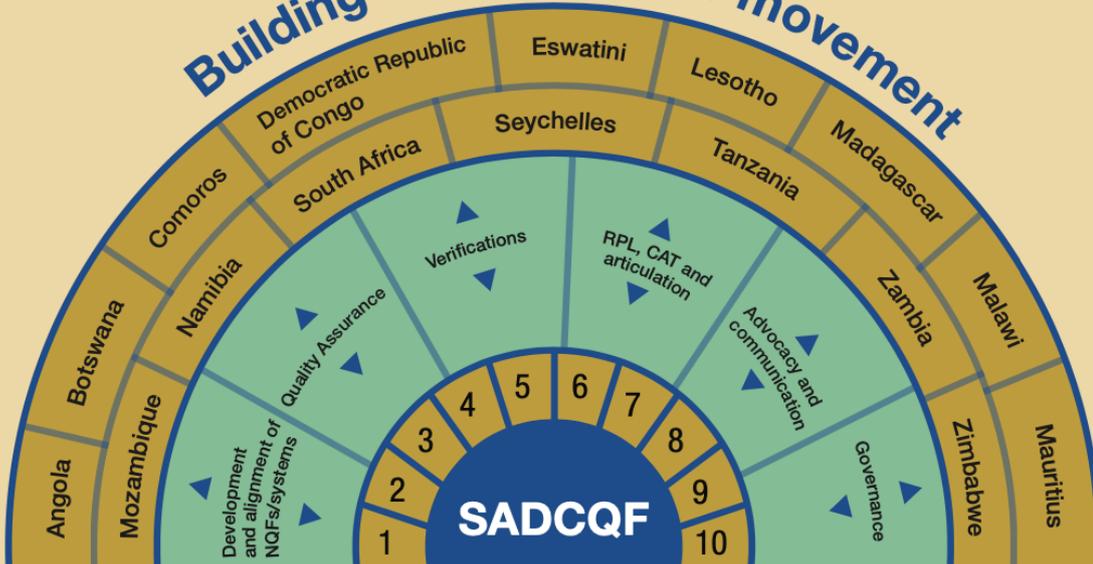


Building trust for better movement



Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)

Review of implementation and way forward

This project is co-funded by the European Union and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development



Supported by



This study has been conducted over a period of eight months in 2021-2022 upon request of the Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA).

This assignment was supported and funded within the project AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability/Skills Initiative for Africa, Technical Cooperation – Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework.

Views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should in no way be attributed to the institutions to which they are affiliated or to the African Union Commission or the project partners: European Union (EU), Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), European Training Foundation (ETF).

We acknowledge all contributors, institutions and experts who shared information, comments and recommendations during the survey and interviews, the TCCA meeting on 25 November 2021, and supported the authors in the accomplishment of this mission.

Sincere gratitude is extended to the SADC Secretariat for their coordination, leadership and support.

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Final version: 23 May 2022

Table of contents

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	4
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
2. INTRODUCTION.....	9
2.1 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT	9
2.2 TURBULENCE AND TRANSFORMATION	10
2.3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY	11
2.4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	11
2.5 THE PROCESS AND SOURCES OF THE STUDY.....	11
2.6 KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS.....	12
3. SADCQF – GENESIS, SCOPE, AND STATE OF PLAY	14
3.1 POLICY CONTEXT OF THE SADCQF	14
3.2 SADCQF: GENESIS, PURPOSES, DESIGN AND GOVERNANCE	15
3.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SADCQF.....	16
3.4 INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF SADCQF.....	19
4. NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN SADC.....	19
4.1 NQFs ARE DEVELOPING IN ALL REGIONS OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT	19
4.2 NQFs IN SADC.....	21
4.3 DATABASES/REGISTERS OF QUALIFICATIONS	23
4.3.1 SNAPSHOT OF NATIONAL DATABASES/REGISTERS OF QUALIFICATIONS IN SADC.....	23
4.4 CREDIT ACCUMULATION AND TRANSFER (CAT) SYSTEMS	29
5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	31
5.1 SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS.....	31
5.2 OVERVIEW OF LESSONS LEARNED	36
5.3 HIGH-LEVEL ISSUES AND AREAS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT	37
5.4 FOCUS ON SPECIFIC QUESTIONS.....	38
6. ADAPTATION TO NEW DEMANDS AND TRANSFORMATION	43
6.1 ASPECTS OF THE GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION CONCERNING QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AND SYSTEMS	43
6.2 FINDINGS.....	44
6.3 ASPECTS OF THE SADCQF THAT NEED REVISITING TO ASCERTAIN RELEVANCE	45
7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	47
8. SOURCES.....	57
8.1 REPORTS AND ANALYSES.....	57
8.2 NATIONAL LEGISLATION, REGULATIONS, GUIDELINES RELATED TO NQF: BY COUNTRY.....	60
ANNEXES	63
ANNEX 1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THIS STUDY	63
ANNEX 2: LEVEL DESCRIPTORS OF SADCQF	64
ANNEX 3: SADCQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS: ISSUES - SUMMARY OF RESPONSES (SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS)	65
ANNEX 4: SWOT ANALYSIS	66
ANNEX 5: DATABASES AND REGISTERS OF QUALIFICATIONS: EXPERIENCES FROM EUROPE, UNITED STATES, NEW ZEALAND, HONG KONG	67
ANNEX 6: MICRO-CREDENTIALS: DEBATES AND DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS COMMON UNDERSTANDING.....	70

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACQF	African Continental Qualifications Framework
ANEP	National Authority of Vocational Education (Autoridade Nacional de Education Profissional)
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASEAN QRF	Association of Southeast Asian Nations Qualifications Reference Framework
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
AU	African Union
BQA	Botswana Qualifications Authority
CAT(S)	Credit Accumulation and Transfer (System)
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESHEC	Eswatini Higher Education Council
ESQF	Eswatini Qualifications Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
HAQAA	Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation
HEI	Higher education institution
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MQA	Mauritius Qualifications Authority
NAC	National Alignment Committee
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA	Quality assurance
QR	Qualifications Register
REC	Regional Economic Community
RISDP	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Regional Qualifications Framework
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADCQF	Southern African Development Community Qualifications Frameworks
SADCQVN	Southern African Development Community Verifications Network
SAQA	South Africa Qualifications Authority
SAQAN	Southern African Quality Assurance Network
SARUA	Southern African Regional University Association
SNATCA	National System of Credit Accumulation and Transfer
SQA	Seychelles Qualifications Authority
TCCA	Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation
TCCA EXCO	Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation Executive Committee
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ZAQA	Zambia Qualifications Authority
ZIMCHE	Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education
ZIMCATS	Zimbabwe Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

1. Executive Summary

Context of the study

This study was undertaken upon request of the Secretariat of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Executive Committee of TCCA (EXCO TCCA), as agreed on 26 July 2021. This report provides a concise review of the status of implementation of the SADCQF and identifies directions of change to be considered in the next phase as the region engages with the goals of the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Programme (RISDP) 2030 and with the continuously changing challenges of the transformation of societies.

The first draft version of this report was submitted to SADC Secretariat and was presented to members of TCCA at the meeting of 25 November 2021. The comments received during that meeting were considered in the pre-final version of the report, submitted to the Secretariat for the TCCA meeting on 29 April 2022. This final version includes complementary information shared by two countries after this TCCA meeting: Namibia (Namibia Qualifications Authority - on RPL policy document of 2010) and Seychelles (Seychelles Qualifications Authority, SQA, on adoption and entry into force of the new SQA Act N° 57/2021).

This report has been drafted in a period marked by global turbulence. Africa as a whole and the SADC region are not insulated from global developments and crises. As a response, economic, employment and skills development systems will need innovative and consistent support policies and investments.

In Africa there is hope that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will accelerate operations and deliver on the promise of new trade dynamics and ties across the continent, ease of transactions, access to technology, and mobility of skills and qualifications indispensable for this massive integration flagship programme.

Five years have passed since the September 2016 meeting of the TCCA, which formally adopted the new designation 'Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)', as well as the two-year milestone plan and the first implementation model of three programmes. This first phase of implementation of SADCQF has reached several achievements. The resource constraints have been partially addressed, thanks to solidarity between the SADC countries, regional ownership, and cooperation with the key international partners.

SADC Qualifications Framework

The SADCQF is a regional mechanism for comparability and recognition of full qualifications, credit transfer, creation of regional standards and facilitation of quality assurance (QA). It consists of a set of agreed principles, practices, procedures and standardised terminology intended to meet the five purposes of the SADCQF:

1. Providing a mechanism for comparability and recognition of qualifications in SADC.
2. Facilitating mutual recognition of qualifications in all member states.
3. Harmonising qualifications wherever possible.
4. Promoting the transfer of credits within and among member states and even beyond.
5. Creating SADC regional standards where appropriate.

In the five years of its existence, the SADCQF implementation model showed resilience in the face of challenges and resource limitations and was able to deliver tangible contributions on some of the defined purposes.

The countries' commitment to accepting responsibility for the five implementation programmes was a unique starting point to progress with technical activities, create mutual trust between countries and generate a first tangible home-grown experience and knowledge of SADCQF, which will always be a reference point for other RQFs.

The five purposes remain relevant and valid as the SADCQF enters a second half-decade of life. These are objectives requiring sustained and long-term commitment and a balanced combination of actions and complementarities. None of these purposes can be considered as having reached the full set and scope of achievements. Actions and initiatives have been started and deliverables completed in regard to the first four objectives, but less activity can be reported as concerns the fifth objective ('Creating SADC regional standards where appropriate'). One of the recommendations of this report concerns this objective, notably the development of common profiles (of elements of common standards) for occupations and qualifications related to emerging occupations, new skills (digital and green, transversal) and priority sectors for SADC economic integration and effective operations of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The Revised Draft Proposal for implementing the SADCQF (May 2019) has not been funded according to the planned parameters and estimations. This proposal was conceived and elaborated in pre-Covid-19 times and reflected high costs of travel and physical missions to countries to participate in TCCA meetings, which can nowadays be substantially curbed as the world learned to work in hybrid mode. A revised roadmap for approximately four years (2022-2026) should be elaborated, taking account of the findings and recommendations of this study, and the new demands and opportunities of this period of turbulence and continuing transformation of the contexts and dynamics of the qualifications eco-systems (national and regional) to which the SADCQF relates.

National level developments

National Qualifications Frameworks

Over 60% (9 countries) of SADC member states are implementing comprehensive National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs), encompassing all levels and subsectors of education and training. These developments have started over twenty years ago – Namibia, South Africa – and have seen some acceleration in the last five years, with NQF development actions in *new* countries. In some of the countries with more tangible NQF experiences, the qualifications authorities have advanced with the review and improvement of elements of the NQF, policies, regulations, and tools - Seychelles, South Africa and Zambia.

- a) Six countries have NQFs that have been operational for some time, and some have been reviewed: Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, and Zambia.
- b) Three countries have NQFs in place (legal act approved, implementation started): Eswatini, Lesotho and Zimbabwe.
- c) Five other countries are at the stage of development and consultation for their comprehensive and integrated NQFs, and some of them have showed good progress in the 2020-2022 period: Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania. Some countries have sectoral qualifications frameworks operational (TVET and higher education), and at the same time are advancing with development of integrated/comprehensive NQFs, for example, Malawi and Mozambique.

- d) Two countries are at a very early stage of NQF development: Union of Comoros and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Comoros started steps to develop its NQF, in a process linked with the programme supporting enhancement of the TVET system.

NQFs are not static - review is important

Acknowledging the need for existing NQFs to evolve and respond to new demands, several SADC countries are undertaking processes of review of the NQF, and certain regulations supporting NQF implementation. Seychelles, South Africa and Zambia illustrate such an effort to improve the NQF and adopt new or revised NQF legal acts, policies, and guidelines.

- Seychelles (SQA) has drafted the new SQA Act, reviewed the NQF and NQF Regulations and the Quality Assurance Manual. The new SQA Act (N° 57/2021) has entered into force on 1 May 2022. The new SQA Act widens the functions of SQA.
- South Africa (SAQA) has adopted amendments to the NQF Act (2019) and revised the RPL Policies and Criteria for RPL (in 2019) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (2021).
- Zambia (ZAQA) published information on [progress made on the NQF review](#), which focuses on the structure of the NQF, level descriptors, finalisation of the Guidelines for the Development of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems and revision of the current ZAQA Act No. 13 of 2011.

Registers / Catalogues of national qualifications accessible online for end users

This study identified and examined four countries with registers/catalogues of national qualifications accessible online for all users. These countries are Botswana, Mauritius, Mozambique, and South Africa. Digital and accessible registers of qualifications are instruments of strategic importance for the implementation of NQF, for quality and comparability of qualifications, for visibility and outreach to end users and for delivery of the public service and promise of NQF: transparency of qualifications. Other countries can learn from the existing practice and SADC could support development of qualifications databases able to interoperate and deliver much-needed information for portability, mobility and recognition.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

People learn anytime, everywhere. Outcomes of prior learning in all contexts of life can be validated, recognised, and certified to give people access to new opportunities in education and training, employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

Across the world, countries and regional communities increasingly recognise the value of non-formal and informal learning and many are establishing systems to acknowledge knowledge, skills and competences acquired in all contexts.

In the SADC many countries have or are adopting RPL policies and guidelines and most importantly, advancing with delivery of RPL services. RPL systems and experiences are at different stages of development and consolidation, and a few examples can be mentioned:

- South Africa has amended the Policy and Criteria for RPL and has substantial and long-standing experience with much expertise and data to be shared.
- Zambia has put in place the Policy and Criteria for RPL (ZAQA, 2016). In TVET implementation is led by TEVETA for several sectors, such as in mining, tourism, agriculture and construction sector. In higher education RPL is applied to provide exemptions for further studies

- Malawi has adopted in 2018 a set of RPL documents to facilitate implementation, including Guidelines, Procedure Manual, Assessors Guide, Candidate Guidelines and Application Form. RPL is more active in the TVET sector.
- Mauritius (MQA) amended the RPL Guidelines in 2016 and RPL services for individuals are accessible.
- Mozambique (ANEP) adopted the legal and regulatory framework in 2021 and started implementation with pilot actions to train and certify RPL professionals, certify RPL centres and deploy RPL processes for individuals.
- Namibia is one the first SADC countries to adopt the RPL Policy, in 2010.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

Many SADC countries have included references to CAT in NQF legal acts and other education system legislation. But only a few have adopted legal texts and implementation policies and guidelines that are specific to CAT. According to the information collected by this study, these countries with specific CAT legislation and guidelines are Mozambique (SNATCA), South Africa, Zimbabwe and more recently also Eswatini. In Zambia the CAT Guidelines are waiting for approval.

Most SADC countries adhere to the principle and notion that:

- “Credits” means the amount of learning contained in a qualification whereby one (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.

Countries explicitly adopting this principle are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique (in TVET qualifications framework), Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

But there are some exceptions, which reflect the specifics of the national context and education system, and established relations with other communities of countries. In this context the following definitions are in application:

- Angola: in higher education – one (1) credit is equated to 15 notional hours of learning. Curriculum units may have a credit value of 1 to 20 credits. (Source: Presidential decree 198/18.)
- Madagascar: in higher education – some diversity of definitions varying from 10 to 16 hours of notional learning for 1 credit, depending on the field of learning.
- Mozambique: in higher education (SNATCA) - 1 credit equates to 25-30 notional hours.

Recommendations

Chapter 7 of this report contains conclusions and recommendations, and is structured in seven topics:

- A. On the five purposes of SADCQF
- B. Governance and implementation model
- C. Legal basis and methodological framework of SADCQF
- D. NQF development and alignment
- E. New demands – new developments
- F. Dissemination and application of SADCQF Handbooks and Guidelines
- G. Capacity development
- H. Interplay between SADCQF and ACQF

In this Executive Summary focus is given to one recommendation: E. New demands – new developments, specifically micro-credentials.

The SADC TCCA needs to give some attention to understanding the types of micro-credentials emerging in the region, how they link to mainstream policies supporting lifelong learning, career progression and employability, and the challenges and opportunities they bring.

It is recommended that the lessons and results of the most recent international and regional initiatives towards definition of common language and principles be considered by SADC. For instance, the EU experience of developing a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2021), is relevant. This EU initiative recommended ten principles applicable when designing and issuing micro-credentials: quality, transparency, relevance, valid assessment, recognition, portability, learner-centred, authentic, information and guidance.

Country experiences in creating frameworks for micro-credentials can suggest useful directions of thinking for a SADC initiative on micro-credentials. For instance, New Zealand has included micro-credentials in the NQF. The [register of NZQA-approved Micro-Credentials](#) contains 224 micro-credentials at different levels of the NQF (levels 3 to 7). The Australian Government in 2021 adopted the [National Micro-Credentials Framework](#), which defines what constitutes a micro-credential, and elaborates the main unifying principles and critical information requirements.

The SADC in cooperation with the ACQF, other RQFs, education QA agencies and relevant stakeholders in Africa could seize the opportunity to engage in a structured dialogue about a common African concept and guidelines on micro-credentials.

2. Introduction

The first half decade has passed since the September 2016 meeting of the TCCA, which formally adopted the new designation 'Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)'. The same meeting endorsed the two-year milestone plan and the first implementation model of three programmes.

This first phase of implementation of SADCQF has reached several achievements, and the resource constraints have been partially addressed thanks to solidarity between the SADC countries, regional ownership, and cooperation with the key international partners.

This study was undertaken upon request of the Secretariat of the SADC and the EXCO TCCA, as agreed on 26 July 2021. This report provides a concise review of the status of implementation of the SADCQF and identifies directions of change to be considered in the next phase as the region engages with the goals of the RISDP 2030 and the challenges of a turbulent period of transformation of work, learning and societies.

The first draft version of the report was submitted to the Secretariat and was presented to members of the TCCA at the meeting on 25 November 2021. The comments received during that meeting have been considered in this final version of the report, submitted to the Secretariat for the TCCA meeting on 29 April 2022.

2.1 Structure of the report

This final version of the study covers two parts, available as separate but interconnected reports:

- a) **This report** examining the **status of implementation** of the SADCQF and providing a concise overview on the status of development and implementation of National Qualifications

Frameworks (NQF) in the SADC countries. The scope and methodological approach of this study are described in this part.

