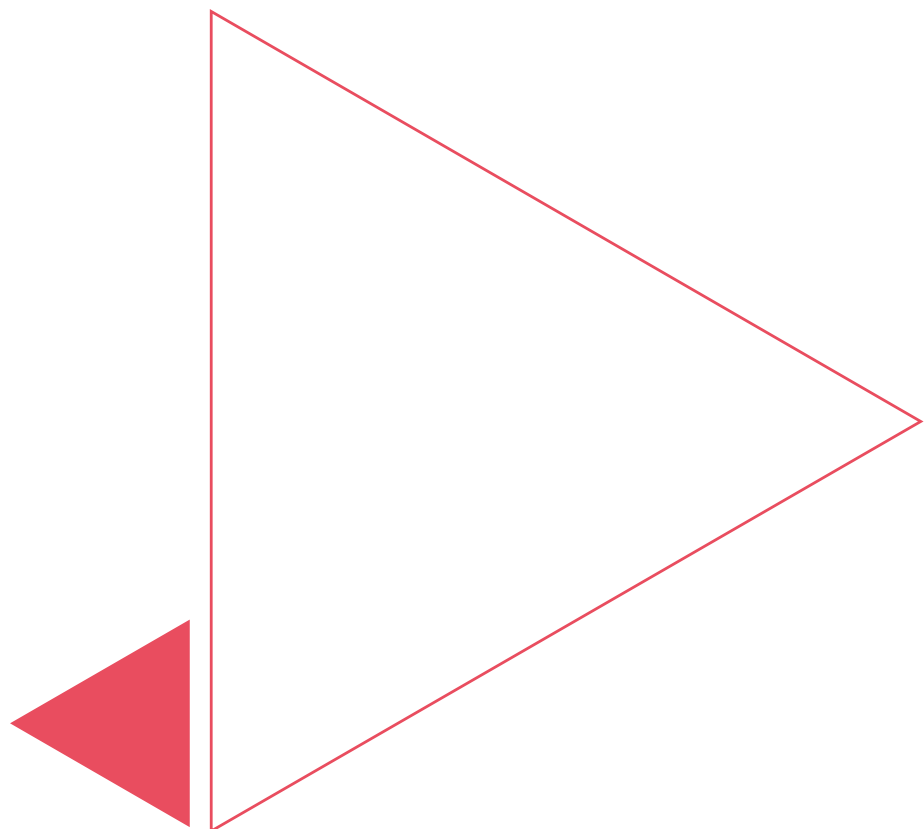
- ▶ Rotation of hosting is in line with the Chair's
- ▶ Provides a support mechanism for a collaborative model, whereby the international agency's infrastructure (website) could be used and human resources could be housed.

Issues:

- ▶ Requires a high level of cooperation
- ▶ Requires additional documentation similar to a 'heads of agreement' or 'constitution' (whatever is allowed at this level of engagement within the MS) and would require specialist input to design the agreement.

▶ Sustainability

Discussions will also need to be had around long-term sustainability. Although the above discussion only addresses a website and a support team, there is a significant amount of work to be undertaken, referencing activities and meetings throughout the life of a long term project such as this.



Appendix 1:

Extract from SAQRF – Governance (draft)

The oversight of the SAQRF will be managed by the SAQRF Technical Committee. This Committee shall:

- ▶ Provide high level technical advice and engage with policy issues arising from the implementation of the SAQRF
- ▶ Foster collaboration amongst the Member States
- ▶ Facilitate the resolution of issues with agreements on common approaches and understanding culminating in briefing papers and guidelines
- ▶ Provide for the consideration of referencing reports and confirming whether the submission meets the SAQRF Referencing Criteria
- ▶ promote the SAQRF and quality assurance of education in all sectors within its Member States
- ▶ Monitor the implementation of the SAQRF and of the Technical Committee's remit
- ▶ Facilitate capacity development of Member States in terms of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance
- ▶ Promote the SAQRF to the international education and training community.

Representation shall be one member per SA Member State. Election of Chair and Vice Chair shall be determined on an alphabetical basis, appointed for one year, with the Vice Chair continuing as the Chair for one year. Decision-making processes shall be based on consensus. Members may draw on additional expertise for their deliberations. Member States may determine the number of observers present from their Member State.

Further governance arrangements are stipulated in the decisions made by the Technical Committee.

