QUALIFICATIONS FOR A WORLD CLASS, PROGRESSIVE, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SYSTEM

Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) Conference

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Abstract:

The UAE economy is operating in a globally competitive and constantly changing environment influenced by increasing economic integration, technological innovation and advances, a changing population demographic profile, increased labour mobility, productivity growth, and skills shortages[1]. In response to these challenges, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Sayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces initiated the Qualifications Framework Project in 2006 to "create an open and inclusive environment in which every individual's learning is valued and recognised, leading to a highly knowledgeable and skilled society in a competitive world". This project involved developing an initial national qualifications framework that would build a competent and highly quality workforce that is suitably educated, skilled, adaptable and valued.

In late 2010, President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Sayed Al Nahyan issued a federal degree to establish the UAE National Qualifications Authority (NQA). The NQA's key role is to facilitate improvements in the quality of outcomes of education and training and its interrelationship with the labour market and economic development, with particular emphasis on vocational education and training (VET). This role entails NQA developing a single, coherent and integrated qualifications framework, industry and education standards, quality assurance systems and associated supporting arrangements such as a qualifications register and information system. This paper will focus on the drivers influencing the design of Qualifications Framework for the Emirates (known herewith as QF*Emirates*) as well as the challenges impacting on the successful development and implementation of the Framework. It will discuss findings from previous research as well as numerous consultations, presentations and briefings delivered to stakeholders and the community.

To further align to the themes of the ANQAHE conference, this paper will also examine the development of the relationship between the QF*Emirates* and UAE's higher education system.

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[1] NQA (2011) Recognition of the Vocational Education and Training Awards Commission (VETAC) Steering Committee Paper

Introduction

In 2006 His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Sayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces initiated the Qualifications Framework Project 'to create an open and inclusive environment in which every individual's learning is valued and recognised, leading to a highly knowledgeable and skilled society in a competitive world. After a three year period of research, development and intensive consultation, in late 2010, President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Sayed Al Nahyan issued a Federal Decree to establish the UAE National Qualifications Authority (NQA) and a Qualifications Framework for the Emirates (QF*Emirates*).

The purpose of the NQA is to facilitate improvements in the quality of outcomes from the education and training system across the UAE and to ensure that the qualifications system is aligned to the economic and social development needs of the nation. Previous researchers[2] have found in the past that there has been poor alignment of the education and training system to its ambitions, its delivery and the extent to which it is evaluated in the UAE. There has been insufficient emphasis on learning goals (outcomes), rather than textbooks (inputs), especially in general education and limited understanding of a 'whole system' approach. By taking a strategic whole system approach, aligned to the economic and social development needs of the nation, Emirati nationals can be developed to gain employment not just in the public sector, but in the private sector and therefore contribute to accelerating Emiratisation. Initially, the NQA will focus in particular on Vocational Education and Training (VET). However, the ultimate goal is to bring all general and higher education qualifications into a coherent and unified UAE qualifications system which includes VET and professional education and training. In so doing, the NQA will, therefore, need to balance supporting the very highly accelerated development of locally based industry and social infrastructure with all its implications for workforce development, with a more culturally grounded education and training system[3].

This paper reviews the drivers that have shaped the development and design of the emerging Qualifications Framework for the Emirates. It will consider findings from national and international research and the numerous briefings, consultations and events that have taken place to shape the new system. It also considers the essential design parameters, the benefits of the QF*Emirates* for higher education, how the QF*Emirates* will be aligned to the current UAE higher education system and the transition arrangements for implementation of the QF*Emirates*.

What is a national qualifications framework and why does the UAE need one?

Qualifications, as testimonies of individual learning, carry intrinsic and economic (or exchange) value. Intrinsic value is normally associated with status and traditionally has been important for academic qualifications within educational hierarchies. Exchange value has been associated with the 'utility of learning', especially in industrial settings. These values lie in different proportions in most qualifications and are influenced by a variety of factors.

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[2] Gaad E, Arif M & Scott F (2006) Systems analysis of the UAE education system. *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 20, No. 4 pp290-303

[3] Crabtree SA (2010) Engaging students from the United Arab Emirates in culturally responsive education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* Vol. 47, No.1 pp 85-94

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), and the associated systems and processes that support them, have been introduced or are in the process of being developed in over 90 countries[4]. They range from the heavily industrialised and post-industrial economies of the European Union (EU) through to fast developing countries in Asia and developing countries in Africa and South America. Largely outcome-based they are being introduced to support economic goals and are fast becoming a key policy instrument for many governments as a means to systems reform and external, as well as internal, recognition of qualifications in a globalised labour market.

Simply put, a NQF defines the relationship between different forms of qualifications within a single hierarchy and the progression routes between them. Most define qualifications in terms of learning outcomes covering, in most cases, the knowledge and skills required, ranked according to a single hierarchy of levels. The majority of National Qualifications Frameworks also include qualifications which are applied in nature and measure competency, for example in the workplace (sometimes defined as the product of skills + knowledge + attitudes and behaviours).