- b) **The inventory of NQFs in SADC countries.** Although this inventory is primarily an integral part of the final review report, it can be used as a standalone reference report. This inventory is based on a common structure of content for all countries, allowing comparisons. This inventory summarises information on the policy and legal basis, objectives and principles, scope and level structure, credit accumulation and transfer, recognition of prior learning policies and governance and management of NQFs in SADC countries. The information integrated and summarised in this inventory builds on national sources collected via desktop research and sources shared by the country representatives at TCCA SADC. These sources are policies, legal and regulatory acts pertaining to NQFs and related components, guidelines and handbooks, online registers and catalogues of qualifications, websites of the lead NQF institutions and reports. Other international sources include the [mapping reports](#) and [thematic presentations on NQFs](#) of the capacity development programme of ACQF; and other analytical reports, such as the [Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks 2019](#) (Volume II). (ETF, Cedefop, UIL, UNESCO. 2019).

The report is structured in six main chapters:

1. Chapter 2: Introduction – discloses the context of the study and the leading role of the SADC Secretariat and EXCO in initiating the study. Clarifies the objectives, scope, and methodological approach of the study.
2. Chapter 3: Describes the regional level - genesis, state of play, scope and instruments of SADCQF.
3. Chapter 4: Presents the national level - a concise overview of national developments on NQFs in SADC countries.
4. Chapter 5: Elaborates on the findings of the study, with emphasis on results of the survey.
5. Chapter 6: Highlights areas of innovation and change, related to new demands and transformation.
6. Chapter 7: Proposes the recommendations emerging from the study.

2.2 Turbulence and transformation

This report has been drafted in a period marked by global turbulence. Africa as a whole and the SADC region are not insulated from global developments and crises. As a response, economic, employment and skills development systems will need innovative and consistent support policies and investments.

This transformation is triggered by cumulative drivers of change, including the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the aggravation of climate and environmental balance, and new hefty threats to global peace and security that put at risk food security, energy prices, trade, and economic ties. The combined effects of these mega drivers will impact on production, organisation of work, technology, and digital transition. The demands on education and training and skills development eco-systems will continue to put pressure on governments and civil society. In such a context regional and national qualifications frameworks and systems more than ever need to be able to adapt and contribute to a vital need for trusted, transparent, accessible, and rewarding lifelong learning.

In Africa there is hope, that the AfCFTA will accelerate operations and deliver on the promise of new trade dynamics and ties across the continent, ease of transactions, access to technology, and mobility of skills and qualifications indispensable for this massive flagship integration programme.

2.3 Scope of the study

The concept paper defining the scope and research questions underpinned the terms of reference of the study and was shared by the Secretariat for review and validation by the TCCA EXCO members.

The study elaborates on the lessons learned from development and implementation of the SADCQF and identifies high-level issues and areas for further improvement or requiring substantive review and adjustment taking account of the ongoing pervasive transformation of learning, skills needed, technologies, work and jobs. The study analyses strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges related to both the internal and external environment of SADCQF, provides orientations and outlines options to address the identified gaps and emerging needs and to leverage on opportunities. While the focus of this study is the SADCQF as a regional qualifications framework (RQF), issues related to development, implementation, and review of NQFs in the SADC region are also addressed.

The draft report was presented at the TCCA meeting in November 2021. The comments and suggestions received were considered in this final version.

This study is carried out in partnership with the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the project 'Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)', in which ETF assures the coordination of analytical and technical developments and support of capacity development within countries and regions. The ACQF development project (2019-2022) responds to the policy initiative of the African Union (AU) and is supported by the European Union (EU) and the Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ) of Germany. Refer to the [ACQF website](#) for more information.

2.4 Methodological approach

The study made use of a combination of sources of information and data (listed under "Sources" at the end of the report), commensurate with the scope of work and timeline, notably:

- Documentary research (desktop research) – SADC-specific, member countries and relevant international sources.
- An online survey addressed to key respondents from all SADC countries (including respondents from different ministries and agencies, other stakeholders).
- Targeted interviews with representatives of the TCCA EXCO and the SADC Secretariat.
- Discussion: virtual meetings to deepen or clarify certain themes, issues, and propositions.

Analysis was conducted by the authors listed.

Timeline: the study has been conducted over the period September 2021 to March 2022. The draft report was presented in November 2021 and the final report was completed on 31 March 2022, for final presentation to TCCA on 29 April 2022.

2.5 The process and sources of the study

The study focuses on two clusters of research questions, available in Annex 1 of this report.

- Questions related to the status of the implementation of the SADCQF
- Questions related to potential adaptation of the SADCQF to new demands triggered by the different drivers of transformation.

As foreseen in the concept paper underpinning the Terms of Reference, the collection of information and data was based on the combination of a desktop analysis of documents, an online survey questionnaire

sent to TCCA members and other experts in the field of qualifications frameworks in all SADC member states, and interviews with TCCA EXCO and the SADC Secretariat.

Desktop research

As part of the study, desktop research was conducted through a review of SADC documents, notably SADC Protocols, the regional strategic plan and other sectoral plans; records of meetings of Ministers of Education and Science and Technology from 2017 to 2019; reports of TCCA meetings; SADCQF tools, handbooks and guidelines (indicated in Table 1); two country alignment reports, and other relevant analyses and studies including the Mapping Reports conducted by the project ACQF.

Online survey

The design of the survey tool (questionnaire) was based on the research questions defined in the concept note and was finalised in consultation with the SADC Secretariat and ETF. It was distributed via email in the three SADC languages (English, Portuguese, and French), to ensure that all member states could participate and submit their responses within the deadline. The online survey was administered by the Consultant on behalf of the ETF and the TCCA Secretariat. Eight countries submitted responses to the survey (50% response rate).

The survey tool was structured in two clusters of questions (refer to Annex 1 of this report):

1. Cluster 1: State-of-play of implementation of SADCQF
2. Cluster 2: adaptation to new demands, transformation

Interviews

Interviews were held with all members of the TCCA EXCO, the SADC Secretariat; a stakeholder with extensive experience in the implementation of SADCQF and the current chairperson of the TCCA. Individual electronic interviews that were conducted with the SADC TCCA EXCO and the SADC Secretariat did not take more than 60 minutes. All individuals (100 percent) that were targeted for the interviews have participated.

2.6 Key concepts and definitions

This report uses reference definitions with international currency, as listed below.

Further reading: ACQF. 2021. Thematic Brief 1: Concepts and Definitions¹.

Credit

- ‘Credit’ means confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g. credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes. (EQF, 2017).

‘Credit transfer’ means the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit in one context to have it valued and recognised in another context. (EQF, 2017)²

¹ <https://acqf.africa/capacity-development-programme/thematic-briefs/acqf-thematic-brief-1-concepts-and-definitions>

² Source of these definitions: EQF Recommendation 2017. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN#d1e32-20-1](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN#d1e32-20-1)

- ‘Credits’ means the amount of learning contained in a qualification or part-qualification whereby one (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning. (SAQA, 2021).

‘Credit transfer’ means the vertical, horizontal or diagonal relocation of credits towards a qualification or part-qualification on the same or different level, usually between different programmes, departments or institutions. (SAQA, 2021)³

Level descriptor

- ‘Level descriptor’ is that statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of the NQF that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate to a qualification at that level.⁴

Qualification

- ‘Qualification’ means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.⁵

National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

- ‘NQF’ means a policy and instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims at integrating and coordinating national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.⁶
- ‘NQF’ is an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes – clear statements of what the learner must know or be able to do, whether learned in a classroom, on the job, or less formally. The qualifications framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another, within and across occupations or industrial sectors (and even across vocational and academic fields if the NQF is designed to include both vocational and academic qualifications in a single framework).⁷

National Qualifications System

- This includes all aspects of a country's activities that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, QA processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and

³ Source of these definitions: SAQA. 2021. *Policy and Criteria for Credit Accumulation and Transfer within the National Qualifications Framework. (as Amended, 2021)*. <https://www.saqa.org.za/sites/default/files/2021-04/Policy%20and%20Criteria%20for%20Credit%20Accumulation%20and%20Transfer%20within%20NQF-2021.pdf>

⁴ Source of this definition: SAQA. 2012. ‘SANQF level descriptors’. https://www.saqa.org.za/sites/default/files/2019-11/level_descriptors.pdf

⁵ Source of this definition: *European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Recommendation of 22/05/2017, annex* [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

⁶ Source of this definition: *European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Recommendation of 22/05/2017, annex* [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

⁷ Source of this definition: Tuck R. 2007. *An introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks. Conceptual and Practical Issues for Policy Makers* https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_103623.pdf

civil society. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualifications system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.⁸

Regional Qualifications Framework

- A broad structure of levels of learning outcomes that is agreed by countries in a geographical region. A means of enabling one national framework of qualifications to relate to another and, subsequently, for a qualification in one country to be compared to a qualification from another country.⁹

3. SADCQF – genesis, scope, and state of play

3.1 Policy context of the SADCQF

Development and enhancement of educated and skilled human capital is one of the SADC's broad strategic objectives for regional integration to foster sustainable development of the region. This objective is supported by SADC legal and policy instruments and strategic frameworks, notably: the SADC Treaty 1992; the Protocol on Education and Training 1997–2020; the Protocol on Science, Technology and Innovation (2009); the Protocol on Facilitation of Movement of Persons (2005); the Protocol on Trade in Services (article 7) 2012, updated in March 2017¹⁰; the SADC Industrialisation Strategy and Road Map 2015–63; the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP 2020–30); and the Labour Migration Action Plan (2020–25). Moreover, the SADCQF refers to the [Addis Convention](#) (*Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States*), adopted on 12 December 2014 in Addis Ababa.

The SADCQF has acquired a stronger centrality in the region's development plans for the decade (2020–30). This new impetus to strengthen implementation of the SADCQF capitalises on the outcomes of the first phase of implementation (2017–21) and aims to incentivise development of NQFs aligned with SADCQF, and work in complementarity with other tools supporting recognition of qualifications across the region, including the SADC Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, the SADC Recognition Manual, submitted for validation at TCCA Meeting, Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and SADCQF Quality Assurance Guidelines. This renewed attention to the SADCQF is consistent with the place of education, skills development, and people mobility in SADC strategies, listed above.

In 2020 the SADC reaffirmed its intent to give a new impetus to promote and implement the SADCQF, by including relevant measures in two key strategic plans for the decade: RISDP 2020–30 and the SADC Labour Migration Action Plan (2020–25). The RISDP 2020–30 has a comprehensive set of measures shaped for social and human capital development (Pillar 3). Enhanced implementation of SADCQF and skills development for regional industrialisation are part of these priorities, under the umbrella of 'access to quality and relevant education and skills development, including in science and technology, by SADC citizens' (Strategic objective 2).

⁸ Source of this definition: OECD. 2005. *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*

<https://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/qualificationssystemsbriidgetolifelonglearning.htm>

⁹ Source of this definition: ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework, *A Practical Guide and All you Need to Know*. p. 33

<https://asean.org/storage/2018/12/AQRF-Publication-2018-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ The Protocol on Facilitation of Movement of Persons and the Protocol on Trade in Services are not yet in force (ratification process).

In its third outcome ('Enhance participation of migrant workers in socio-economic development processes in countries of origin and destination') the Labour Migration Action Plan 2020–25 (Output 3.3, pg. 21) specifies actions to promote SADCQF, e.g.:

- support member states in the development of NQFs that are aligned to the SADCQF;
- support the development of sector-specific regional mutual recognition arrangements in line with the SADCQF;
- conduct awareness and capacity-building workshops, as appropriate, targeting labour and employers' representatives in the region to promote the SADCQF; and
- conduct skills audits to profile supply and demand for selected sectors.

3.2 SADCQF: Genesis, purposes, design and governance

Genesis of the SADCQF

The idea of a RQF for the SADC emerged in a number of regional policy directives and strategies upon signature of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training in 1997.

TCCA was established in 2000. Between 1997 and 2011 TCCA undertook activities to support the SADC RQF process. This included the review of existing qualifications (2001 and 2010) which recommended the need for development of level descriptors for the SADC RQF, a framework for the improvement of quality assurance systems in the region, and a SADC Qualifications Portal. A regional QA guideline was developed in 2008 informed by a review of the status of QA systems in member states. The development of a SADC Qualifications Portal was started in 2009 and was initially populated with qualifications until 2011. The Region adopted a piece-by-piece approach to developing the SADC RQF by first focusing on QA. For some time however the development of the RQF remained dormant and was resumed in 2016. (Seychelles SQA. 2018).

The SADC RQF was formally named the SADCQF at a September 2016 meeting of the TCCA. [SADCQF's](#) main policy and technical document (as revised in 2017) defines the purpose, scope, design features, underlying principles, as well as governance structure. Annex 1 of the SADCQF document specifies the [SADCQF Level Descriptors](#) and Annex 2, the [SADCQF Quality Assurance Guidelines](#).

Purposes of SADCQF

The SADCQF is a regional mechanism for comparability and recognition of full qualifications, credit transfer, creation of regional standards and facilitation of quality assurance. It consists of a set of agreed principles, practices, procedures, and standardised terminology intended to meet the purposes of the SADCQF:

1. Providing a mechanism for comparability and recognition of qualifications in SADC.
2. Facilitating mutual recognition of qualifications in all member states.
3. Harmonising qualifications wherever possible.
4. Promoting the transfer of credits within and among member states and even beyond.
5. Creating SADC regional standards where appropriate.

Conceptual technical design of SADCQF

The SADCQF was established as a ten-level reference framework, with level descriptors based on learning outcomes, defined by three domains of learning: knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility.

The scope of the SADCQF is based on the principle of inclusiveness encompassing all forms, types, levels and categories of education and training. This includes out-of-school, formal, non-formal and informal

learning; general education, TVET, higher education and various modes of learning, including distance and online.

SADCQF (2017) specifies [sixteen principles of QA](#) for the government and relevant institutions in every member state. QA and verification are important objectives of the SADCQF, working in complementarity with the [SADC Qualifications Verification Network](#) (SADC QVN) and the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN).

Governance of SADCQF

The SADC Council of Ministers, the ministers responsible for Education and Training, the TCCA, the TCCA Executive Committee and an Implementation Unit are the main governing structures for the implementation of the SADCQF. However, an Implementation Unit has not been put in place yet, therefore its role is assured by an arrangement of shared responsibility of SADC member states and the SADC Secretariat for the six implementation programmes of the SADCQF:

1. Programme 1: Alignment of NQFs to SADCQF – South Africa
2. Programme 2: Quality assurance – Botswana
3. Programme 3: Verification – Kingdom of Eswatini
4. Programme 4: Articulation, RPL and credit accumulation and transfer – Namibia
5. Programme 5: Advocacy and communication – Zambia; and
6. Programme 6: Governance – TCCA and SADC Secretariat.

In the absence of an Implementation Unit to drive the implementation of the SADCQF programmes, the member states volunteered to augment the capacity of the SADC Secretariat by providing administrative support on a rotational basis, using their capacities (human, technical expertise, and funding).

3.3 Implementation of the SADCQF

Implementation of the SADCQF presupposes engagement, capacity, and resources at both the national and regional levels. The national level has a particularly important role in alignment, from the decision to align, to organisation of the participative approach, and assuring quality and evidence-based report.

To date, two countries have completed the alignment process – South Africa (SAQA 2019)¹¹ and Seychelles (SQF 2018).¹² Mauritius (MQA 2019)¹³ has submitted its alignment report to TCCA EXCO for adjudication, and the final (revised) report in 2021. Mauritius will present its report at the TCCA meeting of 29 April 2022.

Currently none of the countries which finalised the alignment process is using or preparing the ground to use SADCQF levels on newly issued qualifications documents issued by the competent authorities and bodies.

To guide and support implementation, SADCQF developed two information booklets (Items 1 and 4 – table 1), and three substantive manuals and Guidelines (Items 10, 11, 12 in Table 1). The SADC ‘Qualifications Recognition Manual’ (12/2020) was compiled by a task team of country representatives (Botswana,

¹¹ Final report: SAQA (2019), Report on the alignment of the South Africa National Qualifications Framework (SANQF) to the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF).

<https://www.saqa.org.za/sites/default/files/2020-02/SADCQF%20alignment%20report%20%28js%2907012020.pdf>

¹² SQF (2018). Draft report: SQF (2018), Draft Report on the Alignment of the Seychelles National Qualifications Framework (SNQF) to the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF).

<http://www.sqa.sc/Resources/DocsForComment/DraftReportAlignmentSeychellesNQFSADCQF.pdf>

¹³ MQA (2019), Report on alignment of the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Mauritius to the SADC Qualifications Framework. <http://www.mqa.mu/English/Documents/FS/Report15042019.pdf>

Eswatini, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia) with consultant’s support. The ‘Guidelines for SADC Credit Accumulation and Transfer’ were presented to TCCA in October 2020, reviewed for validation in April 2021 and approved by the Ministers in June 2021.

Currently there is no unified package of guidelines (handbook) supporting the alignment process, which is the core function of SADCQF, as a meta or regional qualifications framework. In the initial period (2017-2018), the country leading the alignment implementation programme (South Africa), contributed to develop and deliver training workshops supporting the eight pilot countries and drafted information materials, such as ‘SADCQF Building Trust for Better Movement’.

Suggestion 1 - unified information and methodology package on SADCQF: Going forward, development of a unified information/guidance package on the policy, technical and QA aspects of the alignment process is relevant, to assist and incentivise the countries, and contribute to self-guided alignment processes fitting the national contexts. Such a methodological tool can be digitalised and has the potential to contribute to improve the pace, transparency, sustainability, and impact of the overall SADCQF alignment programme.

Table 1: Overview of the components of the SADCQF as a policy instrument

Component	Document. Participants	Date, Status, adoption
1. Main policy document Objectives, benefits, principles. Level descriptors – 10 levels Quality assurance guidelines (16)	SADCQF – Booklet.	As revised in 04/2017.
2. Alignment criteria (10)		Adopted at TCCA meeting 09/2016
3. Self-assessment tool Criteria and sub-criteria		Shared in 12/2016 to the 8 pilot countries
4. SADCQF – Building Trust for Better Movement Generic alignment roadmap Implementation model QA guidelines	Booklet - infographic	SADC Secretariat, 2019
5. TCCA a) Established b) TCCA ToRs revised c) TCCA EXCO established		In 2000. TCCA meeting 09/2016 12/2016
6. SADCQF Implementation model a) Model of 3 programmes b) Model of 5 programmes		TCCA meeting 09/2016 TCCA meeting 09/2017
7. Work plan a) 2-year milestone plan b) 5-year work plan with cost plan and funding proposal		TCCA meeting on 09/2016 Date: 05/2019
8. Capacity building a) Alignment workshop		06/2017 (SAQA hosted)

b) Alignment report writing workshop	8 pilot alignment countries	04/2018 (SAQA hosted)
9. SADCQF Communication Strategy		Adopted TCCA meeting 04/2017
10. RPL Guidelines		Adopted TCCA meeting 09/2016
11. CATS Manual		Adopted
12. Recognition Manual		Discussed, reviewed

Sources: as indicated in table 1. Compiled by the author.