There are multiple levels of governance:

- ▶ *Overall governance ('home' and secretariat support) for the SAQRF – to be determined at a later date*
- ▶ **Operational governance – through a Committee that has responsibility for its management**
- ▶ *National level linkages.*

The Operational governance is through a SAQRF Technical Committee. Broad roles and responsibilities are included here.

- ▶ *Is there anything that needs to added? Changed?*
- ▶ *Should there be a terms of reference developed and added in this document. Or can it be a different document? Is the terms of reference, as documented here, sufficient?*

National representation shall be through a National SAQRF Committee (NSC) acting as the interface between the SAQRF Technical Committee and the Member State. Membership shall be determined by the member state, but should include nominated representatives of the relevant competent bodies responsible for the national qualifications framework (or system) and other main stakeholder bodies in the country. The NSC should have expertise in the NQF/NQS and related policy positions of the Member State it represents.

The NSC is responsible for

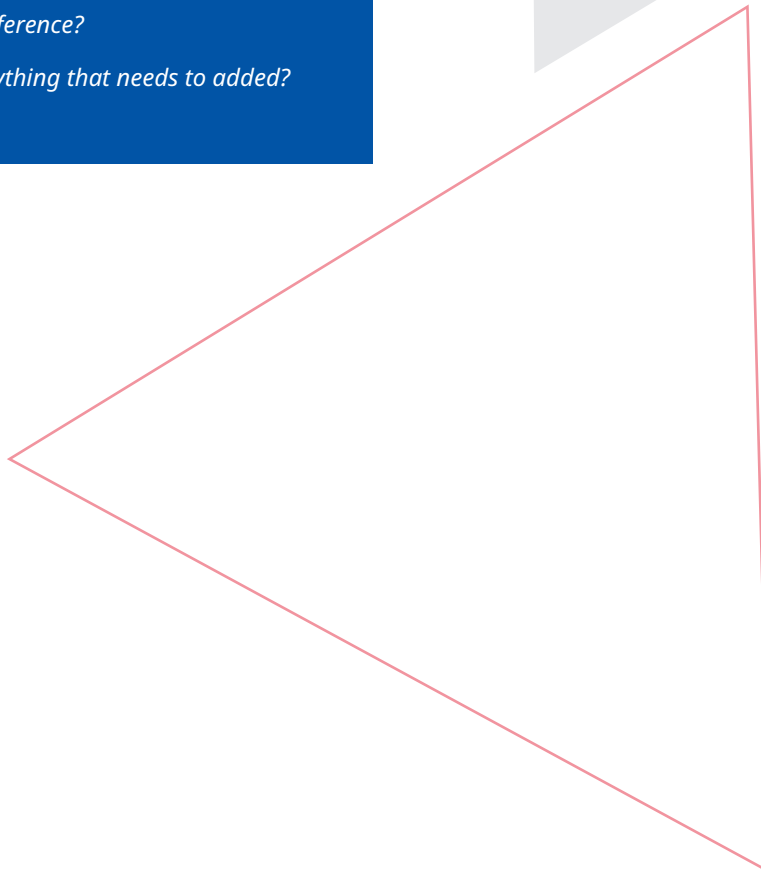
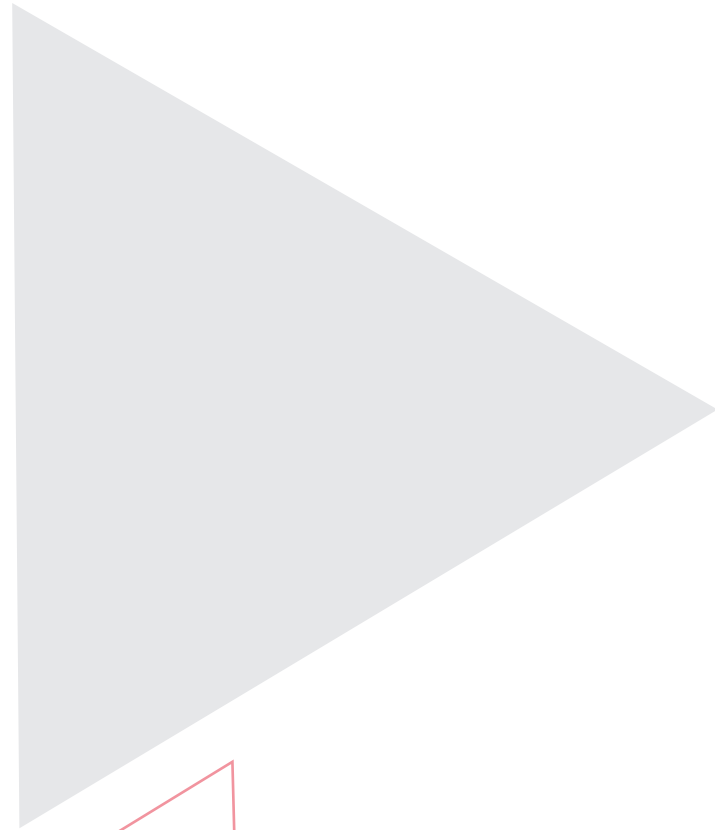
- ▶ Updating and reporting to the National SAQRF Committee (NSC) on changes and progress in qualifications systems within its own country
- ▶ Developing a nationally agreed roadmap for referencing
- ▶ Steering and guiding the referencing process
- ▶ Ensuring the quality of the referencing milestones and outcomes and producing a validated report.