Although early NQFs such as those developed in the UK, New Zealand, Australia and Ireland covered, at least in the first instance, largely vocational qualifications, those developed more recently have been overarching in nature, embracing all forms of education and training within a single, integrated system. Indeed, some of the more established ones, such as the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework have been broadened to take account of general and higher education – this was possibly the first truly integrated system[5]. As a result these broad, integrated National Qualifications Frameworks are independent of VET (although may be driven by a need to improve the market responsiveness of VET to support 'up-skilling') and have fairly complex quality assurance systems and assessment processes. However as integrated systems, it is easier to recognise and put value on previous learning, credit accumulation and transfer. In almost all instances NQFs have been introduced to improve the skills of the population to help the economy grow.

Unlike most other countries, the UAE does not need to introduce a NQF to help the economy grow.[6] In the 1970s the economy exploded following the oil boom and has continued to grow at record rates. However, the local population, which had limited access to formal education, was poorly placed to cope with the rapid growth. Labour was imported and continues to be brought in, in large numbers, to support the oil-orientated and service-based industries, including the public sector. The traditional subsistence agriculture and marine-based industries (fishing, seafaring, pearl farming) now account for a very small percentage of the workforce. The UAE is now diversifying into other non-oil income sources, including creative and knowledge industries and tourism. Vocational education for the local population has not kept pace with the growth in skills requirements and therefore needs to be mobilised in order to 'hand back' jobs to the Emiratis. This has created a two tier labour market, exemplified by only around

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[4] Young MFD (2003) National Qualifications Frameworks as a Global Phenomenon: a comparative perspective. *Journal of Education and Work,* Vol. 16, No.3

[5] Philips D (2003) Lessons from New Zealand's National Qualifications Framework. *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 16, No. 3

[6] Raven J (2011) Emiratising the education sector in the UAE: contextualisation and challenges. *Education, Business & Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 4, No.2 301

2% of the private sector workforce being Emirati. Underpinning the labour market issues is a widely held view that economic independence is being held back by deficiencies in the education system[7]. These perceived deficiencies are largely related to the relevancy of some of the degrees and diplomas currently being offered, including some foreign 'imports' which fail to take sufficient account of the historical and cultural values of the UAE. There is also limited promotion of teaching as a viable career and poor training of teachers, with many new resources and teaching techniques being produced in English only. In order to deal with these deficiencies robust quality assurance systems are necessary and a qualifications framework is needed which both encourages progression and checks for relevancy.

Understanding the cultural context is vitally important, and is often one of the reasons why new forms of teaching and learning, qualifications and even National Qualifications Frameworks and the regulatory environment surrounding them sometimes fail[8]. For example, in the UAE the prevailing culture is high in uncertainty avoidance – therefore, for UAE nationals, increasing autonomy is perceived as lack of direction. This is particularly relevant for vocational qualifications and on-the-job training.

Detailed research on the content of qualifications in the UAE[9] has also highlighted an ongoing discontinuity between curriculum development and delivery and no uniformly recognised and applied system to monitor and evaluate the quality of delivery at a local/subject level or at the level of national educational goals. There has been a widely held belief that delivering the content would automatically satisfy the learner needs and, therefore, national goals. The new QF*Emirates* will be used to help to resolve these issues. More training support for teachers is helping to address the former problem, but how to address the problems at a national level remain.

The National Qualifications Authority will, therefore, facilitate improvements in the quality of outcomes of education and training and its interrelationship with the labour market and economic development, with a particular (but not exclusive) emphasis on VET, but at the same time, will include support for social development.

The essence of national qualifications frameworks and systems

Globally, a number of different approaches have been adopted for national qualifications systems and their underpinning qualifications framework[10] [11]. Generally speaking they have a number of core aims which provide a practical solution to real political, economic and educational problems such as the need for labour market reform, changes to labour markets, the expansion or diversification of post-compulsory education or improvements in the quality of education or training. Often nations have very

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[7] Muysken J & Nour s (2006) deficiencies in education and poor prospects for economic growth in Gulf countries: the case of the UAE. *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, pp 957-80

[8] Abu Elanain (2008) Job characteristics, work attitudes and behaviours in a non-Western context. *Journal of Management Development,* VOL.28, No.5, pp 457-477

[9] Gaad E, Arif M & Scott F (2006) *ibid*

[10] Fernie S & Pilcher N (2009) National Qualifications Frameworks: Developing Research Perspectives. *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 15, No. 3

[11] Young MFD (2007) Qualifications Frameworks: some conceptual issues. *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 42, No.4

high expectations, which may not always be realised which will include some or all of the following: provide wider access to the education system for lifelong learning; allow the development of a robust 'exchange rate' mechanism for within and cross-nation learner mobility; facilitate homogenisation of international standards for equivalency and develop a reliable basis for homogenisation through robust quality assurance. Despite these aims, at a macro-level, it is rare for NQFs to be regarded as being transformational even though wider access, an exchange rate mechanism and homogenisation all imply that the systems was not previously being delivered, so *de facto* NQFs are transformational. It is largely dependent on how they are implemented – and the extent to which there is recognition that there may be gap between the written NQF model and the problems faced by practitioners in implementation.