The set of 10 alignment criteria of the SADCQF (Table 2) are very similar to those applied in the two most active meta/regional frameworks (EQF and ASEAN QRF).

Table 2: SADCQF Alignment criteria

SADCQF Alignment Criteria	
1.	Responsibilities of relevant national bodies involved in the alignment process are determined and published by the relevant competent authorities
2.	There is a clear and demonstrable link between qualification levels in the NQF/National Qualifications Systems (NQS) and level descriptors of the SADCQF
3.	The NQF/NQS is based on learning outcomes and links to non-formal and informal learning and credit systems (where these exist)
4.	Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or describing the place of qualifications in the NQS are transparent
5.	The national quality assurance system for education and training refers to the NQF/NQS and is consistent with quality assurance guidelines of the SADCQF
6.	There is a clear indication of the relevant national authorities responsible for the verification of the qualifications obtained in the national system
7.	The alignment process shall include a stated agreement of relevant quality assurance bodies
8.	Competent national bodies shall certify the alignment of the NQF/NQS with the SADCQF. A comprehensive report on alignment and its evidence must be published by competent national bodies
9.	The official platform of the country must provide for a public comment process for the alignment report
10.	Clear plans have been made to make changes to legislation and policy supporting alignment to SADCQF levels on new qualification certificates, diplomas and other documents issued by competent authorities

Source: Seychelles SQA. 2019

There appears to be an acceptance that the regional initiatives (that is the development and implementation of an RQF) provide a strong avenue for facilitating policy learning across the community of countries. RQFs have a coordinating effect, and this is often due to the guidance offered to countries on the commonalities and differences between the national approach and the approaches in other countries. (ETF,2021c).

Alignment to the RQF provides multiple benefits to the NQFs, in particular thanks to the self-driven in-depth analysis, the argumentation around key criteria and the opportunity to build on constructive critical reflection in the National Alignment Committee (NAC) and from peers in TCCA or beyond.

Suggestion 2 – Documentation and dissemination. Going forward in the alignment programme, it will be essential for the region and the countries to improve the documentation, knowledge management and effective dissemination of information about the lessons learned, dialogue and peer exchanges, and the opinions and recommendations of international experts.

Knowledge circulation and sharing of good practices contribute to quicker advances and progress in the national processes of NQF development, consolidation, and review. Experiences and lessons learned in the SADCQF alignment process have the advantage to be better contextualised and fit for policy learning among SADC member states.

3.4 International dimensions of SADCQF

The SADC has the most advanced regional qualifications framework in Africa and benefits from the fact that the SADC's development strategy contains measures dedicated to strengthening and consolidating implementation of the SADCQF. The number of countries aligning to the SADCQF is expected to grow in the coming years, as a result of new support measures and expected availability of resources.

From the launch of implementation in 2017, the SADCQF sought cooperation and peer learning with other regional frameworks. The SADCQF is currently not referenced to any continental or other regional qualifications frameworks but has benchmarked with the ASEAN QRF and the EQF in terms of the level descriptors, coordination and implementation mechanisms of these RQFs. The benchmarking was facilitated by a study that compared, among others, the SADCQF with three NQFs and with the ASEAN QRF and the EQF (SADC, 2017). The alignment/referencing criteria of SADCQF, EQF and ASEAN QRF are very similar.

In 2017 the TCCA Executive Committee undertook a peer-learning visit to the EU to study the EQF institutional arrangements and their applicability to the SADCQF.

Cultural and political sensitivity embedded in the SADCQF principles will be given due consideration in managing the comparison exercises with other RQFs. The 'Underlying principles' defined in SADCQF Booklet (SADCQF, 2017: 6) note: 'The SADCQF will facilitate interaction with relevant international developments and standards in a way that enhances the global standing of and respect for the region while effectively affirming local cultures, values and good practices.'

4. National Qualifications Frameworks in SADC

4.1 NQFs are developing in all regions of the African continent

NQFs in Africa are at different stages of development and implementation. Dynamics in the last three years show a surge in the number of countries starting development of NQFs, while others are adopting the policy and legal basis, putting in place governance structures and technical tools to operationalise the NQF.

The project 'Developing the African Continental Qualifications Framework' (ACQF) undertakes research to map and update information on the status and dynamics of NQFs in Africa. The overview provided in this chapter is entirely based on ACQF research, accessible on the [ACQF website](#).

Moving from initial concepts and plans on the NQF to adoption of policies and instruments can be more challenging and lengthier in some countries than in others. While in some contexts the national institutions benefit from enabling conditions, such as socio-economic demand for better qualifications, active social partners, and technical and financial resources, in other contexts the implementation of education and training reforms and NQF projects is adversely affected by persisting political instability and insecurity. In many countries NQF development is related to wider reforms of education and training systems, reinforcement of employment policies, and often supported by international projects and expertise. In many cases the national authorities work with projects supported by the EU.

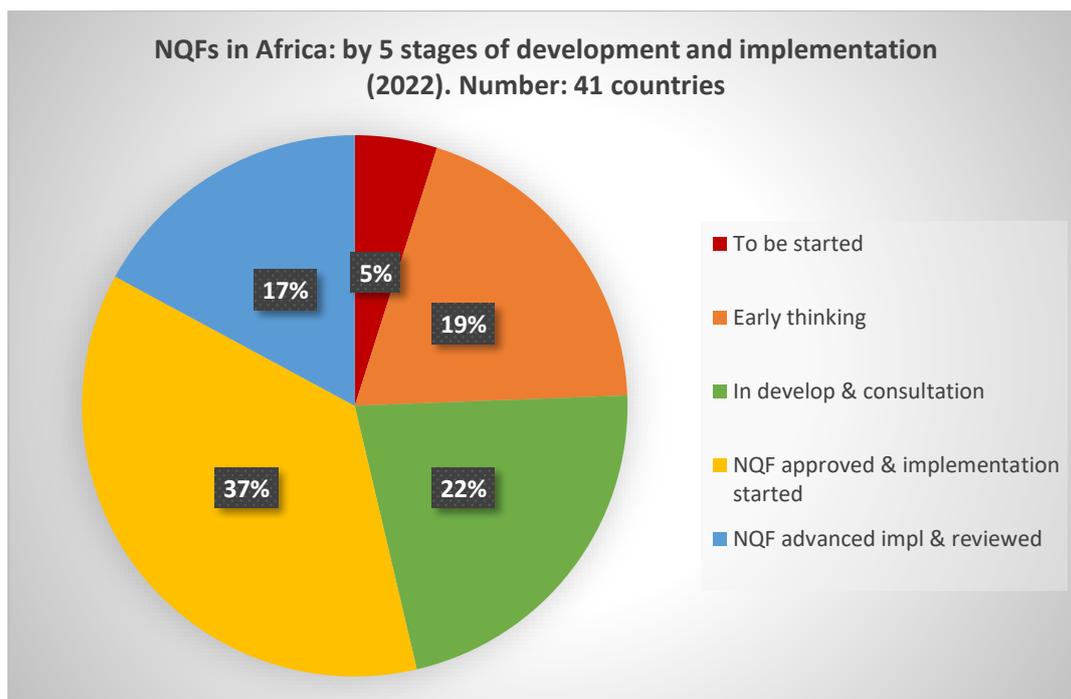


Figure 1: NQFs in Africa – distribution by stages of development. Number of countries included: 41. Source: Database of ACQF project. [ACQF website - resources](#).

These developments are taking place in all regions of the continent. Some examples of recent dynamics of NQF development and implementation in all regions are summarised as follows:

Region in Africa	Some examples of NQF development processes and milestones
North	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In 2021-2022 Egypt approved legislative amendments on the NQF, establishes governance structures and NQF register of qualifications. - In 2021 Morocco works on legal basis and governance of the NQF; and on the register of qualifications. - In 2021-2022 Tunisia develops the concept and tools of the register of qualifications
West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In 2020-2022 Cape Verde approved renewed legislation on the NQF and on the National Catalogue of Qualifications; reinforces the governance set-up; improves the website and tools of the NQF; started operationalization of the RPL system: methodology framework, training of assessors and facilitators, piloting RPL processes in key sectors and award of qualifications. - In 2020-2022 Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone are developing comprehensive NQFs. - Ghana takes steps to develop a comprehensive NQF, based on the experience of the TVET Qualifications Framework. - In 2021 The Gambia adopted the 10-levels NQF and started implementation, led by the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA). - In 2021-2022 Guinea-Bissau started reflection and analysis on the NQF, formed a dedicated multi-stakeholder working group and capacity development actions.
East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kenya made progress with the development of policies, standards and guidelines, e.g.: for developing national occupational standards and national curriculum development; on quality assurance of qualifications. Developed and tested RPL

	<p>policy and Guidelines; Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. A new digital register of qualifications is in construction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rwanda approved in October 2021 the comprehensive NQF integrating all sub-sectors of education and training. - Burundi approved the NQF.
Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cameroon resumed work on development of the policy and legal basis of NQF. - São Tomé and Príncipe started the first steps towards development of the NQF, with a baseline analysis, and capacity development actions.

4.2 NQFs in SADC

The majority of operational NQFs in Africa are in SADC countries. According to data collected and updated by the ACQF development project, all SADC countries are engaged with NQFs processes at different stages.

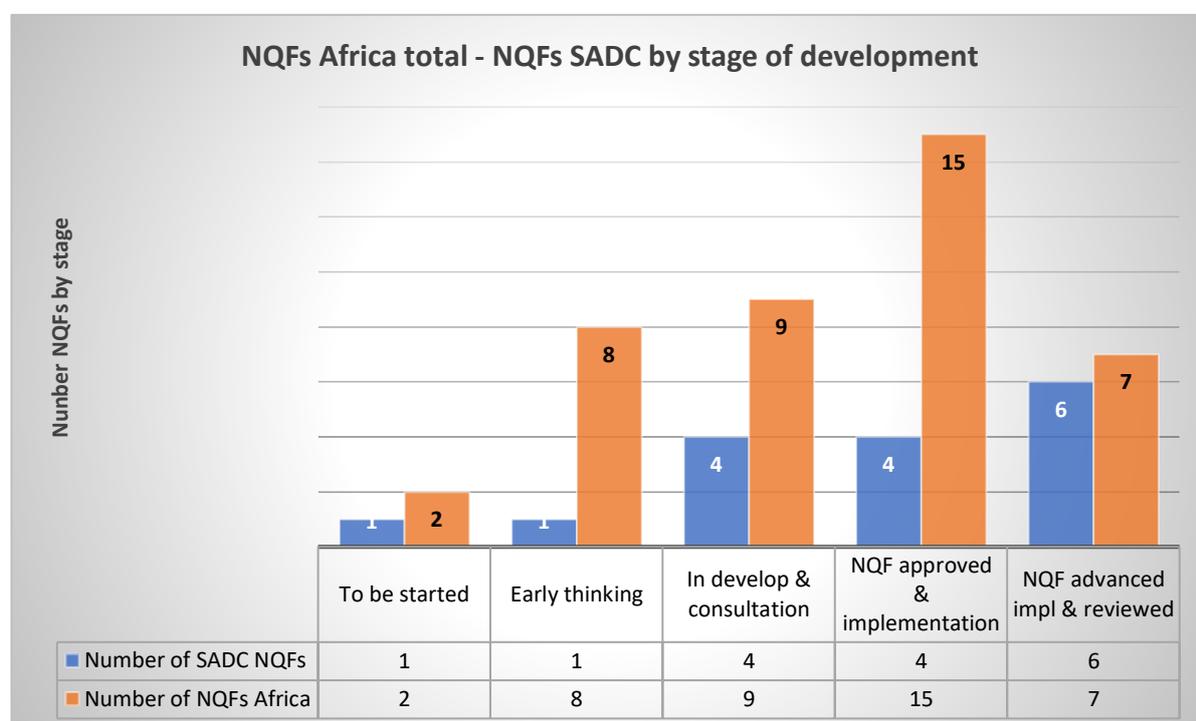


Figure 2: NQFs in Africa (total) and NQFs in SADC – by stage of development. Number: 41 pays

Source: Database of ACQF project. [ACQF website - resources](#).

The overview of NQFs by stage of development displayed in Figure 2 indicates that the large majority of NQFs (6 out of 7) in advanced stages of implementation and reviewing, are in SADC countries

Over 60% (10 countries) of the SADC member states are implementing comprehensive NQFs, encompassing all levels and subsectors of education and training. These developments have started over twenty years ago – Namibia, South Africa – and have seen some acceleration in the last five years, with NQF development actions in *new* countries. In those countries with more tangible NQF experiences, some of the qualifications authorities have advanced with processes of review and improvement of policies, regulations, and tools (Seychelles, South Africa and Zambia).

- a) Six countries have NQFs that have been operational for some time, and some have been reviewed: Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, and Zambia.

- b) Three countries have NQFs in place (legal act approved, implementation started): Eswatini, Lesotho and Zimbabwe.
- c) Five other countries are at the stage of development and consultation for their NQFs, and some of them show with good progress in 2020-2021: Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania.
- d) Two countries are at an early stage of NQF development: Union of Comoros and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2021 Union of Comoros started concrete steps towards an NQF under the umbrella of the newly started TVET development project.
- e) Some countries have sectoral qualifications frameworks operational (TVET and higher education), and at the same time are advancing with development of integrated/comprehensive NQFs: Malawi and Mozambique.

Lesotho and Eswatini have most recently started implementing their NQFs, approved in 2019 and 2020, respectively, and to that end have developed guidelines and procedures.

Angola and Mozambique are in the process of adopting comprehensive NQFs.

- Angola has developed a ten-level NQF, contextualised in the establishment of a wider NQS, which comprises a comprehensive policy and technical proposal for the register of qualifications, governance setting and a system of validation of non-formal and informal learning – this package is in an advanced stage of consultation and legislative process.
- Mozambique’s initiative to move to a comprehensive NQF builds on the experiences gathered through implementation of the two sectoral qualifications frameworks (higher education and professional education), and benefit from a home-grown process of dialogue and analysis, stakeholders’ engagement, and consultation. The legal act underpinning the new comprehensive NQF of Mozambique is at an advanced stage of the approval process. To improve implementation and coordination of the NQF, a revised governance setting is in preparation, based on a new Inter-ministerial Commission, an Executive Commission and a Management Unit. Legal establishment of a National Qualifications Authority is planned.

In 2021 Union of Comoros started the implementation of the programme ‘Mzomo na Hazi” aimed at reinforcing and expanding the TVET system, access to training, skills and employability. This project is supported by the EU. The project includes actions to assist development and validation of the NQF, as part of package ‘A4.1. Reinforce, operationalise and pilot multipartite governance of TVET’.

Four countries are piloting a regional e-certificate initiative (Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia), but progress has been uneven.

Countries such as [Botswana](#), [Mauritius](#), [Namibia](#), [Seychelles](#), [South Africa](#), and [Zambia](#) have well established national qualifications authorities, responsible for the integrity of the NQF, policy proposals and implementation, maintenance of the national qualifications databases and Member Information System (MIS), registration of qualifications, verification of qualifications, setting of standards and dissemination of information for end-users via websites and digital services.

The ten-level structure is used by all comprehensive NQFs in the SADC. Examples of domains of level descriptors applied in NQFs in the region are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Level descriptors – domains of learning in use (non-exhaustive overview)

Country	Domains of learning – level descriptors
Angola	Knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility

Botswana	Knowledge, skills and competence
Eswatini	Knowledge, skills, personal attributes
Lesotho	Areas of knowledge; nature of skills; agency and context
Mauritius	Learning demand and processes
Mozambique	Knowledge, skills, autonomy, and responsibility
South Africa	Applied competencies: Scope of knowledge; knowledge literacy; method and procedure; problem solving; ethics and professional practice; accessing, processing and managing information; producing and communicating information; context and systems; management of learning; accountability
Seychelles	Degree of complexity of tasks; reasoning and problem solving; knowledge; autonomy and responsibility
Zambia	Degree of complexity; reasoning and problem solving; knowledge; autonomy and responsibility

Sources: ACQF, 2020; ACQF, 2021a-d.

4.3 Databases/registers of qualifications

The path from concepts to approved legal and technical foundations of NQFs can be long and uneven. But the path from approving legislation to translating it into actions is another stage of the policy cycle, focused on delivery of the fundamental outputs, such as qualifications transparently included the NQF and instruments to deliver these social goods to society, the people.

Databases/registers of qualifications are important instruments for transparency across the landscape of qualifications of different countries. The quality, completeness and accessibility to this information is fundamental for the end-users (learners, training providers, employers, and workers). Databases/registers of qualifications also offer a view on the actual status of implementation of NQFs, notably on the scope of the qualifications effectively included in the NQF.

4.3.1 Snapshot of national databases/registers of qualifications in SADC

This brief overview is based on web sources (online registers and databases), the [ACQF feasibility study](#) (2021) and [ACQF Mapping study](#) (2021).

This section explores two main questions:

- What can we learn from NQF registers and databases?
- Which qualifications are included in NQF registers and databases – by levels and by sectors?

The ACQF Feasibility study explored existing and accessible registers of qualifications in five countries: Cape Verde, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, and South Africa. In the ACQF training modules information is available on the register of Botswana NCQF, and on the Mauritius Qualifications Authority's National Qualifications and Unit Standards.

Table 4 provides a summary of key features of NQF registers of qualifications in four SADC countries.

Acknowledgements to the national experts who shared information and contributed data to this analysis.