There are multiple levels of governance:

- ▶ *Overall governance (and home and secretariat support) for the SAQRF – to be determined at a later date*
- ▶ *Operational governance – through a Committee that has responsible for its management*
- ▶ **National level linkages.**

This section outlines the key roles of the National SAQRF Committee (NSC).

- ▶ *Is there sufficient information here in the terms of reference?*
- ▶ *Is there anything that needs to added? Changed?*



Appendix 2:

Draft endorsement letter

► Presented and discussed at Technical Meeting #5.

Letter of Endorsement – South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework

- The first technical meeting on the South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF) was held virtually on 15 – 16 February 2022 with the participation of Member State representatives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. A further three virtual technical meetings were held, and the fifth technical experts meeting was held in-person on 26th and 27th June 2023 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. A final virtual meeting was held on the 21-22 August 2023.
- It was agreed that the SAQRF is a common reference framework which aims to enhance regional understandings of South Asia MS' qualifications frameworks or systems.
- The Member State hereby endorses the SAQRF.
- In addition, the Member State:
 - **acknowledges** that a renewed impetus is needed to achieve shared goals and to commit to enduring and sustainable collaboration, to improve the mobility of workers and learners, and to drive quality and best practice in qualifications systems in South Asia;
 - **acknowledges** that the SAQRF can serve as an instrument for change in the quality of educational services and for the recognition of qualifications;
 - **commits to** regional collaboration and cooperation in the field of educational services through the SAQRF; and
 - **commits to** seek sustainable solutions.
- The Member State agrees for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to provide interim support to the implementation of the SAQRF and its Secretariat. This support will be on the basis that the SAQRF Secretariat will be moved to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) whenever possible.
- The undersigned representative(s) from XXX (add name of MS), being duly authorised, have signed as an endorsement of the SAQRF attached in Appendix 1.

For the XXX (add name of MS) Add name of signatory, job title, and ministry name Date:	Signature
For the XXX (add name of MS) Add name of signatory, job title, and ministry name Date:	Signature

Appendix 3:

Sustainability and implementation plan

► South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework sustainability and implementation plan

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► Programme focus

The South Asia Qualifications Reference Framework (SAQRF) is in its early phase of development and is due for endorsement by its Member States (MS) in late 2023.

This paper aims to establish a coherent approach to the long-term sustainability of the framework and identify key steps for implementation at the regional and national levels.

► Background

The initial development of the SAQRF began in August 2020 with a survey and interviews of representatives and culminated in a background report. The report was followed by consultations on a concept proposal, with a final draft concept design for the regional qualifications framework (RQF) and a roadmap for its finalization/endorsement and implementation (Bateman 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

The SAQRF members include the eight South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) MS: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The framework is a response to:

- the New Delhi Declaration on Education (31 October 2014), which resolved to foster quality education and expand the scope of cooperation;
- the Heads of State or Government 18th SAAARC Summit Meeting (held in Kathmandu in November 2014), where the leaders expressed their strong determination to deepen regional integration and intensify cooperation for peace, stability and prosperity in South Asia;
- the SAARC Plan of Action for Cooperation on Matters Related to Migration (adopted in Kathmandu in May 2016), which endorsed the development of a South Asian Qualifications Reference Framework;
- the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, which identified skills recognition as one of four priority areas

in the strategy proposed for cooperation on skills certification in the Asia–GCC migration corridors (June 2017); and

- the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), which contained a dedicated section on investing in innovative solutions that facilitate the recognition of skills, qualifications and competences of migrant workers at all skill levels.