One of the best examples of effective implementation is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) which, although led at a national level, was a 'bottom-up' model built up gradually over a period of years, based on demand and hand in hand with an evolving process of educational reform. This is process should be compared to the South African model and in the initial New Zealand model, which were 'top-down' and where the NQF was expected to drive educational reform. In the UAE, the political imperative to drive educational reform remains paramount, but with a series of checks and balances to enable the respective Commissions – MOE-GEC, CAA and ultimately VETAC, to have a significant role in implementation through a streamlined National Qualifications Authority, which brings all interest groups together, including industrialists who will be setting skills standards for future vocational qualifications.

At an operational level of analysis, there are a number of different approaches to the delivery of NQFs.

The first of these can be described as 'outcome-led'. In an outcome-led national qualifications framework, educational standards must be nationally 'set' by defining learning outcomes and associated assessment or performance criteria. A 'standard' is a clear and fixed statement of learning (knowledge, skills, competence or a combination thereof) that a learner must achieve. These 'standards' form the basis from which programmes can be designed and content selected. Learning outcomes do not necessarily have reference to specific inputs and are defined independently of the route that learners take to become qualified. In this approach, knowledge is given less value than outcomes, resulting in outcomes driving education, potentially weakening institutions. Often accused of 'context-stripping', an outcome-led NQF includes complex processes and stakeholder structures to generate, evaluate, register and regulate outcome-based qualifications separately from educational institutional processes. Many of the longer-established national qualifications systems, especially in anglophone nations, are outcome-led, such as the England, Wales and Northern Ireland QCF and the South African NQF[12].

Despite their flaws, outcomes based systems are popular as they enable articulation between different learning routes to standards defined by a set of common 'level descriptors'. This is broadly the approach the UAE has taken; the paper takes a closer look at the UAE system in a later section.

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[12] Allais SM (2007) Why the South African NQF failed: lessons for countries wanting to introduce national qualifications frameworks. *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 42, No. 4

At the opposite end of the qualifications framework spectrum, the second approach can be described as the 'communications-led system'. In a communication-based NQF, learning outcomes are not seen as 'building blocks' for qualifications which can be prescribed externally to educational providers. Individual organisations may define their own learning outcomes, but the NQF is built incrementally using a 'bottom-up' approach. This approach may work effectively in developed countries and has been adopted in Greece which, unlike most other EU Member States, does not have a formal NQF. However, in developing countries where social partners may be weak and have neither capacity nor capability, the public sector is likely to drive the system at the expense of the private system.

Inevitably there are variants on both types of NQF systems as outlined above. In some nations, a collaborative approach is used which is based on networks and partnerships between private and public stakeholders. In this model NQF development and implementation is seen as a collective exercise that leads to wider consultation and greater ownership of the system and design and development of qualifications. In the England, Wales and Northern Ireland, although primarily an outcomes-based system, this approach was adopted to gain greater ownership of changes in the period 2008-10. Development of a NQF can be a particularly useful approach when programmes of VET reform are being proposed and implemented. In contrast, in other nations, such as in France[13] and Tunisia (and other francophone nations, generally marked by traditional organisational inertia and thus have less interest in developing a central structure), the emphasis is normally on the classification of qualifications based on content and in particular, specialisms. In certain nations their NQF may have a very specific purpose, such as in Jordan where it is sectoral, applied only to VET and in Egypt, where its prime purpose is the integration of professional and scientific qualifications only.

There is a third type of qualifications framework which is emerging – which can be described as a 'meta-framework'; perhaps the most developed example of which is the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Development and implementation of the EQF is an EU-wide policy priority (although something similar is developing in Spanish speaking nations of South America). As a meta-framework, the EQF is an 'enabler' that aims to facilitate transparency and portability of qualifications and support lifelong learning across nations with very different systems. It is central to the EU policy drive to enhance mobility across Member States and establish a set of social and economic goals for Europe[14]. Key to its future success is that it will not supplant Member State NQF processes and structures. However, by 2012, EU Member States are expected to ensure that qualification transcripts and certificates all bear reference to the appropriate EQF level; and most European countries are now involved in a mapping process to EQF levels for their qualifications. Given its international importance, the QF*Emirates* is being developed in such a way that qualifications identified in the EQF can be mapped to it.

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[13] Bouder A (2003) Qualifications in France: towards a national framework? *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 16, No. 3

[14] Deissinger T (2009) The European Qualifications Framework and the European Lifelong Learning Perspective: How European countries are preparing to cope with the new philosophy of VET. *International Journal of Training Research,* Vol. 7, No. 1 pp1-18

What lessons have we learned about National Qualifications Frameworks from other nations?