Table 4: Overview on registers/databases of qualifications associated with the NQFs in SADC

Country	Register / database of qualifications	Number of Qualifications and levels included	Key features
Botswana BQA	Botswana Qualifications Authority – Register of qualifications	529 full qualifications (as of 22/05/2022) All levels of NCQF and fields of study.	The register is searchable by title of qualification (search by key word tool). Qualifications documents can be viewed and downloaded. The online register publishes a list of qualifications (title, type, level, field, document). All registered qualifications are formatted based on a standardised model. Section B of the model - Qualifications Specifications contains: graduate profiles (learning outcomes) and the associated assessment criteria (detail and clarify the learning outcomes).
Mauritius MQA	National Qualifications and Unit Standards Maintained and managed by MQA	167 qualifications distributed in 22 sectors. As of 21/03/2022: 98 qualifications are published, 67 under review. Includes: qualifications of Levels 1 to 6 of NQF	The digital online database of National Qualifications and Unit Standards is accessible as a repository of qualifications files in PDF format. Qualifications at all levels (1–6) are structured in unit standards, described as learning outcomes. All qualifications files are structured following a harmonized format. The qualification files on the database include data on level, credits, review date, access to qualification including through RPL, list of unit standard titles and respective credits, and a brief description of the purpose of the qualification.
Mozambique ANEP	National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications Managed and maintained by ANEP	164 qualifications registered, at levels 2 to 5. 153 published in the online catalogue (21/03/2022) 19 independent modules	The digital online National Catalogue is accessible as a repository of qualification files in PDF format. All qualifications are structured following a standardised format, which includes: general information, units of general competencies, units of vocational competencies, training modules (general and vocational), training programme (modules) and training module in the real context of work. The qualifications in the Catalogue are distributed in 16 professional groups. The Catalogue also includes 19 independent modules.
South Africa SAQA	SAQA: register of qualifications and part-qualifications	Large number of qualifications (over 22,000)	The SAQA online register contains searchable databases: 1. All qualifications and unit standards (no matter their status)

	Managed and maintained by SAQA	All NQF levels	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Registered qualifications and unit standards (NQF qualifications) 3. Qualifications and unit standards that have passed their registration end date 4. Professional Bodies and Professional Designations
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Table 5 provides a comparable view of qualifications registers (Catalogues) in three African countries in different regional economic communities. These countries are Cape Verde, Kenya and Morocco.

Table 5: Registers of qualifications in other (not SADC) African countries

Country	Register / database of qualifications	Number of Qualifications and levels included	Key features
Cape Verde UC-SNQ	National Catalogue of Qualifications	64 full qualifications 4 levels: Levels 2 to 5 of the NQF	<p>The digital online National Catalogue is accessible as a repository of qualifications (in PDF files).</p> <p>All qualifications are structured based on a standardised format, including professional profiles, units of competence (learning outcomes and assessment criteria), training programmes (modules) and training in the real context of work.</p> <p>The qualifications in the Catalogue are distributed in 15 professional families. The Catalogue includes a new Transversal Training Module of 3 units (entrepreneurial competences).</p>
Kenya KNQA	New : National Qualifications Information Management System (NAQIMS) Register of qualifications (of accredited bodies)	1,262 registered qualifications – all NQF levels	<p>NAQMIS is a system for automating processes, based on Blockchain technology to register: (1) qualifications awarding institutions (QAIs), (2) qualifications and (3) learners' records.</p> <p>Managed and maintained by KNQA.</p>
Morocco	Vocational training in figures (2019-2020)	352 TVET programmes leading to qualifications on 4 levels of NQF	<p>Summary of all registered qualifications maintained by the TVET Department. Annual update.</p> <p>Distribution of programmes by levels of qualification and sectors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 levels: specialization, qualification, technician, technician specialist - 21 sectors

The NQF qualifications registers and databases of the four SADC cases present different approaches as regards structure, search possibilities, and scope of the qualifications included in the register/database maintained by the lead NQF institution.

- Accessibility and responsibility: online and maintained on the website of the institution tasked with the coordination and implementation of the NQF.
- South Africa: SAQA ensures the integrity and maintenance of the [Register of qualifications and part-qualifications](#). The Register contains four searchable databases (more information in table 5).
- Botswana: [Botswana Qualifications Authority Register of qualifications](#) contains 529 qualifications at all levels of the NCQF. Registered and accredited Education and Training Providers (ETPs) are encouraged to develop learning programmes, based on the registered qualifications, for accreditation in Botswana. The search function allows queries by title of qualification.
- Mozambique has significantly advanced the process of design and consultation of the integrated comprehensive NQF, and its decree is to be approved in 2022 by the Cabinet of Ministers. Historically Mozambique implemented two sectoral qualifications frameworks, which work in parallel (TVET and Higher education). Each framework is based on a different legal basis, defining the level descriptors, types of qualifications and quality assurance requirements. The TVET QF is implemented by the National TVET Authority (ANEP), while the Higher education QF is coordinated by the National Council for Quality Evaluation (CNAQ). Data on the higher education qualifications is not available in an online register but was obtained via a request to CNAQ. All qualifications in the TVET qualifications framework database ([National Catalogue of Qualifications](#)) are displayed according to a standard template.

The distribution of the number of qualifications in the indicated NQF registers, by levels and by sectors, is presented in a visual way below by two graphs for two countries, Mozambique and Mauritius.

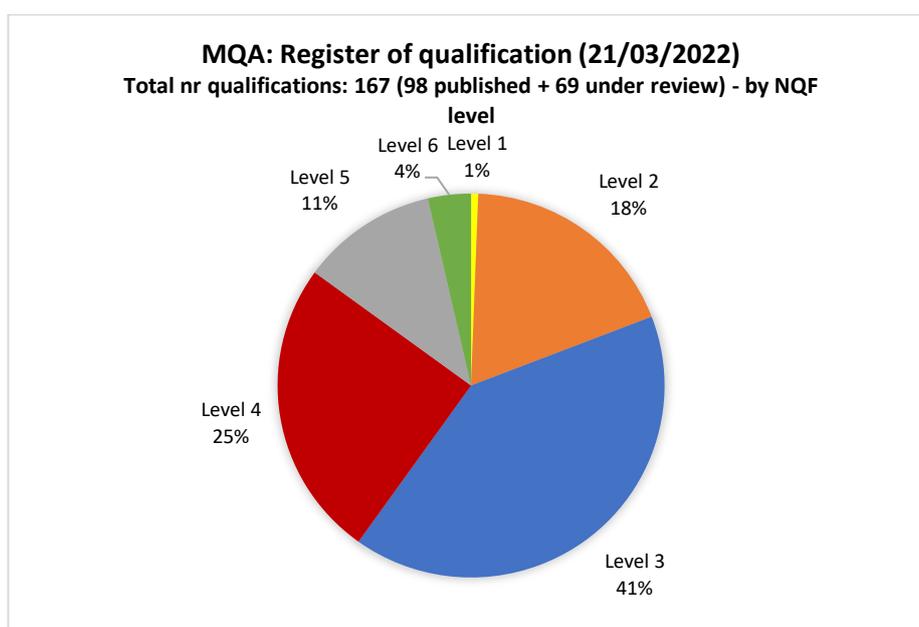


Figure 3: Mauritius: MQA Register of Qualifications. Total number of qualifications by level (Level 1 to 6)
 Source: MQA, [National Qualifications and Unit Standards](#). Data analysis and tables – author of this report.

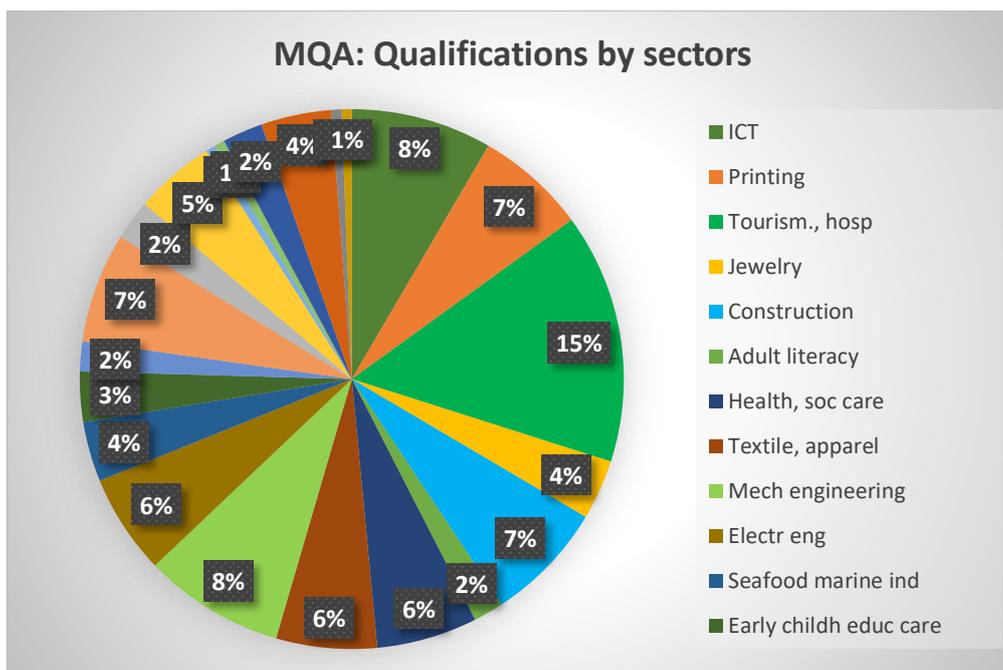


Figure 4: Mauritius: MQA Register of Qualifications. Total number of qualifications by sector
 Source: MQA, [National Qualifications and Unit Standards](#). Data analysis and tables – author of this report.

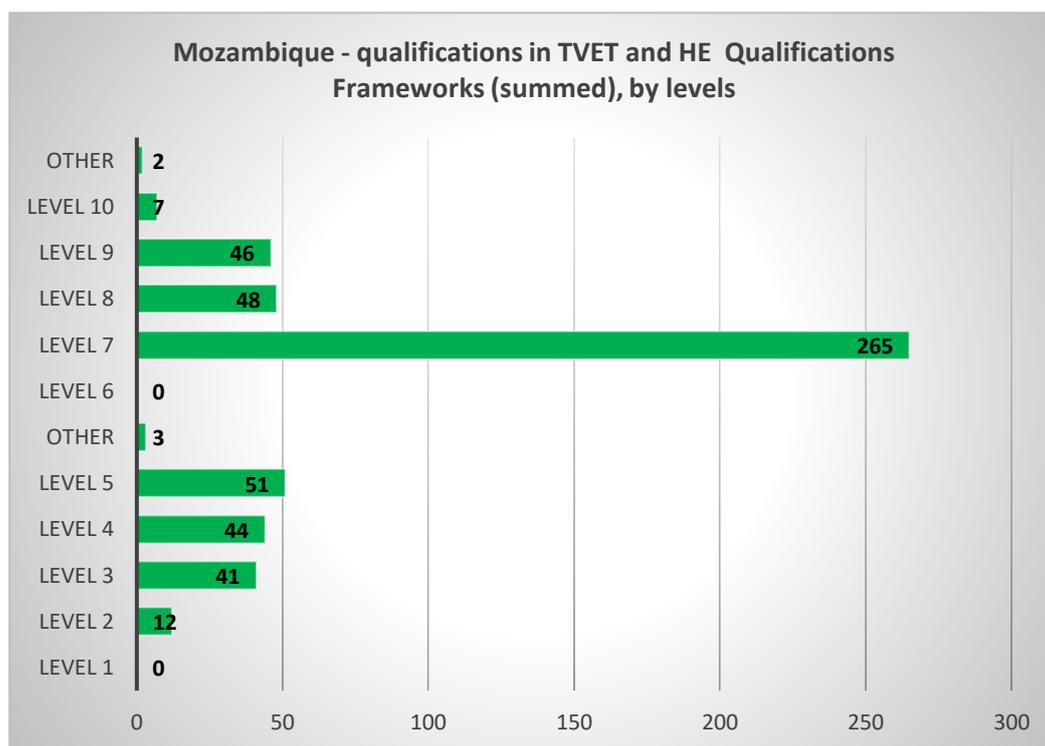


Figure 5: Mozambique - qualifications of TVET (QNQP) and higher education qualifications frameworks by level (sum of qualifications of both sub-frameworks) – (data: June 2021)
 Source: ACQF, 2021, Feasibility study.

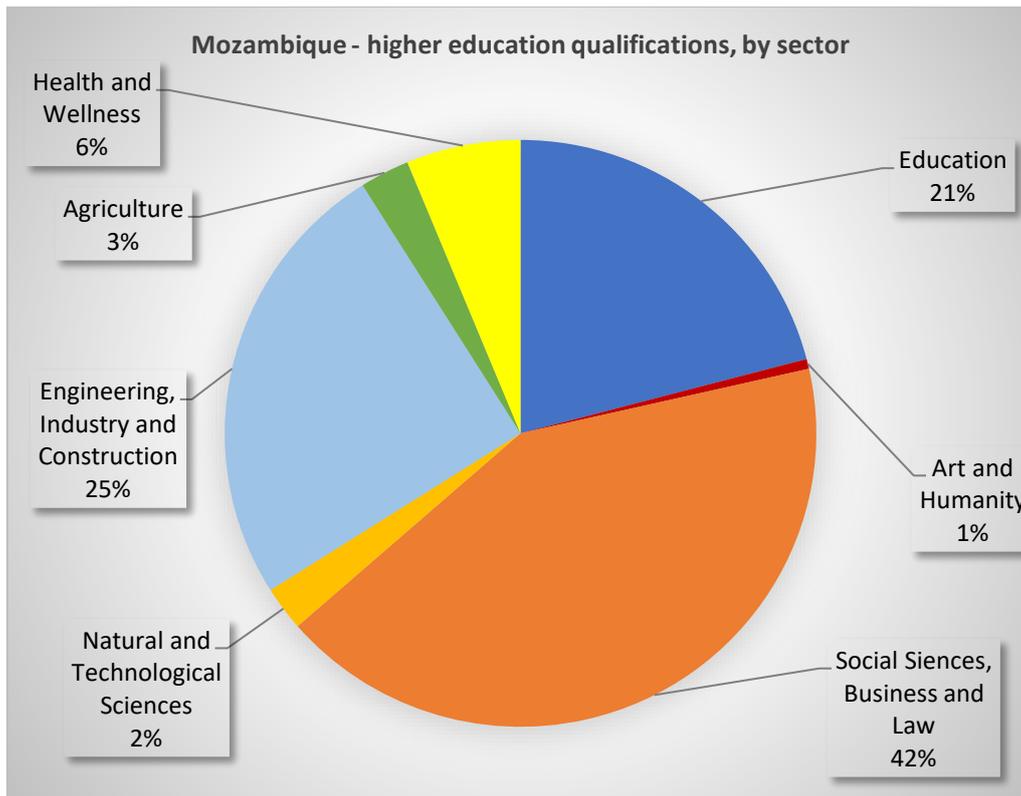


Figure 6: Mozambique – qualifications of the Higher education framework, by sector (data: June 2021)
 Source: ACQF, 2021, Feasibility study.

Analysis of Mozambique’s QNQP (TVET) qualifications can be done. But currently the online catalogue is undergoing updates and content is changing, with new sectors and qualifications being uploaded.

Some salient findings from this overview of the registers of qualifications of four SADC countries:

- Use of learning outcomes: the qualifications reviewed in the context of this study are described in learning outcomes. The structure of the published qualifications documents is largely harmonised within countries. To ease comparability of qualifications between different SADC countries, a common list of minimum fields of qualifications data for electronic publication could be proposed and harmonised with the practices in other RQFs regional qualifications frameworks (Asia, Europe)
- There is a large difference in the total number of qualifications included in the NQF qualifications’ registers of the four countries. This diversity reflects differences in the length of the NQF experience, relative importance of sub-frameworks in qualifications development and management and finally socio-economic demand for qualifications.
- Two of the mentioned NQF registers are inclusive of national qualifications of all sub-frameworks /sub-sectors of the education and training system (Botswana and South Africa).

In the case of Mozambique, ANEP’s online Catalogue of Professional Qualifications contains only qualifications of the TVET system (levels 2 to 5). A total of 164 qualifications have been approved and included in the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications. At the moment of writing this report the online Catalogue displayed fewer than 150 qualifications on Levels 2 to 5, distributed in 16 sectors.

In the case of Mauritius, the MQA’s register includes only qualifications of technical-vocational nature (Levels 1 to 6).

In Mauritius higher education qualifications are accredited and registered by the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA). 'The Register of Qualifications is the official repository of qualifications awarded and regulated under the Higher Education Act of (2017). A qualification awarded under the Higher Education Act is eligible for listing in the Register of Qualifications after it has been fully accredited by the Higher Education Council and is based through the accumulation of credits required under the National Credit Value and Transfer System. The Register will serve to inform public interest and shall act as an endorsement about the quality of the academic standards of the qualifications awarded in the higher education sector in Mauritius'. However, at the time of writing this report, the QAA's webpage [Register of Qualifications](#) did not display the list of qualifications or links to a database.

- The distribution of qualifications by levels in the cases of the two comprehensive NQF registers (Botswana and South Africa) shows a common pattern of concentration of qualifications in higher levels (Levels 6-10).
- A fine and contextualised analysis of the distribution of qualifications by sectors and levels should be conducted by SADC to assess the extent to which labour market demands and skills needs related with the digital and green transition are covered by the offering of programmes and qualifications at all possible levels. For this report, it is important to take note of the following findings:
 - o Different sectoral classifications are in use: different underlying concepts, different ranges, and numbers of sectors. Some countries use a classification based on education sectors (e.g. the Mozambique higher education register), others use a mix of education and economic sectors, while others apply an occupational structure to their classification of qualifications.
 - o The analysed NQF registers have qualifications in all sectors of the used classification, broadly speaking in different sectors of services, industry, and agriculture. There are asymmetries to be noted, such as a high concentration (over 40%) of qualifications in one sector (for example, in social sciences, business and law) in two cases.
 - o A closer analysis of the concentration of the distribution by sectors shows that, for now, most of these NQFs have a limited number of qualifications in ICT, which raises questions about the ability of the qualifications system to enable the digital transition, and the adaptation of the labour force to the requirements of automation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

4.4 Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) systems

CAT systems contribute to lifelong and life-wide learning, to flexibility of learning pathways, to mobility and progression of learners, and to full personal development of learners.

Three main questions addressed in this review:

- Is there a legal basis specific for CAT?
- What is the value of 1 credit in notional hours?
- What is the status of implementation of CAT?

Many SADC countries have included references to CATs in NQF legal acts and other education system legislation. But only a few have adopted legal texts, implementation policies and guidelines that specifically apply to CATs. According to the information collected by this study, these countries are Mozambique,

South Africa, Zimbabwe and more recently also Eswatini. Zambia drafted CAT Guidelines and await approval.