► Current support

The initial development of the SAQRF was supported by the ILO and began in August 2020. Following the research and consultation phase, the development moved to drafting and seeking agreement on the purpose, design and governance of the SAQRF. This latter phase also included a trial referencing activity that involved five MS completing a partial referencing report.

As the framework moves towards endorsement by the MS, consideration needs to be given to the sustainability of the framework and its implementation.

► SAQRF

The main purpose of the SAQRF is to enable the referencing of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). It must therefore enable comparisons of all types and levels of qualifications within participating MS's NQFs, focusing on referencing their qualification levels to the levels of the SAQRF.

These comparisons of qualifications across the MS aim to:

- improve the recognition of qualifications;
- improve worker and student mobility;
- improve transparency of qualifications, qualification systems and quality assurance arrangements;
- improve recognition of learning achieved outside formal education;
- support NFQs that facilitate lifelong learning;

- ▶ strengthen regional identity and support other regional initiatives; and
- ▶ provide a link to other RQFs internationally.

▶ Programme sustainability

Pre-conditions for an RQF

The work undertaken in the initial consultations with MS and the accompanying research indicates that there needs to be

- ▶ a strong and long-term commitment by MS to collaborate and implement an RQF for the betterment of their citizens, both within their countries – that is, across the education and training sectors – and across the region. This would include senior policymakers and key stakeholders (such as quality assurance bodies, education institutions and industries);
- ▶ an agreed view that the RQF is seen as:
 - a catalyst for change in qualification systems within MS;
 - an avenue to support MS in developing and implementing their own NQFs and quality assurance;
 - an avenue to provide for learning and capacity development in NQFs, learning outcomes and quality assurance;
 - an avenue to engender trust and enhance regional identity; and
 - an avenue to link various labour mobility and lifelong learning strategies;
- ▶ strong and long-term commitment by donor partners to support a five- to ten-year plan for implementation; and
- ▶ strong and clear governance arrangements in the management of the RQF, fostering collaborative approaches to engendering trust and mutual respect across the MS (Bateman 2020b).

Focus on sustainability

The discussion on the sustainability of the SAQRF must focus on the following:

- ▶ financial sustainability;
- ▶ MS community sustainability; and
- ▶ governance sustainability.

Financial sustainability

Sources of funding and support

It is critical for the long-term sustainability of the SAQRF that a long-term partner is found for both financial and non-financial support. A long-term programme cannot be supported or financed on a short-term basis if it is to achieve its goals.

Non-financial support can include a SAQRF Secretariat based within an organization with access to facilities, premises, communications and a web platform; and linkages with other regional initiatives and fora.

Support could be obtained by seeking long-term partner/s who are familiar with the benefits of implementing an RQF, such as:

- ▶ ILO;⁶
- ▶ European Union⁷
- ▶ World Bank;⁸ and
- ▶ European Training Foundation.⁹

In addition, MS need to consider the cost benefit to their country and citizens when determining the support, both financial and non-financial, that they can provide to the implementation of the SAQRF.

The considerations for financial support are presented in the following section.

Considerations for costing

- ▶ Any costing should make allowances for at least two to four gatherings per year.

⁶ Currently supports this project.

⁷ European Union has funded auxiliary projects for the AQRF in Southeast Asia.

⁸ The World Bank has shown a long-term commitment to skills development and qualifications frameworks (QFs).

⁹ European Training Foundation has been entrusted by the European Union Delegation to the African Union to implement the African Continental Qualifications Framework.