The discussion thus far indicates clearly that National Qualifications Frameworks and systems achieve little if they are not fit for purpose and are not at the heart of wider educational and/or VET strategy. In other words they must align to their own national policy direction and learn from the lessons of other nations ('policy learning')[15]. 'Policy borrowing' from other nations will not work unless NQFs are explicitly linked to other policy initiatives. For example, the southern Mediterranean region (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia) embarked initially on a peer learning process to decide on the central parameters for a qualifications framework. These were progression routes, improving access to learning opportunities and skills recognition, creating more flexibility, ensuring transparency and quality assurance and increasing the relevance of qualifications for employment. The next step was for each country to shape its NQF at its own pace based on its economic/labour market/social development needs. It is important to note that in the UAE, the development of the QF*Emirates* is closely linked to the Emiratisation agenda and the approach clearly falls into the definition of 'policy learning'.

The lessons from South Africa illustrate the need to be very clear about the rationale for a National Qualifications Framework and system[16] [17]. The NQF in South Africa was envisaged as a transformational instrument and had the dual objectives of contributing to the drive for economic competitiveness and at the same time creating a more egalitarian education system (in schools, VET and higher education) post-apartheid, so supporting the transition to democracy. As such it enabled individuals and organisations with different political agendas to find common ground in the development of the nation – through the reform of the apartheid-led curriculum. The South African NQF is based on an outcomes approach to education, suitable for VET, but at odds with the highly prescriptive input-based system that existed during apartheid. Even within the VET sector, since the specification of standards has been removed from providers and programme development, a very high level of specificity for learning outcomes has resulted, based on pre-NQF approaches, but with no definition of required content. As a result of being alienated from the development process, providers designed their own content. Twelve years after its inception, the South African NQF had outcome-based qualifications and unit standards that were rarely used and most educational organisations continued to develop their own. It is important to note, however, that the South African system now has much more ownership, has become more flexible and many of these issues have diminished. This is partly as South Africa has developed its policy agenda; there is a direct and explicit link to other policy measures and systems simplification which has demonstrable results in systems reform[18].

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[15] Chakroun B (2010) National Qualifications Frameworks: from policy borrowing to policy learning. *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Part 1
[16] Allais SM (2003) The National Qualifications framework in South Africa: a democratic project trapped in a neo-liberal paradigm? *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol.16, No.3
[17] Allais SM (2007) *ibid*
[18] Raffe D (2003) Simplicity Itself – the Creation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. *Journal of Education and Work*, No. 16, pp239-304

In SE Europe the nations identified multiple needs related to improving social capital: including improving their capacity for policy analysis; developing partnerships within and across countries, addressing weak social funding and funding for VET, making heavy investment in education and skills infrastructure and addressing an extensive and unregulated informal labour market that employed workers with no formal skills certification and therefore weakened VET. As a result governments were keen to develop NQFs linked to the EQF, but the hasty 'copying and pasting' of EQF level descriptors and learning outcomes which did not correspond to the individual national labour markets and education and training systems of the various countries has, although pragmatic, had limited success. The key reason for this is that national organisations must gain ownership of EQF descriptors which, as the EQF is a meta-framework, are quite generic – although many experts believe they do help to transcend the academic-vocational divide. There is also a secondary reason which is gaining momentum – and that is some observers have begun to question how much individual NQFs will survive in a global context. The QF*Emirates* addresses both – the learning outcomes will be defined in a way that is not too generic and it not only links the existing UAE qualifications systems at a Federal level, but is being aligned to the European EQF.

In some nations, there are difficulties in bringing together the different strands – general education, VET and professional education and training and higher education. In Europe, Austria and France have been able to link up higher education and VET more readily than Germany[19], through the introduction of 'hybrid' qualifications. This is largely related to the tradition of VET in Germany where it has been primarily delivered through apprenticeships rather than full time programmes. However, there are moves towards a dual system with increasing numbers of young people progressing to vocational schools, although learners from the latter are less attractive to employers by virtue of their relative training immaturity. As a result, they have to look to other pathways – including moving on to higher education. Despite its training heritage, Germany has four key issues: missing links between VET and HE; unreliable links between different streams within VET; lack of differentiation within VET in terms of skills levels and duration and no clear relationships and progression routes between non-formal and informal learning and VET. The QF*Emirates* recognises these potential issues and also that there will need to be transition in implementation to ensure the system beds down effectively.

Employers normally value personal qualities in their workers, but also place a high priority on previous experience in their own industries. In South Africa, for example, around half use qualifications to select and recruit, but their concept of and reliance upon qualifications is relatively subjective. What constitutes a qualification is what is relevant to them and their recruitment and skills needs – and in particular workplace competence. This tension between knowledge or 'content' and competence is inherent in all integrated National Qualifications Frameworks. National governments have not always recognised this tension and have used qualifications frameworks as a means to make education 'more relevant' to the workplace and/or as a steering mechanism whereby the State can achieve social objectives, as in South Africa.