Most SADC countries adhere to the principle and notion that:

- “Credits” means the amount of learning contained in a qualification whereby one (1) credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.
- Countries explicitly adopting this principle are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique (in TVET qualifications framework), Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

But there are exceptions, which reflect the specifics of the national context and education system, and established relations with other communities of countries. In this context the following definitions are in application:

- Angola: in higher education – one (1) credit is equated to 15 notional hours of learning. Curriculum units may have a credit value of 1 to 20 credits. (Source: Presidential decree 198/18.)
- Madagascar: in higher education – some diversity of definitions varying from 10 to 16 hours of notional learning for 1 credit, depending on the field of learning.
- Mozambique: in higher education - 1 credit equates to 25-30 notional hours (SNATCA).

The state of implementation of CAT is as follows:

Eswatini:

- Policy and Guidelines on Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) were approved in 2021.
- CAT policy and guidelines apply to
 - o Programmes accredited by Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC).
 - o All Higher Education and Technical and Vocational qualifications on the Eswatini Qualifications Framework (ESQF)
 - o Individuals who may want to transfer their credits to HEIs in Eswatini.
 - o Curriculum design.
 - o Stakeholders who support higher and TVET education in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Mozambique:

- Higher education: CAT legislation adopted and in implementation
Decree n° 32/2010 created the National System of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SNATCA), in accordance with requirements of the Law n° 27/2009 on higher education.
 - o 1 credit = 25-30 notional hours
 - o Total number credits in 1 full-time academic year : 50-60
 - o Total workload per academic year: 1500 hours. Exceptionally for some programmes: up to 1800 hours
- TVET
1 credit = 10 notional hours

South Africa: CAT policy and criteria updated and in implementation

- SAQA. 2021. Policy and criteria for Credit Accumulation and Transfer within the NQF (As amended, 2021).¹⁴

Zambia: CAT Guidelines drafted and await approval

¹⁴ <https://www.saqqa.org.za/sites/default/files/2021-04/Policy%20and%20Criteria%20for%20Credit%20Accumulation%20and%20Transfer%20within%20NQF-2021.pdf>

- ZAQA Guidelines for the Development of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems have been developed to facilitate implementation. Awaiting approval. Guidelines not yet published on ZAQA's website.

Zimbabwe: ZIMCATS approved and in application in higher education

- All higher education programmes are designed based on ZIMCATS. This contributes to harmonization of programmes and qualifications in higher education.
- CAT has not yet been applied in programmes of primary and secondary education; nor in programmes of TVET and Polytechnic Colleges.

5. Findings of the study

5.1 Synthesis of findings

This synthesis of findings is organised by main issues and questions derived from the survey and interviews and supplemented by documentary review of the SADCQF.

1. Legal base of SADCQF

Article 3 J and K of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training that entered into force in 2000 is the main actual legal instrument of the SADCQF legal framework instruments underpinning the SADCQF.

The ratification of the Protocol by SADC Member States Parliament System is an indicator of the text of this legal instrument being clearly communicated and accepted. In addition, most of the SADC member states' qualification frameworks policy documents refer to this text. SADC member states enforce texts and guidelines underpinning the SADCQF by domestication and legislating them in National Statutory instruments such as Acts, Development Strategic Plans and Specific Education or Human Resource Development Acts or NQF Acts. Cited examples are the Manpower Planning and Development (MPD) Act - 140, 132, 133 of 2018, and NQF Acts in Zimbabwe and Seychelles. The SADCQF serves as a model setting instrument for qualification systems and qualifications frameworks developed or under development in SADC member states. For instance, based on the questionnaire responses, the text and guidelines of the NQFs of Namibia and Zimbabwe are either replicated or modelled after the features of the SADCQF, while in Mozambique they inform the technical design of the NQF. The main challenges of the legal instrument of the SADCQF are:

1. Low awareness by stakeholders in some countries especially academic regulatory bodies due to insufficient communication.
2. Limited involvement of stakeholders and users such employers, HEIs and TVET colleges.

2. Conceptual-technical design of SADCQF

According to the survey and interviews, the principles, level structures, level descriptors and QA guidelines are generally considered relevant and supportive to both national and regional objectives. Considering the pace and importance of the transformation of learning, technology, and work, internationally and regionally, it is important to regularly review, update and improve the various elements of the SADCQF.

Principles: The principles serve as blueprint for regional solidarity and co-operation, recognising the sovereignty and autonomy of the SADC member states. They articulate the effectiveness of cooperation arrangements to integrate education and training systems. Also, they are configured as a guiding framework for the promotion of greater qualification comparability, recognition and transparency, which

are all essential for easier mobility of learners. The principles accommodate the diversity of education systems' contexts and education sector learning needs of the SADC member states, as well as allowing a phased approach in the development and implementation of qualification systems and frameworks. They are benchmarked to both intra-continental standards and reflect international practices. Furthermore, they support easier mobility and recognition of learning in the SADC region and ultimately globally.

Level descriptors: Responses generally acquiesce that SADCQF level descriptors contribute to achieving regional and national objectives, notably in terms of harmonisation of qualifications across the region, and promotion of parity of qualifications in the same discipline/fields within a country and the region. This contributes to comparability of qualifications, and consequently to improve the supply and mobility of critical skilled labour and skills across members states to enable industrialisation and modernisation of the region. The SADCQF level descriptors serve as a translation device and reference mechanism as they are minimum standards of learning outcome of each level, allowing comparison across SADC countries. They articulate the level of complexity in the outcomes of learning for each level of learning from the lowest to the highest level, thereby supporting the decision in some countries to have a clear set of minimum bodies of knowledge for all accredited programmes. These potentialities of the level descriptors facilitate recognition of qualifications across the SADC Regional Economic Community (REC) as well as other RECs. At national level, the level descriptors contribute to recognition of learning undertaken from Basic Education to TVET and Higher Education whilst providing for both horizontal comparison and vertical portability of qualifications leading to more seamless career progression across different learning pathways (Basic education, TVET, Teacher Education and University Education). In addition, the level descriptors can be considered in programme accreditation. The identified challenges and gaps concerning the level descriptors (Annexure 3) are similar to those found in previous studies, particularly the SADCQF Analytical Review of Level Descriptors (SADCQF, 2017c). It is worth noting that in 2016 TCCA had agreed to use the findings and recommendations as source materials for future decisions and reference.

Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines: QA Guidelines are considered supportive and relevant to both national and regional objectives as they are broad and provide a minimum standard for QA systems in the region, contributing to mutual trust of qualifications needed for fostering integration, industrialisation, innovation, and competitiveness of the region. They reflect international practice as they emphasise a clear set of learning outcomes and competency-based education and training assessment procedures that impress a balance of cognitive, psychomotor, and affective performance criteria for all qualification standards. The strength of QA guidelines is their prioritisation in the implementation model and governance structure of SADCQF. A leading role is played by Southern African Regional University Association ([SARUA](#)) and network with the implementation of QA in the region and for building mutual trust regarding the recognition of qualifications. The Botswana Qualification Authority which is serving as a secretariat for SAQAN is the champion leader of external QA, while SARUA is a champion leader of internal QA, facilitating communities of practice and networking. As QA minimum standards, they guide the establishment of national QA structures and systems in member states. Other strengths based on questionnaire responses include awareness of SADCQF QA by national QA structures and compliance by both national public and private higher and tertiary education Institutions. In Zimbabwe, for instance, there is 80% compliance of QA guidelines by public and private higher and tertiary education Institutions. Notwithstanding their acceptance and relevance, the weaknesses highlighted by the questionnaire and interview respondents are the following:

- The current QA Guidelines are too generic and broad in some sections to effectively serve as an operational reference mechanism for member states.
- There is inadequate dissemination and advocacy within some member states to key stakeholders and beneficiaries, resulting in poor implementation and slow adoption of a QA culture.

3. Benefits of SADCQF

Benefits of the SADCQF are promoted and shared at both regional and national level. They assist as governing principles and guidelines for countries that have recently developed or are developing their NQF and qualification systems, such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola. Based on the survey responses from member states, dissemination of information on the benefits of SADCQF is done at national level using various media platforms where the NQF and SADCQF are discussed and advocacy materials disseminated. In some countries, like Zimbabwe, the benefits feature in the Zimbabwe National Qualifications Framework (ZNQF, 2018).

While the benefits of SADCQF are known, several challenges were identified, which need corrective measures:

- Insufficient and ineffective communication and information, resulting in unrealistic expectations by many beneficiaries and stakeholders in SADC member states, as they expect automatic recognition of all qualifications, credentials, professional licences and trades, etc.
- Limited sensitisation and awareness of the benefits to key stakeholders such as the private sector, academic regulatory bodies.
- Slow acquisition of the benefits of SADCQF by beneficiaries such employers, employees, students, academics and the public, due to cost implications and the lengthy verification process of qualifications in some countries.

4. Participation and Engagement

Regional platforms for all member states on the SADCQF implementation process at technical and political level are utilised annually as part the governance of the SADCQF. At technical level, engagements and participation is through the TCCA, which meets twice annually using a combination of physical and virtual mechanisms. Since the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic TCCA meetings have been organised virtually (Zoom platform), with simultaneous interpretation. Member states participate and engage in different aspects of the SADCQF process from conceptualisation, technical development, information sharing, launch and implementation. Member states contribute by providing technical inputs, guidance, championing, steering, as well as hosting and coordinating key components of the SADCQF.

However, the level of involvement and contribution by all member states, varies. Those who constantly participate in SADCQF related platforms play an active role spurring the implementation of the SADCQF, but the SADC system of engagement where member states use their own resources for participation continues to adversely affect full involvement and contributions by all member states and relevant stakeholders, as financial capabilities and economic possibilities of the SADC member states differ.

At national level, relevant stakeholders are informed and engaged about the NQF and SADCQF through national qualification platforms such as meetings, alignment committees and workshops. At these platforms, stakeholders are kept abreast on the latest developments of SADCQF implementation and can make inputs on the development of national alignment reports.

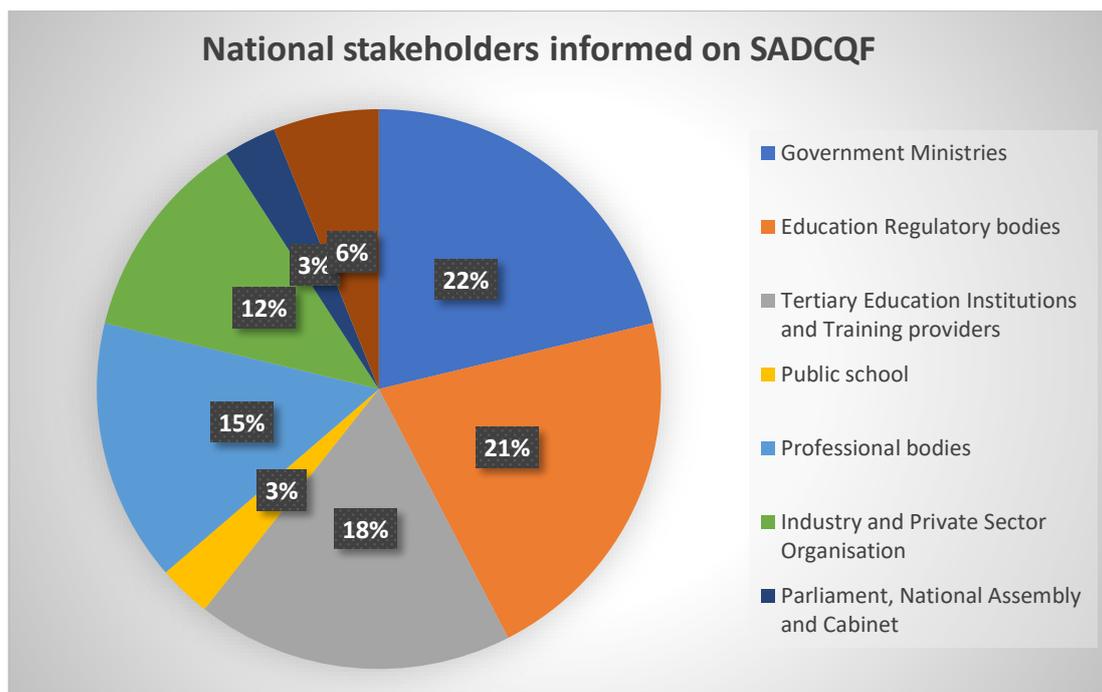


Figure 7: Types of national stakeholders informed about SADCQF related issues. Source: survey - review of SADCQF. Source: online survey for this study.

5. Mechanisms for support on development, implementation, review and alignment of NQF to the SADCQF

Currently, there is no regional coordinated approach in the provision of support to member states that are in the process of developing or aligning their NQF. Direct support continues to be on bilateral arrangements that take the form of hosting of study visits and sharing of the NQF model, policies, governance systems and NQF implementation processes. A study visit organised by SAQA for several countries such as Botswana, Eswatini, Namibia is cited as one good practice of supporting with the NQF development. The Mauritius Qualifications Authority also hosted study visits for several peer qualifications authorities.

The survey reveals that support to countries' capacity development was considered limited and not followed-up. Among the few examples of good practice, some respondents mentioned workshops addressing relevant themes, such as RPL, and alignment to the SADCQF.

The survey enquired about the types of support, which member states would prefer to receive from the SADCQF in future. Responses expressed interest to receive support in the form of capacity building and technical advice, and some also mentioned financial support. The indicated thematic areas of interest for future support included: review of the NQF; technical support with the alignment of their NQF, technical support with the development of the NQF; material and other educational support about the SADCQF; regular peer learning platforms on key aspects of the SADCQF and the facilitation of benchmarking, study visits and platforms for member states.

6. SADCQF Implementation Programmes

SADC countries are of the view that the six programmes provide a holistic approach that recognises the different aspects for effective implementation of the SADCQF. Although the programmes are being implemented, the progress and effectiveness of implementation remain a challenge.

The strengths can be summarised as follows:

- Ownership of their implementation by governments of the SADC member states, manifested by the leadership and driving role in the implementation, using their national resources (human, technical and financial). For instance, at technical level, implementation of the SADCQF is delegated to National Qualification Authorities or similar bodies, either with dedicated staff to focus on SADCQF related matters or otherwise making available human and financial resources for specific assignments of the SADCQ. At political level, the SADC member states' unequivocal leadership of the six programmes of the SADCQF is cognisant of the available collective government financial resources of the region and recognises the comparative advantage of member states driving implementation of certain (or all) aspects of Qualification Frameworks (SADC, 2017 and SADC, 2019).
- Existence of or the gradual development of implementation tools and guidelines. As examples, existing tools include: a five-year Implementation Plan, Terms of Reference of the Governing Structures; SADCQF Communication Strategy; SADCQF promotional messages guideline for aligning National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) to the SADCQF; Terms of Reference for National Alignment Committees; Annually updated Booklet of SADC verification contacts; RPL Guideline, SADC Recognition Manual and the Manual on Credit Accumulation and Transfer Guideline.
- Effective leadership and management of the implementation of the SADCQF at both political and technical levels, with regular platforms, namely TCCA twice a year and SADC policy organs annually (SADC Council of Ministers and Sectoral Ministers).
- Harnessing regional expertise through collaboration with existing networks and associations, particularly in the verification and QA programmes, i.e. SADC Qualifications Verification Network (SADC QVN), Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and SARUA, to avoid duplication.

The following aspects have been identified as weaknesses:

- Slow implementation coupled with poor reporting and response by member states.
- SADCQF-related documents and tools are difficult to find and access; they need to be systematised on a web platform for easy access by all TCCA members and the stakeholders in the member states.
- A lack of awareness or absence of the SADC Implementation Plan causing uncertainty about what each SADC member state is expected to do.
- Monitoring of SADCQF activities and outputs in relation to the implementation plan is not systematised and is not constantly supported by the relevant reporting documentation.
- Fragmented progress on the submission of alignment reports for adjudication by the TCCA and approval by the respective SADC organs.
- Irregular participation in organised TCCA meetings and inadequate convening of meetings of thematic working groups and sub-committees.
- Appropriateness of representation in the TCCA. For instance, the system of using the TROIKA in chairing the TCCA needs to be reviewed, as one of the member states who had never participated in any SADCQF meeting had to chair the TCCA by virtue of being in the TROIKA.
- Lack of a mechanism to enforce compliance by member states.

Progress is as follows:

- Regarding alignment to the SADCQF, two fully completed processes and a third reaching the final stage towards approval. There are two new alignment processes underway, with reporting in preparation.

- In addition, mobility within the region has been enhanced with the establishment of regional verification networks that enables a common approach and quicker verification of foreign qualifications.
- Some SADC member states are making progress with RPL and Articulation.

7. Alignment of NQFs to SADCQF

Based on the questionnaire responses, the alignment criteria and process are found to be generally clear, concise, streamlined, and feasible. Namibia and Eswatini have started steps in their alignment process, while Zimbabwe and Tanzania indicated readiness for alignment.

The hindering factors and challenges in the alignment process are mainly limited human and technical capacity, as the process is quite lengthy and demanding and may require technical support and input from stakeholders, and in some instances also limited financial resources. This has led to slow completion of alignment and validation of the reports to be submitted for adjudication by the TCCA. Another hindering factor is the lack of feedback on the self-assessment questionnaire, while, for some countries, it is still premature to consider alignment as they are still in the process of developing their NQF.

To cope with these challenges, MS in the alignment process employ different strategies, such as the mobilisation of resources from external partners and seeking support from national stakeholders.

For countries that have completed the alignment, the dissemination of the reports is through the TCCA. Publication is done through the SADC Secretariat Bulletin and the respective countries' websites. For instance, based on the questionnaire response, alignment reports are accessible on the SAQA website and the Seychelles alignment report will soon feature on the new Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA) website.

5.2 Overview of lessons learned

The analysis of internal and external strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, and of the SADCQF environment (presented in Annexure 4) depicts lessons learnt in the development and implementation of SADCQF, which can be summarised as follows.

- Available human, financial and technical capacity to drive the SADCQF development and implementation on the ground has been lacking, thus limiting progress in its implementation. The absence of the Implementation Unit or dedicated personnel for the SADCQF continues to be a hindering factor despite recognition as a prerequisite since its conception (SADCQF Concept paper 2011). Since 2011, the commitment to the establishment of the Implementation Unit through the strengthening of personnel at the SADC Secretariat within the Education Unit by secondment of experts who would be financially supported by member states, has not materialised (Record of meetings of Ministers of Education and Training 2011, 2016, 2017, 2019). Although the establishment of champion leaders for the six programmes, coupled with a dedicated and constant leadership of the TCCA enabled some progress, it happened at a slow pace and has not proved to be sustainable over a long time.
- The harnessing and utilisation of existing institutions at national level, regional networks, associations, and external expertise, such as SAQA, SAQAN, SARUA, ILO and UNESCO, in the implementation of the SADCQF activities has promoted synergies, avoided duplication, and maximised utilisation of limited financial resources. For instance, ILO and UNESCO, through their SADC Programmes, supported developments, and implementation of SADCQF instruments and related activities such as SADC RPL, benchmarking study visits and the integration of the work of the Addis Convention. In addition, establishing interlinkages with continental and international

initiatives, i.e. the AQVN and UNESCO World Referencing Steering Committee, facilitates benchmarking and the integration of good practice into the development and implementation of the SADCQF.