Ideally, these would be face-to-face; however, since COVID-19, they could also be online gatherings (meetings/workshops) for at least the first to the fifth year, with one face-to-face meeting per year. Further,

- if they are in person, anticipate that they will be two-day gatherings. Once the Technical Committee is confirmed, half or one day should be devoted to its business and planning (note that all MS representatives can attend but only one representative per MS is on the Technical Committee); and
 - it is suggested that the Technical Committee business is preceded by a capacity development/community-of-practice workshop on the same or similar topic. This allows representatives to better understand issues. For example, when discussing governance in the capacity development workshop, a model could be proposed, and then the groups could discuss and formulate opinions based on the model. The Technical Committee meeting then confirms the approach and a document is drafted.
- ▶ Although each MS can have one voting representative, given that in many MS, the main education and training sectors include at least four sub-sectors (for example, school, vocational training, skills and higher education), it is anticipated that up to three country members will be present at any meeting. Any funding partner would need to consider how many of these representatives will be funded to attend them.
 - ▶ The funding partner must consider providing an expert consultant to guide the process, draft documents, provide capacity development, and lead communities of practice.
 - ▶ Capacity development may include bringing in additional experts for specific topics such as

writing learning outcomes, quality assurance and building an NQF.

- ▶ Funding partners must consider support for the SAQRF Secretariat (two to three staff members) and website.
- ▶ Costs will include travel, accommodation and per diems for identified representatives, expert project consultant, additional experts and the SAQRF Secretariat.

Finally, experience has shown that individual MS need in-country NQF and quality assurance support throughout their early years. This may need to be factored in and will be dependent on the individual needs of each MS. Their initial needs could be established through a survey and analysed and reported with recommendations to the MS for approval. Such a survey could be repeated every three to five years to capture the progress of NQFs and QA, as well as the emerging needs of MS.

MS community sustainability

The strength of an RQF lies in its links to other initiatives within the region and in the level of awareness and application of an RQF within each MS.

MS need to acknowledge that there needs to be a strong and long-term commitment to collaborating and implementing an RQF for the betterment of their citizens, both within their countries and across the region. They need to develop strategies within their respective countries so that senior policymakers and key stakeholders (such as quality assurance bodies, education institutions, industry) are included in the discussions and application of the RQF. MS will need guidance and support to communicate with and engage senior policymakers and key stakeholders in the implementation of the SAQRF. A strong commitment from each MS is important when gaining donor support.

Operational sustainability

The SAQRF is to be led by a Technical Committee that will

- ▶ provide high-level technical advice and engage with policy issues arising from the implementation of the SAQRF;
- ▶ foster collaboration among the MS;
- ▶ facilitate the resolution of issues with agreements on common approaches and understanding, culminating in briefing papers and guidelines;
- ▶ promote the SAQRF and quality assurance of education in all sectors within its MS;
- ▶ monitor the implementation of the SAQRF and of the Technical Committee's remit;
- ▶ provide for the consideration of referencing reports and confirm whether the submission meets SAQRF referencing criteria;
- ▶ facilitate capacity development of MS in terms of QFs and quality assurance; and
- ▶ promote the SAQRF among the international education and training community.

The selection of members to this committee falls under the remit of each MS. However, it is envisaged that members will be senior representatives with a commitment to quality provision of qualifications within each MS's qualifications system.

The SAQRF Technical Committee will be the link between the donor/s, the SAQRF Secretariat and the National Committee set up within each MS. It will need to take a regional approach to the framework and support other related initiatives.

Members of the SAQRF Technical Committee are often the "face" of the SAQRF, participating in international fora and research related to RQFs. As such, members will need to be supported by a strong communication strategy and SAQRF support documents that can be used for a range of purposes.

A strong and cohesive SAQRF Technical Committee is important when gaining donor support.

▶ Programme implementation

Focus of implementation plan

Implementing an RFQ is not a short-term strategy, and policymakers should consider a five- to ten-year initial implementation plan, which should focus on a number of key strategies such as:

- ▶ formulating and finalizing the SAQRF and governance arrangements;
- ▶ formulating supporting documents to promote a common understanding across the MS; for example, referencing guidelines;
- ▶ capacity development of MS, such as learning outcomes and quality assurance, formulation of an NQF;
- ▶ establishing communication strategies and structures, such as a website and inter-group communication portal;
- ▶ preparing for referencing. Assume that the referencing activity will take about one year, including the preparation of a draft report, review by the Technical Committee, revisions and the final acceptance by MS; and
- ▶ formulating a regional quality assurance framework to support the SAQRF and other regional initiatives. The establishment of an RQF provides a catalyst for change at the national and regional levels. It also supports and provides a platform for other initiatives within the region, such as qualification and skill recognition. Another strategy that can be linked directly to an RQF and builds trust in qualifications systems is a regional quality assurance framework.