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[19] Deissinger T (2009) *ibid*

To summarise the debate, in developing a NQF, it is important that lessons are learned from previous experience, challenges are recognised and issues tackled. In particular, it is important to balance the definition of the qualification learning outcomes of a NQF between those which are highly generic and those which are too content-specific and in so doing ensure ownership of the emerging QF by the key stakeholders. Aligning the NQF to **both** to the national context to improve the skills of a given nation to support its economic and social development, competitiveness and prosperity **and** to the international recognition of qualifications, mobility and migration is essential. Tensions may emerge if a nation uses the development of a NQF as a lever for general social change and/or to drive major change to or reform of an education system. Time also needs to be allowed to enable transitions from existing systems to be made, but at the same time maintaining momentum in the pace of change which adopts a strategy for policy and peer learning in designing and developing the qualifications framework.

What are the key drivers for the QF*Emirates*?

A highly skilled and educated workforce is essential for the economic growth and prosperity, global competitiveness and social development of every nation. The UAE has identified that it faces significant challenges as a result of its economic growth and prosperity as it is required to operate in an increasingly globally competitive and changing environment. To meet the challenges ahead, and maximise the nation's competitive advantage the UAE needs access to a pool of highly skilled, educated and qualified workers through the human development of the nation's citizens (Emiratisation). Failure to deal with this challenge could lead to the lowering of global competitiveness and missing out on future opportunities, which need to be founded on the increasing economic integration, technological innovation and advance, continuing productivity growth and underpinning it all, an adaptable and flexible workforce.

For example, through research into the insurance sector in UAE, it has been determined that barriers to Emiratisation include low standards of education and poor skills of employees, inadequate English and a lack of trust by employers in the work readiness of Emirati nationals[20]. The research suggests that suggests that the standards of those entering after tertiary employment are having a negative impact on the profitability of companies in the sector and a dampening effect on growth. It goes as far to suggest that nepotism ('wasta') may well be having a negative impact on social capital, acting as a barrier to reform, although there is limited empirical evidence to support this.

In order to remain internationally competitive and attract inward investment, many nations have determined that investment in skills and qualifications reflecting new and emerging technologies and developing industrial sectors, has to be the number one priority in order to stimulate innovation, improve productivity and competitiveness and in turn improve a nation's wellbeing (eg Leitch Report[21], published in 2006 for the UK government, but applicable primarily to England).

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[20] Al-Ali J (2008) Emiratisation: drawing UAE nationals into their surging economy. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 28 No. 910 pp.366-297

[21] Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills, *Leitch Review of Skills*, published by the UK Government in December 2006

For many countries, the school system has an important role in offering a passport from poverty into productivity. However, this does not apply in the UAE. Where the UAE has similarities with other nations is in their perception of VET as a second class pathway – compared to the general education school system. Although this has been overcome in some countries, such as in Ireland[22], through developing the relationship of VET to existing systems, and as we have seen, in Germany, in the UAE the need to up-skill offers an opportunity to address ongoing structural issues within the education and training system – through the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework.

In summary, therefore, the key drivers in the UAE for the introduction of a National Qualifications Framework[23] focus on the need for a central education and training coordination authority to oversee the development of national strategic policy on skills and quality assurance of education and training outcomes. Linked to this, a singular, coherent and integrated framework of qualifications bringing together general education, higher education and VET will allow comparisons with and alignment to existing UAE and international qualifications – which could facilitate progression and avoid unnecessary repeat of learning. Following from both the above, the QF*Emirates* will provide an enabling mechanism for all national qualifications that can be used by the nation's decision makers to coordinate, monitor and quality assure VET providers and their delivery and enable the military, as a Federal body, to negotiate with an equivalent government body to help it address its current and future skills recognition and development needs.

It is the key drivers – international competitiveness and productivity and the need for a national strategy for the development and coordination of an integrated education and training system - that are at the heart of the new National Qualifications Authority.

Creating a world class system – the design features of the QF*Emirates*

This paper has demonstrated that the QF*Emirates* is being built on the best practice to create a truly world class system. Although the evidence base about what constitutes best practice in designing a world class system is vast and at time contradictory, certain features emerge as those most likely to lead to a qualifications system which drives skills development, productivity and prosperity.

First, the best systems bring together general education, VET, professional education and training and higher education: this is challenging but avoids fragmentation and encourages progression.

Second, unit standards are devised which are generic in design and which can be contextualised to specific sectors or contexts. This encourages transferability and progression.

Third, occupational skills standards are set to underpin VET qualifications design. This facilitates transferability between occupations and sectors and education, training and social mobility between nations. Skills standards also provide an objective and directly relevant measure for employers and employees alike to review their performance against. Industries are involved in setting their own skills

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[22] Granville G (2003) 'Stop Making Sense': chaos and coherence in the formulation of the Irish qualifications framework. *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 13, No. 3
[23] Internal document prepared by the project team assessing the need for a NQF, 2009

standards which ensures that they have ownership of them and will use them not only for qualifications design but implementing good human resource development practices.

Fourth, the best systems are developed with the involvement of all stakeholders, including schools and higher education at every stage of development. If the system is driven by VET, it will be harder to accommodate generic and academic requirements.