- Direct technical support for the translation of regional agreements/commitments towards implementation is necessary, as SADCQF-related issues tend to compete with national priorities. For instance, the continuous extension of deadlines of completion and submission of alignment reports to the TCCA since 2018 to date points to the need for in-country support for progress to be achieved.
- Intersectoral collaboration and involvement of stakeholders such as the private sector and migration experts is imperative for the SADCQF to be relevant in the SADC industrialisation agenda. For instance, the absence of representatives of the private sector and other relevant sectoral experts in the TCCA/governance structure limits the harnessing of resources for the effective implementation of the SADCQF.
- Continuous peer engagements, learning and review on key technical activities and issues through the creation of sub-committees or thematic working groups within the TCCA facilitates capacity building. For instance, the QA guidelines of the SADCQF were developed following a situational analysis of QA systems in member states that was conducted by a sub-committee of the TCCA.
- Development and sustainability of initiatives for a centralised system for recording qualifications and human capital data remains a challenge.

5.3 High-level issues and areas for further improvement

Level descriptors: The responses (summarised in Annex 3) complemented by previous studies on the SADC level descriptors, pointed out what needs to be reviewed. Primarily there is need for: definitions of the three domains; review of progressions across all three domains; rationalisation of some of the level descriptors to explicitly reflect the progression in the complexity of learning from level to level; disaggregation within certain levels to cater for different disciplines/fields that are in the same band, such as Level 8; and alignment and harmonisation of occupational standards and descriptors for all levels. However, any decision regarding the revision of the level descriptors should consider priorities, resources and impact.

Quality Assurance: There is a need for unpacking and streamlining the QA principles as they are found to be too generic and broad to effectively serve as a reference mechanism. In addition, the QA guidelines should cater better for the QA of online/digital qualifications. TCCA might consider expanding the current version of 16 QA Guidelines into a practical Handbook, covering conceptual and theoretical aspects, but also including practical orientations on internal and external QA, and a more specific focus on the QA of qualifications and certification. It is worth noting the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance ([ASG-QA](#)), developed under the project Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation-2 (HAQAA-2), (AU-EU), already accessible for users. SARUA and QA agencies of SADC member states are involved in or informed about HAQAA-2.

Resources: The lack of financial, technical, and human resources dedicated to the implementation of the SADCQF continues to be a major constraint in its implementation. There is a need for at least one qualification expert at the SADC Secretariat to focus only on SADCQF implementation.

Capacity Building: Changes of personnel who work on qualifications in member states is inevitable yet has a negative impact on the continuity of knowledge on the SADCQF process. There is a need for foundational understanding of the SADCQF by each country. A programme or regional academy for building capacity of personnel involved in the domain of qualifications, including the SADCQF, could provide in the need.

TCCA and TCCA EXCO representation and Terms of Reference. The TCCA lacks intersectoral representation while the SADCQF is multisector in nature. There is a need for the adoption of a multisectoral representation of key regional stakeholders. This should be coupled with the revision of the Terms of Reference of the TCCA, the role and function of the SADC Secretariat and the system of chairing and leading the TCCA.

SADC Qualification Portal Development and Management. There is a need for a SADCQF portal or website ideally to be hosted at the SADC Secretariat. This will support effective communication and knowledge management, including intellectual property of SADCQF.

5.4 Focus on specific questions

Legal basis, action plan and implementation support basis

The SADCQF supports and seeks to implement a range of regional, continental, and international Protocols and Policy and Strategic Frameworks that have been developed and approved:

1. The SADC Industrialisation Strategy Road Map (2015 – 2063)
2. The SADC Protocol on Education and Training (2000 – 2020)
3. The SADC Youth Employment Policy Framework (2016)
4. The SADC Protocol on Science, Technology, and Innovation (2009)
5. The ILO Recommendation No. 195 (2004)
6. The Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs (Goals 4 and 8); and
7. The African Union Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA-25).

The implementation of the SADCQF since its launch has been guided by an Implementation Plan. The first was the two-years implementation plan (2016 – 2018). A five-year implementation plan included in the SADCQF financing proposal was approved in 2019 as a resource mobilisation document (Table 4).

Table 4: Revised proposal for implementing the SADCQF (05/2019). Table of outcomes and indicators 2019-2023

Expected Outcomes	Indicators	Means of verification	Assumptions
Improved functioning of all the existing structures of the SADCQF including the establishment of an Implementation Unit (IU)	Regional implementation unit implemented	Quarterly IU report	Available expertise, capacity and financial resources at regional and national level
SADC countries have functional NQFs and have aligned their NQFs to the SADCQF	Number of countries with functional NQFs	Regional report on NQF development and implementation	All Members States have established NQFs and are aligning their NQFs to the SADCQF
	Number of SADC NQFs aligned to the SADCQF	Regional report on Alignment of NQFs to the SADCQF	
Enhanced quality assurance in the region	Number of Member States with functional internal QA	Regional report on internal QA	Member States have a comprehensive system for both internal and external QA
	Number of Member States with functional external QA	Regional report on external QA	
Enhanced mobility of labour and learners in the region based on credible recognition of qualifications and credentials	Number of foreign qualifications evaluated by each Member State	Annual regional report on qualifications evaluated	All member states have a credible qualifications infrastructure and are submitting national reports on qualifications evaluated in a particular year.
	Percentage of intra-regional mobility of students and labour	Regional Report on Mobility	
The SADC RPL, CATS and Articulation guideline is available, understood, and implemented as a framing document	Number of Member States that facilitate articulation in their education system	Regional articulation report	Member States develop and implement articulation mechanisms in their education systems
	Number of Member States implementing a regional CATS	Regional report on CATS	Member States have developed and are implementing a national CATS
The SADCQF is visible and all beneficiaries are aware of its benefits	Number of Member States where SADCQF is visible and being used	Evidence of visibility and use	The SADCQF is being used by the stakeholders in Member States

Source: SADC/ ET-STI/1/2019/12: 7.

The five-year plan for implementing the SADCQF had an estimated cost of USD 9,683,847. The programme governance is the most significant in terms of estimated cost (50% of total cost), while alignment and QA account for 23% of total estimated cost. This funding proposal was conceived in pre-Covid19 times and includes a substantial amount for travel and mission costs. Savings in travel costs can be proposed in a potential revision of this proposal.

The funding proposal appealed to the SADC Ministers for support in the form of direct funding and/or support with identifying and applying for donor funding (Table 5). The Secretariat initiated contacts to raise funds among international organisations.

Table 5: Funding proposal supporting the five-year plan for implementation of SADCQF (2019)

SADCQF programme	Yr1	Yr2	Yr3	Yr4	Yr5	Budget
Governance	926280	980024	933229	1035106	1021526	4896165
Development and alignment of NQFs to the SADCQF	144493	227037	232650	256291	260506	1120977
Quality Assurance	199187	215122	232332	250919	270992	1168552
Verification of Qualifications	307965	155002	139170	149455	160513	912105
RPL, CAT and articulation	142648	231090	115924	202542	291108	983312
Advocacy and Communication	97438	104800	112724	121254	166520	602736
TOTAL	1818011	1913075	1766029	2015567	2171165	9683847

The set of implementation support documents and tools to support alignment, as summarised in Table 1, is of fundamental importance to ensure clarity of the requirements, concepts and methods, and consistency in implementation. Currently there is no unified package (handbook) integrating all documents, decisions, recommendations, guidance, which have been gradually developed in different contexts to support alignment. This issue is addressed in the Chapter 7 (Conclusions and recommendations).

Conceptual-technical design of SADCQF

The decisions of TCCA in 2016 and 2017 (refer to Table 1) have structured the SADCQF as a combination of components addressing major dimensions of qualifications systems:

- Development and alignment of NQFs – to assure that all member states have transparent and comparable qualifications levels and align to SADCQF.
- Quality Assurance – to ascertain that NQF qualifications awarded across the region comply to a common set of quality standards and criteria and NQFs contribute to maintain these features.
- Verification of qualifications – to curb fraud and assure credibility of qualifications systems.
- RPL, CATS and articulation – to facilitate progression, permeability, and access to qualifications irrespective of the modality and context of learning.
- Communication – users’ outreach, information, dissemination.

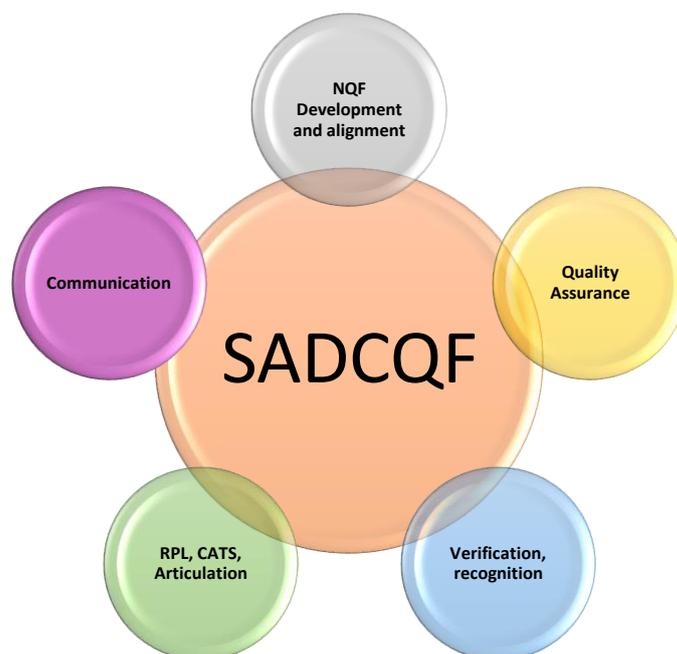


Figure 8: The pillars of SADCQF. Based on SADCQF documents.

This section addresses solely the level structure and level descriptors of the SADCQF.

- The SADCQF level descriptors are structured in three domains of learning (Knowledge, Skills and Autonomy and Responsibility). Further details or definitions of these domains of learning, or indications of the sub-domains are not included in the main SADCQF policy document (SADCQF 2017b) or other SADC documents analysed for this study. The full set of level descriptors is included in Annex 2.
- The study undertaken in 2017 (SADC, 2017c)¹⁵ provided an analytical review of the level descriptors of SADCQF, comparing them with the descriptors of EQF and ASEAN QRF. The study concluded that the level descriptors of SADCQF compare well with the descriptors used in the EQF and ASEAN QRF, as well as with three NQFs included in the study. Nonetheless the study recommended a careful review of SADCQF level descriptors with the main purpose to ensure clarity in the vertical progression of learning complexity across all three domains, with notable improvements required in the knowledge and skills domain.

Responses captured by the survey and interviews revealed (i) largely concurring views regarding the acceptability of the SADCQF level descriptors at national level; and (ii) differences of opinions about the main gaps and issues that characterise these descriptors.

It is worth noting a selection of self-explanatory responses provided to these two questions.

Question: Please comment on the extent to which the SADCQF level descriptors¹⁶ are accepted and supportive to your country objectives.

Most responses concurred on the view that SADCQF level descriptors are acceptable for the national frameworks and for the alignment process. A selection of some of the most elaborated responses:

¹⁵ SADC. 2017c. 'Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework: Analytical review of level descriptors'.

¹⁶ https://www.academia.edu/32433237/Southern_African_Development_Community_Regional_Qualifications_Framework_Analytical_Review_of_Level_Descriptors

- One country responded: “we have found the SADCQF level descriptors explicitly clear, reliable and they make setting qualification standards really objective and there is no confusion.”
- Another country wrote: “...has aligned its NQF to the SADCQF. This exercise has enabled the identification of weaknesses and gaps in our NQF which will need to be addressed and these in line with the SADCQF level descriptors to meet the country's objectives of mutual recognition of our national qualifications”.
- A third response mentioned: “The SADCQF level descriptors were accepted by the national stakeholders. The stakeholders also validated the alignment between the national descriptors and the SADCQF descriptors. The national descriptors are particular, and the regional QF does not need to directly support country objectives. It is fit for the regional purpose and serves regional priorities.”
- A fourth submission with a positive view on acceptability, expressed a concern related with the generic formulation of the regional level descriptors: “As I expected, the descriptors are accepted, but we alert that in some cases they are too general, too wide, although this makes it possible to adapt them to the specific context of each country.”
- One of the submissions underlined the problem of lack of information on the level descriptors and other features of the SADCQF: “As stated above, some details of the SADCQF need to be shared within member states. With the document provided, I am unable to find Level Descriptors and give my opinion on them. Country members of TCCA do not have details on the SADCQF Level Descriptors.”

Question: What gaps and issues have you identified in the level descriptors of the SADCQF?

Respondents expressed their understanding and suggestions, sharing their interpretation linked with the national context or with the alignment experience. These reflections can be useful in defining further development actions related to the SADCQF, in information-sharing, capacity development packages and peer learning activities.

- “In the national alignment process, we indicated that the SADCQF level descriptors lack progression, in that certain (sub-domains [not explicit as sub-domains]) were not present at all SADCQF levels. However, since the submission of the national alignment report, I have come to realise that not all domains or sub-domains need to be present at all levels of an RQF like SADCQF. Also, the SADCQF needs to be fit for purpose as a RQF and cannot accommodate the complexities that an NQF can accommodate. I think the key issue is that the SADC level descriptors are poorly understood, and there are no definitions of the domains or an indication of how each domain is organised into sub-domains whether implicit or explicit, and no underpinning principles explaining the SADC level descriptors, and what is present or absent at each level.”
- “There are level descriptors especially for the lower qualification levels that may be too simple for the particular level (easier than the previous level in terms of degree of complexity).”
- “Level descriptors by their nature are open to interpretation and that remains a gap. Since some countries are still developing their NQFs the use of the descriptors is limited.”
- “There is need to have clear clarity regarding the competency differences distinguishing the level descriptors for post graduate diplomas from those of Masters’ degrees. The SADCQF level descriptors have been criticised by practitioners for not having clear set bands within qualification levels. As in there are distinct descriptors from one level to the next but there are not clear distinctions for qualifications falling under the same band but in different sectors e.g. an

undergraduate qualification in Business Management cannot be blanketly placed at the same level as an undergraduate qualification in Civil Engineering as the level of difficulty is obviously not the same.”

- “The gaps identified are really that the descriptors are dated and therefore require review to align and take into consideration the current development such as 4th Industrial Revolution etc and the demands this have on the describing of ability, skills and knowledge in general.”
- Finally, one of the respondents expressed the following concern: “Non-certified qualifications and competencies are not captured.” This formulation points to the need to embrace qualifications outside of formal education/accredited institutions.

Question: Is there any support you have received from SADC to develop, consolidate, implement the NQF and align it to the SADCQF? Please elaborate on the features and content of this kind of support.

On SADC support to NQFs and national institutions to enable alignment processes, several TCCA members expressed on average a critical view. Most responses concurred on the problem of scarcity of support to countries’ NQFs and alignment. Some countries recalled two to three workshops conducted in the beginning of the alignment process but noted the relatively low sustainability of the knowledge and capacities built due to high staff turnover and limited dissemination among the national institutions (“loss of institutional memory”, as noted in one of the responses). Some countries have not been involved in capacity development activities, possibly because they were not in the group of eight pilot countries. The themes of the training workshops were mostly related with alignment process and criteria.

- “We received training for the alignment and the guidelines, but this can really be improved because the biggest challenge is that all member states are left to their own mercy after the workshops etc. More support post workshop activities etc to assist member states where possible would be useful and can change the pace at which we move.”
- “There were workshops on alignment driven by one country, as well as a capacity building workshop for the TCCA to be able to adjudicate alignment reports. The institutional memory may have been lost as many of these people do not work at the said organisations anymore.”

All responses emphasised the need to expand support, notably through training and updated information to build capacities of personnel in the national institutions:

- To consolidate and implement the NQFs, improve the knowledge and practices of quality assurance bodies, consolidate the national institutions, and prepare for alignment to SADCQF.
- Some countries requested comprehensive training sessions, others required support to review the NQF, and some recommended strengthening the SADC Secretariat to enable its country support functions.

6. Adaptation to new demands and transformation

6.1 Aspects of the global transformation concerning qualifications frameworks and systems

The landscape of jobs, as well as their accompanying qualifications and skills requirements is rapidly changing. The transformation of tasks, occupations and the organisation of work is creating a demand for new sets of skills, displacing existing jobs and giving rise to wholly new ones. The 'Top Skills for 2025' (WEF 2020b) are changing, with new top skills moving up the list, notably skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility. The twin green and digital transitions have strong skills dimensions, which every skills development and qualifications system must recognise and address.

Strategies for empowering job transitions from declining to emerging roles are being devised, modelling the opportunities for job transitions to new professions on the basis of skills similarity (adjacency) between a worker's current and future roles, as well as the reskilling investment. A shift to a skill-based hiring system focused on lifelong learning principles requires more flexible modalities of learning, of assessment and recognition of learning and certification. Countries are grappling with the need for more effective skills, intelligence providing real-time insights for skills development policies and practices, and for more responsive lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Qualifications are changing, and education and training institutions must open up to new types of learning, be learner-centred, and also recognise learning outcomes from non-formal and informal contexts. New concepts and instruments, such as micro-credentials, and digital technologies to recognise learning (digital certificates) are gradually becoming part of the mainstream reality of our education and training systems.

The digital transformation arrived ahead of schedule, as countries had to suddenly close schools, training centres and universities to counter the threat to life posed by the global pandemic. Education and training in all countries had to shift to remote, digital and hybrid forms of learning. This shift was accompanied by a steep learning curve for all education and training systems, teachers, and learners; but also by significant learning losses. As education and training systems shape their recovery from the pandemic crisis, questions arise on the necessary adaptation of QA policies and practices, new teachers' roles, curriculum delivery and assessment in the new context of more digital, remote, open learning.

Qualifications in time of crises can be considered from at least two angles:

- The acquisition of new skills for the numerous transitions using a mix of instruments anchored on innovation: digital learning, micro-credentials, skills-based credentials and hands-on learning.
- The realisation that knowledge is not less important in qualifications, but should be enriched with values, attitudes, and behavioural dispositions.