Implementation plan

The following implementation plan is based on a five-year cycle to ensure a long-term plan over ten years. The plan addresses actions that can be undertaken at the national and regional levels over this period.

Its key milestones are as follows:

► Medium goals:

- all documents agreed upon and endorsed by the SAQRF Technical Committee;
- funding and support secured;
- communication strategy agreed upon;
- portal (external and internal) established;
- capability development programme

agreed upon and implemented; and

- MS's NQFs referenced to the SAQRF.

► Long-term goals:

- all MS's NQFs referenced to the SAQRF;
- all key SAQRF documents reviewed; and
- funding and support secured for another ten years.

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
	Year 1	Regional	National
1.	Endorsement of SAQRF by relevant senior officials	ILO and MS seek endorsement	MS consult and update senior policy officials on the SAQRF
2.	Formation of SAQRF Technical Committee	MS agree at inaugural Technical Meeting #1; confirm Chair and Vice-Chair; Committee proceeds to business identified on agenda	MS consult internally with their representative on the Technical Committee and notify the SAQRF Secretariat
3.	Confirmation of SAQRF Guidelines: referencing information; governance and protocols; and templates.	Technical Committee discusses and finalizes Guidelines at inaugural meeting	
4.	Confirmation of five-year implementation plan	MS confirm five-year and annual work plan for the SAQRF	
5.	Development of communication strategy including: website; and support documents (for example, flyers and brochures).	MS agree upon a communication strategy	
6.	Establishment of internal portal for communication with the group and an external portal; finalization of support documents for use by MS	Group establishes website portals; MS finalizes support documents for use	

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
7.	Development of national implementation plans for referencing		MS make implementation plans for: implementing QFs/NQFs and quality assurance; community awareness of SAQRF; and progress to referencing. MS report progress at each technical meeting
8.	Undertaking an initial survey that scopes within MS: NQF developments; Quality assurance developments; application of learning outcomes; plans for NQF and QA over the next five years; and areas of need.	MS report on status of NQF and quality assurance, implementation plans, and identified areas of need; recommendations will inform the capability plan for MS at the regional level	

Year 2

Regional

National

9.	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
10.	Building a common understanding of quality assurance: capability development of quality assurance and regional quality assurance frameworks; and community of practice – shared experience and developing further understandings and commitment.	MS conduct regional capability workshop ¹⁰	
11.	Development of draft regional quality assurance framework ¹¹	MS draft regional quality assurance framework after in-country consultation; to be ready for agreement in Year 3	

¹⁰ All regional capability workshops will be dependent on the needs of the MS and the findings of the survey.

¹¹ This activity is complementary to those of the SAQRF. A regional quality assurance framework builds trust in MS's qualifications systems.

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
12.	Building a common understanding of learning outcomes: capacity development; and community of practice – shared experiences of SAARC implementation of the learning outcomes	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
13.	In-country NQF/RQF/QA workshop: Building awareness and capability within each MS		MS conduct national workshops

	Year 3	Regional	National
14.	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
15.	Building a common understanding of how to link quality assurance to NQFs: capacity development workshop; and community of practice – shared experiences.	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
16.	MS's evaluation of readiness against pre-conditions for referencing	MS conducts community-of- practice activity, evaluation of reports and sharing of evaluations	MS undertake evaluation with key stakeholders
17.	Building a common understanding of referencing and plan for referencing	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
18.	MS nomination for full referencing	Set #1: 2–4 MS nominated	MS plan for referencing and begin process
	Year 4	Regional	National
19.	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual workplan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
20.	Finalization of regional quality assurance framework ¹²	MS agree upon final draft of the regional framework	
21.	In-country referencing workshop: building awareness and capacity within each MS		Each MS conducts national workshops for referencing
22.	Building a common understanding of recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RPL): capacity development workshop; and community of practice – MS explain how this occurs in-country	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
23.	Building of common understanding of recognition of formal learning – credit transfer: capacity development workshop including regional credit transfer systems; and community of practice – MS explain how this occurs in-country	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
24.	Referencing activity complete (Set #1)	Set #1: 2–4 referencing reports addressed at technical meeting and uploaded to the SAQRF website	
25.	MS nomination for full referencing	Set #2: 2–4 MS nominated	MS plan for referencing and begin process
Year 5		Regional	National
26.	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan confirmed	MS report progress of national implementation plan at each technical meeting
27.	Draft the regional credit accumulation and transfer system ¹³	MS endorse finalized regional credit accumulation and transfer system	

¹² This activity is complementary to those of the SAQRF.