Fifth, the development of a National Qualifications Framework should not just one-dimensional. For a NQF to be effective, it needs to be differentiated by level and by credit to enable the relative standards of every qualification to be determined. Credit has two key functions – to provide assurance to learners by formally recognising that specific elements of their qualification have been successfully completed and to make learning more portable. Both levels and credit should be defined in simple and clear terms based on a common, agreed language. This requires clarity about levels which need to be defined by level descriptors which are effectively statements of national standards/ requirements.

Sixth, a world class NQF should be sufficiently dynamic and flexible to be able to respond to changing national or international demands. It should also support the recognition of prior learning and prior achievement in formal informal and non-formal contexts. This may be recognised in education, training, the community or the workplace.

Finally a world class NQF will be implemented in phases to reflect and support any existing systems. The nature of this will depend on the nature of existing systems, how comprehensive they are and national priorities for skills development.

The QF*Emirates* reflects these 'world class' attributes[24]. It brings together qualifications within two existing Commissions – MoE – GEC for general education, and CAA for higher education and a third - the new Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Commission (VETAC) for vocational education and training. Based on 10 levels, the QF*Emirates* enables qualifications which are developed under the jurisdiction of these Commissions to be assigned a nationally recognised title, level and credit value which is comparable across each levels.

Overcoming barriers to a single, integrated NQF

Despite the clear design characteristics of the QF*Emirates*, its role as an enabler to drive growth and prosperity and develop human capital, its alignment to international best practice and the vitally important commitment to its success at the highest level of Federal Government, it is timely to review barriers that might be encountered during the implementation phase. The system is not being designed to codify previous unplanned change; it is vital that a NQF must create future planned change. The former can occur when a NQF is designed to tackle deficiencies in VET or skills and/or to validate an ad hoc VET system of skills. This should not present a barrier for the QF*Emirates* – the NQF is instrumental in creating a VET system.

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[24] For a summary of how the QF*Emirates* is based on best practice, see Appendix 3, Table 1

In some instances the NQF design is more about supporting institutional power or making social change. In other words it is not clear who the innovators are and what the innovation is for. In the UAE the drivers are very clear – world class skills development, high quality education and training providers, an integrated system and coordinated education policy.

Some NQFs are oversimplified and/or there is an underestimation of the design requirements – resulting in multiple interpretations which could be either deliberate or unintended. Oversimplified NQFs assume wide consensus on use and inherent content, which may be misinterpreted. Equally, over-prescription can led to atomised learning and assessment which is insufficiently stimulating.

A real barrier to the successful implementation of a NQF is where the education system is characterised by those who are hostile to the NQF, fear it or are incredulous through lack of understanding of its purpose. This may be the result of a traditional existing education sector which is resistant to change and/or imposition of the NQF. The former is a potential obstacle in the UAE, which will be addressed through ongoing stakeholder involvement in all phases of the implementation, based on alignment with existing national and international qualifications. However, once a number of early adopters among the sceptical are in place, the levels of resistance often drop sharply. Equally where the education system is characterised by 'lukewarm defenders', with stakeholders and interest groups conducting 'symbolic activities' of no value or with limited impact, a facilitating engagement process will need to be adopted for implementation with the active involvement of those showing lukewarm characteristics.

What next in the UAE – what does this mean for the higher education sector?

The key benefits of the QF*Emirates* for the high education sector lies in the ability of universities and other higher education providers to use the QF to drive national education and training policy within a coherent and integrated framework. This will enable UAE higher education institutions and their graduates to be recognised as 'world class'. The status and credibility of national qualifications will be raised and it will, in time, reduce the reliance on both an imported workforce and international providers to develop the UAE workforce. The facility to quality assure against notional unit standard level descriptors up to doctorate level will enable all higher education providers to be assured that they are delivering qualifications to a given standard which is internationally accepted.

A vital part of the role of higher education is to engage with the development and implementation of UAE recognition and equivalence policies. Recognition is defined by the Lisbon Recognition Convention[25] as '*a formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities.*' Recognition, therefore, enables foreign awards gained through academic study, workplace learning or in line with professional body requirements and standards to be aligned to UAE qualifications and so facilitate transferability and mobility of the nation's citizens. In the equivalence procedure the content, duration and standards of studies required by the foreign qualification is carefully compared with those of the host country. This

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[25] The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Union was developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and adopted in 1997. The full text can be found on: http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Reports/html./L165.htm

enables decisions to be made consistently about whether the foreign qualification can fully substitute for the host country's qualification.[26] A fundamental principle of a recognition agreement is that it should apply to a foreign qualification unless '*a substantial difference can be shown between the qualifications for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification...*'[27]. In an ideal world, only the learning outcomes associated with the two qualifications would matter to ensure that the knowledge, understanding and skills are comparable. This is the direction that the QF*Emirates* will take. In the past analysis has been based largely on easily quantifiable and understandable input factors such as duration of studies and student workload. The QF*Emirates* is aligning its recognition processes to the European higher education system (Bologna Process) and to the European Qualifications Framework, which will move recognition towards quality assurance of learning outcomes to ensure content comparability.

In doing all the above, including establishing recognition agreements, the benefit for higher education ultimately is to facilitate academic freedom and institutional autonomy within a national policy framework and at an international level – as 'best in class'.