Debates linked with the ACQF peer-learning webinars in 2020 included a discussion of the role of NQFs in the context of the great transformations of our time. With reference to the ACQF (2021c) *Feasibility Report* the following main issues are being considered. Some of the following issues might be relevant in the context of SADCQF too, with due consideration of the regional context.

- There are features of NFQs that may be of assistance as countries plan their recovery, particularly job-recovery strategies. RPL may well attract increased attention. So too the prospect of qualifications frameworks opening up to non-formal qualifications, including micro-credentials, which seem to be appearing everywhere. Many labour market policy responses are looking at fast, flexible skill solutions, not always suited to the slower pace of NQFs.

- Inequality and the associated digital divide is a major issue – qualifications and their delivery are going to have to be more accessible for everyone if online delivery continues to play a significant part in TVET and higher education qualifications.
- QA matters as the shift to more online/remote delivery of qualifications poses questions about academic integrity and standards. The learning outcomes approach (agnostic on location) may have been helpful in facilitating the shift to online assessment, though it is too early to tell.
- The role of NQFs in the context of Covid-19 might usefully be unpacked under these three headings:
 - recognition (of individual learning achievements and newer forms of certification);
 - accessibility (NQFs could do more to insist on access as a principle for qualifications to be included); and
 - quality assurance (of NQFs and constituent qualifications, so that measures related to Covid-19 do not present a threat to the quality, reputation or recognition status).
- Principles underpinning NQFs may come to be just as important as technical features – fairness, transparency, quality, equality, flexibility and relevance. Most important is that NQFs, or rather their design, implementation and use by stakeholders, don't make things worse for the population (citizens, refugees, migrants). NQFs as policy instruments are only one of many that policymakers will need to employ in a coherent response to these wide issues.
- The vision of the ACQF combines i) inclusiveness – all types and levels of qualifications; ii) openness - to mutual learning and to stakeholders' needs and iii) innovation. Innovation is a major foundation to build a 'future-ready ACQF', able to promote adaptation of qualifications in Africa to the multiple global transitions (green, digital, technological, societal).

6.2 Findings

Drivers of change

Technological advancement has been mentioned by SADC countries as a key driver of change on both online survey and interviews. Technology is seen as the driving force that has brought change to several countries.

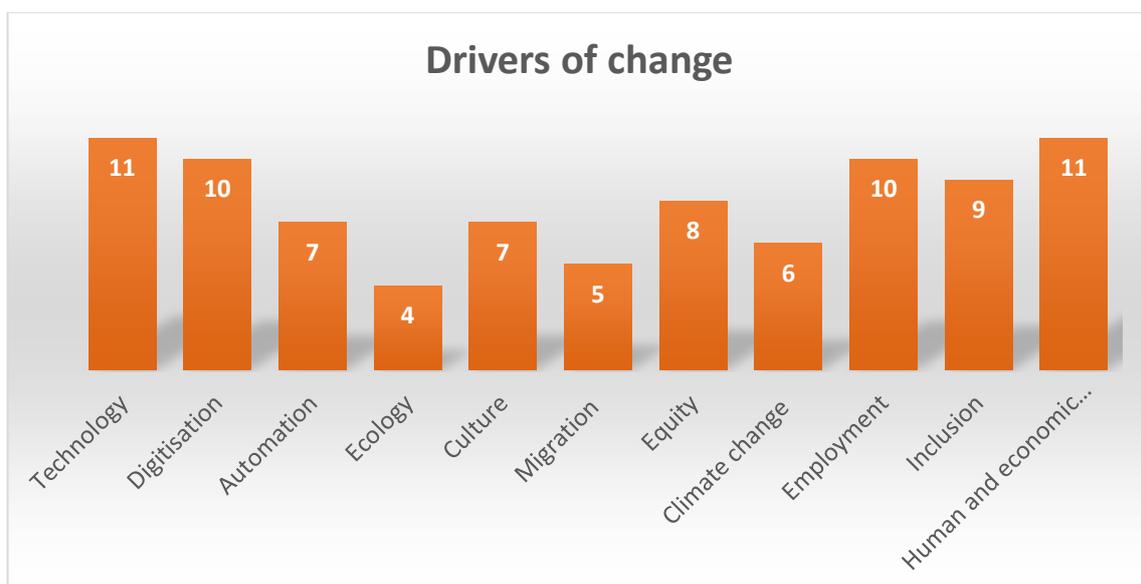


Figure 9: drivers of change impacting education and training, qualifications and qualifications frameworks

Source: online survey for this study.

According to survey results, there is a substantial diversity of views regarding the drivers of change impacting learning, skills and qualification frameworks in their respective countries (Figure 3).

- Technology, digitisation, employment and human and economic development are the top three drivers of change according to this survey.
- On the opposite side – the least significant drivers of change – we found ecology, migration and climate change.
- Automation and culture appear as drivers of average importance.

Change induces member states to take measures enabling adaptation. Measures include the reviewing of outdated educational materials and guidelines; reviewing and revising their curricula in the education and training sectors; modernising occupational standards; boosting continuing training and lifelong learning; expanding recognition of relevant skills, knowledge and competencies to meet work demands and facilitate social cohesion. Member states and the SADC region address change through legislation, various sectoral policies, and specific qualification policies or recognition of qualifications acquired via online learning, open and distance learning (ODL).

Examples were shared by Botswana, concerning the recognition of qualifications acquired through ODL or online learning.

The majority of responding countries emphasised the need for capacity building of personnel responsible for NQFs and SADCQF on matters related to innovation, technology and transfer of skills within the region.

6.3 Aspects of the SADCQF that need revisiting to ascertain relevance

Level Descriptors and Quality Assurance Guidelines

Responses to the survey and interview as well as previous studies concur on the need for regular review of SADCQF level descriptors and quality assurance (QA) guidelines. Updated and relevant level descriptors and QA guidelines contribute to efficient progression and articulation of pathways and outcomes from all contexts and levels of learning, and to respond to labour market transitions, future of work, transformation of jobs and skills and industrialization of the region.

Generally, the level descriptors and QA principles of SADCQF reflect good practice in their design with reflection of minimum standards and complexity of learning outcomes for each level from the lowest to the highest, and serve as minimum standard for QA systems in the region, creating mutual trust of qualifications. There are gaps and challenges in the level descriptors and QA guidelines though, as noted in previous sections.

There are however mixed views on the urgency of substantial revision of the level descriptors and quality assurance guidelines: (i) One view suggests undertaking the review and renewal of the level descriptors and QA guidelines immediately; (ii) Other views recommend substantive revision only after the necessary experience has been gained and feedback has been gathered on the application of the level descriptors and QA guidelines. When taking the decision on the line, careful consideration should be given to priorities for the SADCQF in a context of scarce resources, measured against the impact of the current set of level descriptors on the SADCQF and its alignment process.

Adaptation to new demands linked with the transformation

Respondents generally concurred that the SADCQF needs to adapt to change and innovation. The digital transformation of learning, new types of credentials, effective inclusion of non-formal and informal

learning and RPL in the mechanisms of NQFs and the SADCQF, emerged as the most important dimensions of change, which the SADCQF needs to embrace more effectively going forward. Digital tools and processes should be considered to improve efficiency and coherence of the implementation of the SADCQF.

A selection of responses to the online survey sheds light on the thinking of some respondents:

- The entire framework needs to be revisited with the implementation plan to ensure it caters for the needs of the transformation of learning, skills needs, qualifications, technology, greening, industrial revolution (4th and 5th).
- Use of technology in implementing the SADCQF.
- New awards, new types of qualifications, micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials

The number and diversity of micro-credential offerings have expanded substantially in recent years, accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Micro-credentials hold promises and challenges. To read more on questions in debate and new initiatives concerning transparency of micro-credentials, refer to Annex 6 of this report.

Existing definitions (from OECD, European Commission, UNESCO, Australian Government) point to these key characteristics of micro-credentials:

- Referring to learning over a limited time period and/or in a specific area
- May form part of or adding to formal qualifications
- Potentially 'stackable' over time, adding to individual learning careers
- Given their limited size and focus, more flexible than traditional qualifications
- Based on assessed learning
- Frequently delivered in a digital form

Micro-credentials have been at the centre of attention of several international research projects, and of initiatives aiming to agree to a common definition and position on the way forward regarding coherence with NQFs, contribution to LLL, stacking leading to the construction of qualifications, QA, credibility, and financing.

The responses to this study survey and interviews reveal acknowledgement of the growing importance of micro-credentials; and underscored the need for clear understanding, analysis, and appreciation of what micro-credentials are and how they can link to the SADCQF. Currently the SADCQF, as most countries' NQFs, does not have legal provisions and guidelines related to the inclusion and registration of micro-credentials.

SADC TCCA needs to give some attention to understanding the types of micro-credentials emerging in the region, how they link to mainstream policies supporting lifelong learning, career progression and employability and the challenges and opportunities they bring.

The lessons and results of the most recent international and regional initiatives towards developing a common definition, language and principles can be considered by SADC. For instance, the EU experience of developing a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2021) is relevant. This EU initiative recommended ten principles applicable when designing and issuing micro-credentials: quality, transparency, relevance, valid assessment, recognition, portability, learner-centred, authentic, and information and guidance.

Country experiences in creating frameworks for micro-credentials can suggest useful directions of thinking for a SADC initiative on micro-credentials. For instance, New Zealand has included micro-credentials in their NQF. The [register of NZQA-approved Micro-Credentials](#) contains 224 micro-credentials at different levels

of the NQF (Levels 3 to 7). In 2021 the Australian Government adopted the [National Micro-Credentials Framework](#), which defines what constitutes a micro-credential, and elaborates the main unifying principles and critical information requirements.

The SADC in cooperation with the ACQF, other RQFs, education QA agencies and relevant stakeholders in Africa could seize the opportunity and engage in a structured dialogue about a common African concept and guidelines on micro-credentials.

Governance Structure and role of SADC Secretariat

Responses from the survey and interviews recommended:

- Revision of the terms of reference of the TCCA and TCCA EXCO.
- That the SADC Secretariat should play an enhanced coordination role, introduce clear monitoring functions, and provide support and commensurate resources (human and financial) to member states.
- Digital tools, a web-based platform.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

A. Conclusion on achieving the five main purposes of SADCQF

The SADCQF is a regional mechanism for comparability and recognition of full qualifications, credit transfer, creation of regional standards and facilitation of QA. It consists of a set of agreed principles, practices, procedures and standardised terminology intended to meet the five purposes of the SADCQF:

1. Providing a mechanism for comparability and recognition of qualifications in SADC.
2. Facilitating mutual recognition of qualifications in all member states.
3. Harmonising qualifications wherever possible.
4. Promoting the transfer of credits within and among member states and even beyond.
5. Creating SADC regional standards where appropriate.

In the five years of its existence, the SADCQF implementation model showed resilience in the face of challenges and severe resource limitations and was able to deliver tangible contributions towards some of the defined purposes.

The countries' commitment to accepting responsibility for the five implementation programmes was a unique starting point to progress with technical activities, create mutual trust between countries and generate a first tangible home-grown experience and knowledge of SADCQF, which will always be a reference point for the future of SADCQF and other RQFs in Africa.

The five purposes remain relevant and valid as the SADCQF enters a second half-decade of life. These are objectives requiring sustained and long-term commitment and balanced complementarities with other policy instruments, e.g., with mutual recognition agreements, and fair integration of labour migrants. Further action sustained by resources and partnerships will be needed to generate the intended impacts in terms of comparability, mutual recognition, and mobility.

Actions and initiatives were started regarding the first four objectives, but less activity can be reported as concerns the fifth objective ('Creating SADC regional standards where appropriate'). One of the recommendations of this report concerns this objective, notably the development of common regional profiles (elements of common standards) for occupations and qualifications related to emerging

occupations, new skills (digital and green, transversal) and priority sectors for SADC economic integration and effective operations of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The Revised Draft Proposal for implementing the SADCQF (May 2019) has not been funded according to the planned parameters and estimations. This proposal was conceived and elaborated in pre-Covid-19 times and reflects high costs for travel and missions to countries to participate in TCCA meetings. Such travel and mission costs can nowadays be substantially curbed as the world learned to work and live in hybrid mode.

Recommendations:

A revised roadmap for three to four years (2022-2026) should be elaborated taking account of the findings and recommendations of this study, and the new demands and opportunities of this period of turbulence and continuing transformation of the contexts of the qualifications eco-systems (national and regional) to which the SADCQF relates. Aspects of this roadmap could be discussed with the ACQF development project and coordinated activities could be considered.

Priority areas for the roadmap include:

1. SADC Guidelines on RPL, CAT, recognition – communication and support to application/transposition at country level.
2. Streamlining and reactivating alignment/referencing to SADCQF: support and invite all SADC member states to plan and participate in the process.
3. Use of SAQF levels on newly issued qualifications documents of NQF aligned/referenced to the SADCQF: develop the concept and guideline, submit it to approval by the ministers.
4. New developments related to digitalisation of qualifications management, micro-credentials, common profiles (occupations, qualifications and new skills): develop the concept note, constitute a dedicated working group, raise funding, partnerships.
5. Capacity development and peer sharing: national level, SADC level, and wider international level
6. Strengthening of cooperation with the ACQF and EQF
7. Monitoring and evaluating systems and instruments to support a plan-do-monitor-review approach for SADCQF implementation.

B. Governance and implementation model

The five years of implementation experience of the SADCQF (2016-2021) has been based on the principle and practice of solidarity and cooperation between countries and the SADC Secretariat, which allowed the five main programmes to make progress in a context of scarce/insufficient resources, without a dedicated implementation unit. The countries leading the five implementation programmes have mobilised their expertise to engage, show the way, provide technical reports to TCCA on their respective activities. The semestrial TCCA meetings have been carried out, and from 2020 a virtual/digital format was adopted in accordance with the new ways of work and communication established during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The planned SADCQF Implementation Unit is not yet in place. Without a dedicated implementation unit with technical capacity, this present governance and implementation model was the only realistic possible solution in the context. But the information and views collected by this study indicate that this model may have reached its limits, and that its weaknesses could adversely affect the efficacy of the SADCQF process going forward. Some lead countries have started participating less frequently in TCCA meetings, and some reports have less comprehensively addressed the key themes. This could indicate that existing capacities have been overly stretched and need commensurate resources.

Recommendations:

1. To cope with new opportunities and challenges going forward, a new multi-year workplan for SADCQF is necessary and should be one of the high priority tasks for TCCA in 2022. It should consider the lessons learned from the first five years of implementation, the findings and recommendations from this study, and closely align with the relevant objectives and planned outputs from RISDP 2030, the SADC Industrial Strategy, and the SADC Labour Migration Action Plan 2025.
2. Revision of the Terms of Reference for the TCCA and TCCA EXCO including the role and function of the SADC Secretariat.
3. Establishment of a web-based information platform (website) for SADCQF documents and programmes. This recommendation has a transversal application across all main chapters of this study.
4. Developing a brief technical proposal on work groups to reflect and develop proposals on specific thematic areas. Thematic work groups are mentioned in the SADCQF Booklet (SADCQF, 2017b, in the chapter describing the governance structure).
5. The SADCQF Implementation Unit should be established in a phased approach, starting with a small team. It should be ensured that the staff of the Unit is technically competent and has specific knowledge in the domain of qualifications and qualifications frameworks.
6. Funding to ensure functioning of the Unit should be negotiated. Co-financing possibilities, including international donors should be investigated to support implementation of the relevant SADCQF-related actions foreseen in the RISDP 2030 and the SADC Migration Action Plan, amongst others.
 - a. A fund should be established towards each member state should commit financial resources into a collective pool that is dedicated to support of the Programme of development and review of the NQF and alignment of the NQF to the SADCQF. The fund should support the mobilisation of NQF experts' teams from the region to directly assist and work with in-country teams. The Programme should be driven by the SADC Secretariat and be based on a biennial mapping study of the status of NQFs with country clusters for support.
 - b. Given the importance of qualified/skilled human capital and portability of qualifications across the region for the SADC Industrial Strategy and for the private sector in all countries, the TCCA and the Secretariat could conduct a resources mobilisation campaign addressing large companies to support certain strategic activities related with the five SADCQF implementation programmes.

C. Legal basis and methodological framework of SADCQF

The Protocol on Education and Training provides the broad legal basis for the SADCQF. Decisions from TCCA meetings (2016-2021) are recorded and contain valuable information of technical nature for users. Specific SADCQF guidance and methodological documents for users exist in the form of the 'SADCQF Booklet' (SADC, 2017b) and the booklet 'Building Trust for Better Movement' (SADC, 2019). Further, the two published alignment reports (SAQA, 2019 and Seychelles, 2018) contain useful information on conceptual and methodological considerations and procedures regarding the alignment process, the self-assessment tool, and the reporting by alignment criteria. These are the main reference documents of an informational and methodological nature that can serve users at country and regional level. This overview shows the pragmatic approach taken by the TCCA to gradually develop and put in practice the various elements of the approach to implement the SADCQF, notably the alignment process and outputs. The pieces exist, were

tested, and even critically analysed, but they are fragmented, and an integrated information and methodology package is not yet in place.

Recommendations:

1. Developing of a unified information and methodology package (handbook/manual) for the use of member states, the region and a future Implementation Unit to guide and assure quality and efficacy of implementation of the SADCQF and especially the core function of SADCQF, which is alignment. Development of such a SADCQF Handbook can be done cooperation with ACQF project, for a win-win approach of close cooperation and mutual understanding between the two frameworks.
2. Development of the SADCQF information and methodology package should build on the existing documents, concepts, and policies, and consider the need to rethink and review some important elements of SADCQF and its alignment approach and practice. The documentary research and results from the survey and interviews point to the need to:
 - c. Review and improve the SADCQF level descriptors: inclusion of definitions and conceptual aspects of domains (and sub-domains); ensure the best possible vertical progression in the complexity of learning, as well as horizontal coherence and coverage of the sub-domains across the three domains; analyse the NQF level descriptors and take them into account; consider information from occupational standards.
 - d. Work on the approximation of occupational standards across the region: support inter-sectoral teams, integrating representatives of TCCA, of regional bodies, associations, and networks from the different sub-sectors of education and fields of study. Basic, TVET and higher education as well as professional bodies - adequately financed for the assignment.