¹³ This activity is complementary to those of the SAQRF.

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
28.	Building a common understanding of blended or online learning and related quality assurance issues	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
	Undertaking a follow-up survey that scopes: NQF developments; Quality assurance developments; application of learning outcomes; plans for NQF and quality assurance over next five years; and areas of need.	MS report on status of NQF and QA, implementation plans, and identified areas of need; recommendations will inform the capability plan for MS at the regional level for the next five years	

Year 6	Regional	National
Development of next five-year plan and discussion on annual work plan for SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress on respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
Review and revision of communication strategy	MS agree upon revised communication strategy	
Building a common understanding of micro-credentials and related quality assurance issues	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
In-country referencing workshop: Building awareness and capacity within each MS		MS conduct national workshops for referencing
Completion of referencing activity (Set #2)	Set #2: 2–4 referencing reports addressed at the technical meeting and uploaded to the SAQRF website	
MS nomination for full referencing	Set #3: 2–4 MS nominated	MS plan for referencing and begin the process

Year 7

Regional

National

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
	In-country referencing workshop: building awareness and capacity within each MS		MS conduct national workshops for referencing
	Capability workshop(s) – as identified in survey report	MS conduct regional capability workshop	
	Completion of referencing activity (Set #3)	Set #3: 2–4 referencing reports addressed at the technical meeting and uploaded to the SAQRF website; referencing complete for all MS	
	Review of website and communication support documents		

Year 8

Regional

National

	Review of five-year plan and discussion annual work plan for SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
	Review of SAQRF Guidelines and templates to ensure they meet the needs of the MS and the referencing process	MS revise SAQRF Guidelines	
	Capability workshop(s) – as identified in the survey report	MS conduct regional capability workshop	

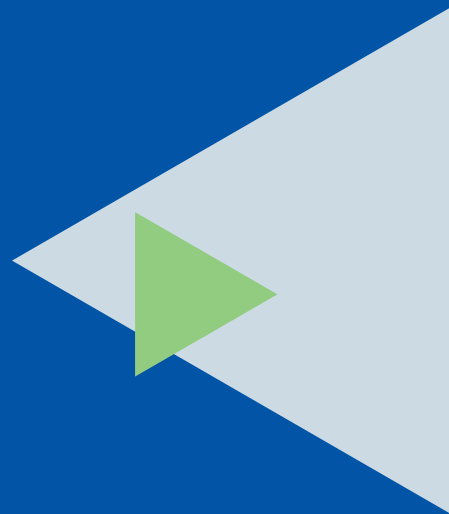
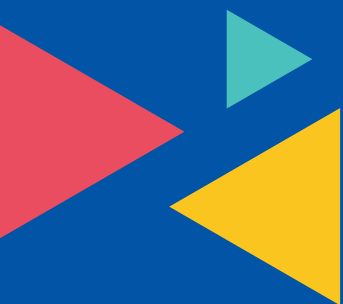
Year 9

Regional

National

	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
	Capability workshop(s) – as identified in the survey report	MS conduct regional capability workshop	

	Timeline and tasks	Focus and milestone	
	Year 10	Regional	National
	Review of five-year plan and discussion on the annual work plan for the SAQRF	MS confirm annual regional plan	MS report progress of respective national implementation plan at each technical meeting
	Review of SAQRF against current and recent developments in NQFs and RQFs	SAQRF revised	
	Undertaking a second follow-up survey that scopes: NQF developments; quality assurance developments; application of learning outcomes; plans for NQF and quality assurance over the next five years; and areas of need.	MS report on the status of NQF and QA, implementation plans, and identified areas of need; recommendations will inform the capability plan for MS at the regional level for the next five years	
	Agreement on the way forward with the donor partner and MS	Stakeholders confirm meetings regarding financial and other support for another ten years	MS determine any additional contributions or support (in kind)
	Building a common understanding and reflection on the progress of the SAQRF	Groups report to MS on behalf of the Technical Committee	



► Contact

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