Sceptics may believe that higher education has no place in a national qualifications system. For example, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, although there are qualifications at higher levels within the Qualifications and Credit Framework, there are comparatively few. In contrast, the Scottish experience has been to place the nation at the forefront of European and international developments to develop a national qualifications framework for higher education. The Scottish Framework for Qualifications in Higher Education (FQHE) is compatible with the European Higher Education framework (EHEA) with very few modifications; one European credit transfer point equates to two SCQF points but there are more levels in the EHEA than in the FQHE. The Scottish approach is successful as it reflects a political and proactive strategy emphasising higher education as a public responsibility and an integrated part of lifelong learning – ie a genuinely integrated and cohesive approach[28].

Higher education's role in delivering the vision for the QF*Emirates*

A central theme of this paper is the skills deficit that is evident in other nations and looming in the UAE. Purely academic qualifications with limited high levels of application of technical skills may encourage analytical and critical thinking skills, but what the UAE needs now is qualified technical experts and professionals to fill corporate functions and highly deliver highly specialised technical skills. A report[29] published by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation noted that the systems for skills development in the region are ill-prepared to meet these challenges[30]. The essential requirement for

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[26] Rauhvargers A (2009) Recognition and qualification frameworks *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, Vol.16, No.1 pp111-125

[27] See footnote 25

[28] Karseth B & Dydral Solbrekke T (2010) Qualifications Frameworks: the avenue towards the convergence of European higher education? *European Journal for Education*, Vol. 45, No.4

[29] Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation (2008) Arab Human Capital Challenge: the Voice of CEOs. Report published by the Foundation in cooperation with PriceWaterhouseCoopers

[30] Referring to the increasing demand for skills, which is sometimes rising exponentially due to a combination of technological, structural and organisational changes

successful skills formation is close alignment of education and training systems with the needs of the labour market. However, training systems in the region tend to operate in isolation of labour market demand and with little or no employer participation.

The QF*Emirates* cannot deliver the vision for a world class system or meet its objectives without the support and active involvement of higher education and leading industrialists. Equally, higher education can be enriched and develop new opportunities to deliver influence and provide expertise not only in the region but internationally[31]. This could be through research into new skills needed by world class knowledge economies, analysing skills shortages and gaps and supporting the export of specialist technical knowledge based on the energy sector and other emerging industries. Furthermore, experimentation with new forms of learning and delivery in ways that reflect Arab culture, in the workplace, but utilising emerging technologies – is required in a world with diminishing resources for publicly funded and supported education and training.

As well as skilled researchers and academics, higher education also offers to the QF*Emirates* experience of using robust quality assurance systems and processes. It has a key role to play in recognition agreements and simplifying attestation processes, so that UAE nationals and those educated overseas can contribute to the growth and prosperity of the nation within the global environment without having to re-train or repeat learning. This will be through quality assured qualifications that are comparable, consistent, aligned to existing systems and processes and supported by the UAE Commissions. Most of all, higher education will be able to take its place at the heart of education system reform, influencing what happens in VET and general education within an agreed structure. It will be able to place itself at the forefront of flexible development and delivery to encourage learning, ongoing engagement and motivation of those who have not yet achieved their potential.

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[31] See Appendix 4, Table 2, for a review of the interaction and synergies between higher education and the QF*Emirates*

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Appendix 2   A summary of qualification types

1. **Principal Qualifications** are the major type of qualification associated with formal recognition at each level, and capture a typical range of achievements for the level such as:

   o   Grade 12 Secondary School Certificate at Level 4

   o   Bachelor Degree at Level 7

   o   Diploma at Level 5

   o   Certificate 4 at Level 4

   o   Certificate 3 at Level 3.

2. **Composite Awards** provide formal recognition for learners who achieve a multiple set of cohesive learning outcomes encompassing*,* in varying combinations, all five strands *of learning outcomes but not the full combination of learning outcomes* required for a Principal Qualification. They may:

   o   represent a cluster of learning outcomes not sufficient to be a Principal Qualification, or

   o   be included as constituent parts of Principal Qualifications, or

   o   stand-alone (independent) as a set for recognition purposes

3. **Component Awards** provide the smallest parcel of cohesive learning outcomes that can be achieved by learners for formal recognition purposes within the Framework. They may relate to all or only some of the five strands of learning outcomes defining the level. These types of awards may:

   •   stand-alone as an orphan parcel of learning contained within a Composite Award and/or Principal Qualification

   •   be used as certification of competence in health and safety in the construction industry

   •   prescribed for regulatory purposes and skills licencing

   •   relate to specific and narrow knowledge or work performance outcomes

   •   be used to update and refresh specific knowledge or skills

   •   apply to continuing professional development

   •   stand-alone as a unit of learning not encompassed within Principal Qualifications but may contribute towards Composite Awards

   •   be low in volume effort relative to, or by comparison with, the outcomes of Principal Qualifications.

Learning outcomes

The five strands of learning outcomes comprise knowledge, skill, and aspects of competence as shown below, in terms of:

- autonomy and responsibility

- role in context

- self-development

Level X	Strand 1	Strand 2	Strand 3	Strand 4	Strand 5
	Knowledge	Skill	Autonomy and responsibility	Role in context	Self-development

Aspects of competence
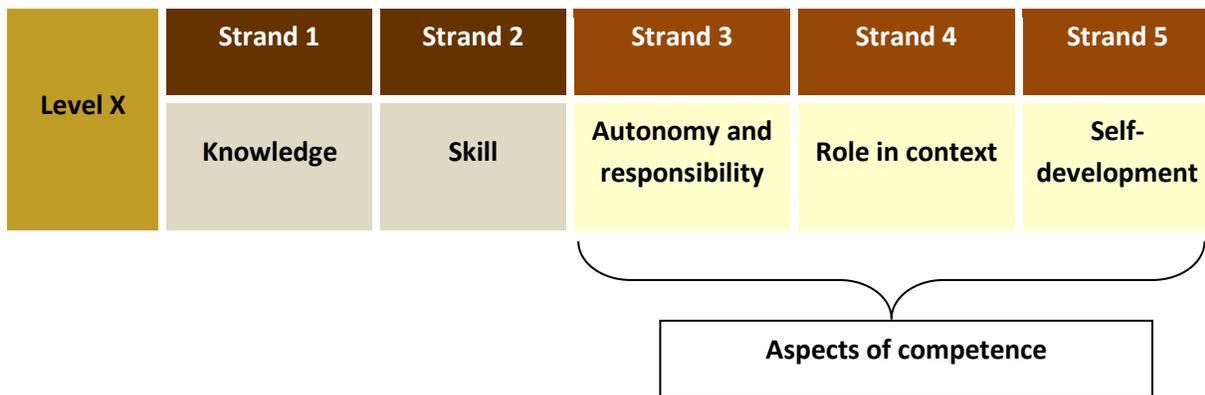
Appendix 3

Table 1: The QF*Emirates* and how it encompasses best practice

Characteristics of a world class national qualifications system	UAE response	Comments
Drives and coordinates national education and training policy	√	
Encourages transferability and economic and social mobility across nations	√	The QF*Emirates* draws on the best of other nations and is aligned to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
Brings together general education, VET, professional education and training and higher education	√	
Defines unit standards generic in design which can be contextualised to specific sectors or contexts	√	Agreed unit template for all qualifications
Uses skills standards set to underpin VET qualifications design	√	Planned
Involves industries in setting their own skills standards	(√)	Planned – industry leadership through 12 industry sectors to cover the UAE workforce
Consults with and involves all stakeholders, including schools and higher education at every stage of development	√	Ongoing – vital both at development and at implementation stage
Enables the development of a Qualifications Framework (QF) which is not just one-dimensional.	√	Based o n levels and credit
Enables a QF which is sufficiently dynamic and flexible to respond to change	√	
Provides a simple and clear design based on a common, agreed language	√	Based on agreed level descriptors
Recognises prior learning and achievement	√	
Reflects and is aligned to existing systems	√	Aligned to the UAE higher education system

Appendix 4

Table 2: Driving growth and prosperity in the UAE: summary of the potential interaction between higher education and the QF

The table below indicates the synergies between the QF*Emirates* and higher education as the framework is implemented across the UAE.

What the UAE needs	What the QF*Emirates* offers	What HE offers to the QF
Workers with good basic education skills	CoreLife Skills[32] integrated into skills standards	Progression routes from school based education
Workers with higher level technical skills	Principal, composite and component qualifications up to Level 6	Progression routes from these qualifications to Bachelor and Masters degrees and other post -graduate opportunities , especially through flexible delivery
Graduates and postgraduates with specialist skills, needed to deliver new jobs within a global knowledge economy	Composite qualifications up to level 8	Opportunities to develop fast track principal, (and if relevant) composite and component qualifications on the QF which respond to immediate requirements
Professionals to support the upskilling of the private and public sector in (for example) HR, finance, law as part of Emiratisation	National and international professional qualifications recognised as equivalencies to national qualifications	Support in achieving recognition as well as skilled academics
Upskilling in the workforce	Component qualifications up to Level 7 or possibly Level 8	Skilled academics with specialist skills capable of teaching at this level
Quality assured qualifications	Overarching role for the NQA	Robust QA systems and processes
Qualifications recognised internationally	Promotion of the QF and process to recognise specific qualifications based on best international practice	Robust QA systems and processes to support HE recognition
Trend and skills analysis	Qualifications which are fit for purpose for a world class system, informed by research and analysis	Research capability

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[32] CoreLife Skills key competencies or generic skills play in underpinning work, learning and life. The recognition of these skills are important because they underpin the ability of learners to learn throughout their lives. In this way they support the promotion of lifelong learning. In summary, the UAE CoreLife Skills are information skills, communication skills, organising oneself, working with others, problem-solving using mathematics and , using information and communication technologies ICT) and participating in social and civic life, including ethical practice.