D. NQF development and alignment

Over the past five years several countries made progress with their NQFs - in developing, reviewing, approving, and starting operations. Angola and Mozambique have progressed towards approval of NQF legislation in 2022. A few countries have established qualifications registers accessible online, based on different data models and technologies, but none is interoperable with databases from other countries in the region. Some of these online qualifications databases are comprehensive containing all levels and types of qualifications (e.g.: Botswana, South Africa), others focus on one sub-sector (e.g.: Mozambique has the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications – levels 1 to 5, and Mauritius MQA’s register contains only qualifications of TVET nature of levels 1 to 6). Table 6 offers a concise overview of the status of NQFs in the region. It is worth noting the fluid nature of this categorisation and the need to regularly update it as countries evolve in their NQF process. This follow-up is being done by the ACQF project, based on the ACQF Mapping Study and the Peer Learning activities. The TCCA and the SADCQF alignment programme can use existing ACQF data, and collect regular updates from the SADC countries using established procedures and questionnaires, and avoiding duplication.

Table 6: Concise overview of NQFs in SADC – by stage

Stage: Early thinking	Stage: In development and consultation	Stage: NQF approved, implementation started	Stage: Advanced implementation, reviewed / in review	Aligned to SADCQF
Union of Comoros Democratic Republic of Congo	Angola Madagascar Malawi Mozambique	Eswatini Lesotho Zimbabwe	Botswana Mauritius Namibia Seychelles	Seychelles South Africa Mauritius (report approved at TCCA)

	Tanzania (information to be confirmed)		South Africa Zambia	meeting on 29/04/2022..
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Source: *ACQF Mapping study reports, ACQF Feasibility report*

Qualifications

TVET and higher education qualifications in the region need to be reviewed, mapped out and aligned to the priorities set out in the SADC Industrialisation Strategy and Road Map, and new important developments such as the digital and green transformation of the economy, new jobs and skills. The TCCA meetings in 2016, and the research on SADCQF level descriptors (SADC, 2017c) acknowledged that TVET qualifications have been given lesser attention in the activities of SADCQF.

Such a project can be planned in cooperation with the ACQF and international partners, as the mapping and comparison of qualifications in the region is a demanding undertaking, requiring a technically sound methodology and capacity. The buy-in of the national qualifications authorities and ministries would be essential for such an undertaking.

Alignment

The initial experience of three countries (South Africa, Seychelles, and Mauritius) is rich in lessons that need to be harvested, discussed, and systematised. This study undertook a review of the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of the current alignment approach and criteria, with recommendations on the way forward. The remaining thirteen countries and the region can gain from such a review and recommendations, which would require from the mentioned countries the allocation of time and staff for meetings with the Study Team.

The observations collected from the countries indicate a concern with the high degree of complexity of the alignment approach and process, which translates into an excessively high workload for the National Alignment Committee, especially the lead authority.

Recommendations:

1. Alignment to SADCQF needs rethinking, addressing both strategic and organisational issues.
 - a. Strategic rethinking: explore the possibility to adopt a “referencing” approach. Referencing has wider international currency than “alignment” and contributes to system improvement purposes, e.g.: enhanced transparency (on similarities and differences), mutual trust (based on mutual understanding between countries and between national institutions) and cooperation (information-sharing on qualifications through efficient and open platforms).
 - b. Operational rethinking: explore and adopt streamlined criteria and procedures; foster a better balance between pre-defined and flexible methods which are adaptable to national contexts; encourage visibility and communication on the benefits and milestones of the process; reduce lengthy bureaucratic processes and hurdles in favour of more peer learning which enables mutual trust, without losing comparability with other RQFs in Africa and beyond.

Streamlining of the SADC alignment/referencing criteria and process can consider the proposed approach for ACQF referencing, and be discussed with the TCCA, allowing the countries ready to align in 2022-2023 to test the streamlined procedures. Lessons from two of the aligned countries show that principles and procedures applied in the first wave of alignment can be revised and redesigned successfully.

Support countries in undertaking the reviewed alignment/referencing activities on operational level through information-sharing, useful guidance, clear and efficient processes oriented to trust building (rather than control), and the required degree of technical assistance.

c. Follow-up upon conclusion of the alignment/referencing to the SADCQF:

The completion of the alignment/referencing report and its acceptance by the community of countries is not the end of the process. Follow-up actions are as important as the proper alignment/referencing process. Key aspects to be considered, and requiring dialogue and decisions at TCCA/EXCO TCCA, include:

- Visibility and communication on the alignment/referencing report
- Planning of countries' roadmaps – steps and actions at national level to address the issues identified in the process and elaborated in the report. Consider support options for countries implementing the roadmap, as adequate.
- Use of SADCQF levels on new qualifications documents (and databases of national qualifications) – in parallel with national levels. Discuss and propose modalities of implementation on national level.

2. Alignment/referencing is not a tool for the recognition of qualifications but contributes significantly to the efficiency and transparency of recognition, via open information-sharing on the qualifications related systems that compose the qualifications framework and panorama.

In this context, the SADC Secretariat and TCCA can seize the opportunity to rethink the scope and role of alignment/referencing and connect it with other policies and initiatives being implemented and supported by the SADC in the context of skills, qualifications, employability, mobility, and innovation.

- The Labour Migration policy area is one such domain with a high synergy potential.
- Another regional initiative with such potentialities includes the SADC University of Transformation, notably the possible development of common profiles (standards) of emerging occupations and new qualifications.

3. Development of a unified information and guidance package on the policy, technical and QA aspects of the alignment/referencing process is relevant, to assist the member states with their self-guided alignment/referencing processes fitting the national contexts. Such a methodological tool can be digitalised and has the potential to contribute to improve the pace, acceptance, transparency, sustainability, and impact of the overall SADCQF alignment/referencing programme.

4. Documentation, knowledge management and effective dissemination of the lessons learned, as gathered through dialogue and peer exchanges and/or opinions and recommendations of international experts, are fundamental for the region and the countries. Knowledge circulation and sharing of good practices contribute to quicker advances and progress in the national processes of NQF development process, consolidation, and review. Experiences and lessons learned during the SADCQF alignment project have the advantage to be better contextualised and fit for utilisation by SADC member states.

5. Peer learning and peer review approach: in connection with simplification and support to alignment processes, the TCCA could develop and test a peer learning and review methodology to boost experience-sharing, dialogue, capacity building and critical thinking among the member states on matters related to their NQFs and alignment/referencing.

E. New demands – new developments

The recommendations concern three main areas:

1. Digitalisation of the management of credentials and qualifications
2. Micro-credentials
3. Common profiles of qualifications for the region

1. Digitalisation of qualifications

At national level:

- Online databases/registers of national qualifications: each NQF should ensure public access to well-structured and updated information on all national qualifications and credentials in the country. Searchable databases providing a minimum of analytics are essential to support individuals' study choices, skills development, and career progression.
- Databases of credentials and qualifications should be interoperable with other relevant databases, such as on recognition of qualifications, career guidance networks, and labour market demand and mismatch analysis (job vacancies, analytics on emerging jobs and skills, skills shortages and gaps, graduate tracking studies).
- Developments at national level can be coordinated between the member countries, for instance through the compilation of a set of common technical specifications for online qualifications registers, and common guidelines contributing to comparable approaches and solutions.

At regional (SADC) level:

- Interoperability of national databases/registers of qualifications – within SADC and with other RQFs, especially with the planned Qualifications Platform of the ACQF.
- Agreement and introduction of common elements for data fields for the electronic publication of information on qualifications in NQFs of SADC countries.

2. Micro-credentials

SADC in cooperation with the ACQF, other RQFs, education QA agencies and relevant stakeholders in Africa could seize the opportunity to engage in a process developing a common African concept and guideline on micro-credentials.

This process could build on experiences of other similar initiatives of regional/international scope, such as the ongoing development of a [European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong-learning and employability](#) and the UNESCO-led initiative '[Towards a common definition of micro-credentials](#)'.

3. Common profiles of qualifications for the region

One of the explicit purposes of SADCQF is to 'create SADC regional standards where appropriate'. Progress has been very limited regarding this purpose.

The rapid pace of transformation of work, technologies, and skills requires agile lifelong learning policies and offerings adaptable to different needs. Development and adoption of common standards for occupations and profiles of qualifications hold promise, as the region engages with large common initiatives like the University of Transformation, as well as challenging issues such as the green transformation and its skills requirements.

- Common profiles of occupations and common elements in qualifications profiles are complementary to national standards and qualifications approved and managed by the national institutions.
- Common profiles are common elements/components, conceived and designed in a participative manner following a common methodological approach.
- The identification of needs should take account of already agreed priority sectors and fields (e.g. University of Technology), and an updated mapping of needs in high priority sectors, to achieve technological and employment development, and ultimately economic growth.
- Common profiles can be managed and disseminated with the aid of a common database of standards and qualifications of SADCQF.

F. Dissemination and application of SADCQF handbooks and guidelines

SADC is developing a series of manuals and guidelines covering the main policy and technical areas of the SADCQF. This is a high-value-added undertaking for the region, with the potential to contribute to common practices, and to shorten the national development processes of similar instruments. Because the regional approach considers national specificities and contexts, it provides a framework for regional harmonisation and for quicker development of the relevant measures and tools at country level.

The set of manuals and guidelines related to SADCQF implementation programmes includes:

Manual – Guideline	Status of adoption
RPL Guidelines	Adopted (TCCA meeting 09/2016)
CATS Manual	Adopted
Recognition Manual	Discussed and ready for approval
Articulation Guidelines	Pending (TCCA meeting report 20/10/2020)

Given the importance of these policy instruments, it is recommended that the TCCA/Secretariat agree on a structured and systematic approach for dissemination and use by the member states. It is not enough to publish the manuals and guidelines in different formats (paper, digital, on websites). Informing all relevant public institutions and interested stakeholders should follow. Inclusion of these guidelines and manuals in the set of reference national policy instruments can be supported by the TCCA, using cases of good practice, peer exchanges and feedback from the countries. Testing of the manuals and guidelines can be planned with the interested countries and undertaken with technical support of the Secretariat and cooperation with partners.

G. Capacity development

The survey and interviews clearly showed there is an urgent need for well organised information-sharing and capacity development supporting the various strands and programmes of SADCQF. The training and information sharing need to address the unique needs of each target group and SADCQF programme, which will require diversified, adapted and fit-for-purpose responses.

Capacity development activities can be conceived and delivered through a combination of modalities, including virtual and hybrid; guided and self-learning; cross-country and country focused. Partnerships with other RQFs, with ACQF and international organisations could be beneficial and could contribute to knowledge circulation, deduplication, and efficiency.

Target groups:

- Secretariat and TCCA members**

Staff turnover in the represented institutions result in the changing of representatives/delegates in the TCCA. Due to competing priorities, the effective, timely and comprehensive transmission of information on past and present TCCA activities during handover is not always guaranteed, which again has a negative impact on the relay of information at national level. It is therefore imperative that the SADC Secretariat and TCCA assure accessible and well organised information for newcomers in the TCCA, allowing them to be well introduced to the policy and technical framework of SADCQF and preparing them to contribute to debate and disseminate TCCA decisions and programmes at national level.

The proposed SADCQF Handbook can serve this purpose, complemented by accessible archives of minutes, reports and annual reports of the TCCA meetings and Ministers' meetings.

TCCA members represent the national institutions with a close relationship with NQFs and QA. Nonetheless, all new TCCA members should be offered an introduction package on themes, concepts and practices related to the five SADCQF programmes, and on NQFs in general terms.

b) Member states institutions, partners, experts, teachers, and students

The status of NQF development varies across the region, with some countries having two decades of experience in NQF implementation, while others have just completed or are still completing development or approval processes. And there is a group at the early thinking stage, starting the first steps towards the design of their NQF. In many cases these developments count on support from international cooperation projects for technical assistance of different scales.

The SADCQF capacity development programme should address the skills and training needs of policy officials from government bodies, middle management and implementation officials in various relevant agencies and departments, as well as representatives from teacher training institutions, from civil society and social partners involved in NQF governance at different levels.

Capacity development activities should be flexible and customised to the extent possible, taking account of target group features and training needs. Peer learning, peer visits, case studies, reviews and practical application in joint projects nowadays are easier to organise and sustain given the new context of learning, strongly building on digital and hybrid modalities of learning and communicating. Training must be easily accessible, modular and the outcomes can eventually be certified (as small credentials).

Summarising:

1. Establishment of a regional Academy for capacity building of personnel and senior managers in the domain of qualifications and qualifications frameworks.
2. A multi-faceted programme for supporting countries with the development and review of their NQF as well as alignment to the SADCQF. The programme should be developed according to the grouping of countries according to their needs. Qualification expert teams from the region should be trained to directly assist and work with in-country teams as necessary. The Programme should be guided by a biennial mapping exercise of the status NQFs with clusters grouping of countries for support.
3. Cooperation with the ACQF project. Cooperation can be strategically geared to support the SADCQF NQF development and alignment programme as well as capacity development. The creation of a pool of SADC facilitators and coaches with knowledge on the key topics of the domain of NQFs and RQFs is recommended. Secondly, the sharing of resources and funding between the SADCQF and the ACQF projects is further recommended. ACQF is developing a collection of Guidelines and Training Modules on 10 fundamental themes and is already publishing on the [ACQF website](#) a wide range of video training materials on NQFs, QA, Recognition, and micro-credentials.

4. Engaging in SADC Secretariat/TCCA partnerships with education and training institutions, notably teacher training colleges and faculties, to disseminate information and raise awareness on the SADCQF.

H. Interplay between SADCQF and ACQF

The SADC is part of the wider continental and global communities, and it is one of the key building blocks of integration at continental level. The SADCQ should endeavour that all strategies, policies, programmes, and activities are implemented with a view to contributing towards the continental ideals espoused in the AU's Agenda 2063.

There were different views on the expectations of SADCQF and ACQF. One view reflects the need for countries to first understand challenges in their qualifications space before participation in the ACQF, and therefore there should be a clear understanding of the link between the SADCQF ACQF. The other view is for the ACQF to be an umbrella framework for all the RQFs in Africa to ensure that qualifications are properly managed, regulated and recognised to enable mutual recognition and a good standard of qualifications management.

In addition, if there are commonalities in the major architecture and features of the frameworks, this will ensure cohesion and alignment of the two frameworks to enable both to function in a synchronised manner. The ACQF should not be a document that will not be used, instead, it should facilitate knowledge of qualifications throughout the continent and contribute towards achieving one common goal of integrated QFs in Africa: to produce people who are versatile, adaptive, and resilient.

The ACQF process should lead in building capacity, skills, and knowledge of technology. It must clarify its role and purpose and its linkages with other African initiatives, such as the Addis Convention, African Verification Network (AQVN) and the Continental Quality Assurance Body (AFRICAN). In addition, establishing of sharing platforms could facilitate peer learning, accessibility of information, information sharing, and knowledge management in all regions. The development of a strategy and procedures for continuous engagement and reporting is suggested.

With respect to SADCQF, in the ACQF process there should be recognition of its implementation and the alignment of member states' NQFs with the SADCQF. Finally, the SADCQF should be referenced to the ACQF.

Synergies and complementarities between the SADCQF and ACQF are already a reality at the moment of writing this report and can be enhanced through joint activities and projects, such as facilitating a common language and guidelines on micro-credentials for Africa, common profiles for qualifications for new jobs requiring new skills (such as for the green and digital transition), and a common continental qualifications platform benefitting countries, regions and the continent as a whole.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Research questions of this study

Main issues and questions to be addressed by the Study SADCQF (indicative questions to be reviewed and defined in the inception report)

1. Cluster 1: state-of-play of SADCQF implementation

- Legal and regulatory base of the SADCQF: Are the texts and instruments composing and defining the SADCQF clear, sufficiently elaborated and communicated to the member states? What is the actual legal status of the texts and guidelines underpinning the SADCQF? How are these texts enforced?
- Conceptual-technical design of the SADCQF (principles, level structure, level descriptors, quality assurance guidelines): Is it fit-for-purpose, accepted and supportive to countries and regional objectives? What are the main gaps, issues and areas for further improvement?
- Benefits of the SADCQF: How are the benefits of the SADCQF formulated, communicated, and received/understood by the different member countries? What are the main problems and issues related with the “benefits of SADCQF”? How can these issues be solved, addressed?
- Support to countries: To what extent can countries benefit from SADC’s support to develop, consolidate and implement their NQFs and align to the SADCQF? What does this support include? Examples, cases of good practice.
- Participation and engagement:
 - Which institutions and stakeholders’ groups are informed about SADCQF, how do they participate and what do they expect from SADCQF?
 - Participation and engagement of the member countries in SADCQF processes, information-sharing, policy orientation and technical developments: State-of-play, issues and concerns
- Main lessons learned from the first three pilot cases of alignment of NQFs to SADCQF (South Africa, Seychelles, Mauritius). Are the alignment criteria and processes clear, robust, streamlined and feasible? How are the lessons systematised and shared with all countries? Where are the alignment reports published and how are they disseminated?
- Other countries of the pilot group for alignment: State of preparedness to engage in the process; hindering factors; expectations from these countries.
- The six implementation programmes of SADCQF: what are the main strengths, weaknesses, achievements/good practice models)? What further benefits are expected from these programmes? Is this implementation strategy fit-for-purpose in the coming years, and what must be adjusted/revised?
- Use of SADCQF levels: State-of-play, issues, way forward regarding the use/application of SADCQF levels on qualifications and qualifications databases of member countries that have successfully aligned to SADCQF?
- Monitoring, tracking and evaluation mechanisms and tools: State-of-play; main issues; positive aspects/solutions in the given context; what needs to be improved/revised, and how?
- Resources (human, technical, financial) allocated to SADCQF implementation: Is the situation likely to be improved going forward? What can be done to increase funding to relevant areas of work?
- What is missing in the implementation setting and tools of SADCQF?
- How can the findings and recommendations of the study be used to finetune, improve, advance or revise the SADCQF (and its implementation modalities, instruments, capacities)?

- Way forward: Focus areas of work of TCCA and Secretariat in the next 1-4 years?
For example: enhance the policy and technical robustness and fitness-for-purpose of the SADCQF; technical support to countries; communication; website and instruments; databases; monitoring mechanisms; analytical work and targeted research; use of SADCQF levels on qualifications.

2. Cluster 2: adaptation of SADCQF to new demands

- Which important drivers of change (e.g. technology, digitalisation and automation, ecology and climate change) and socio-economic issues (e.g. human and economic development, employment, inclusion and equity, culture, migration) at national and regional levels are impacting learning, skills, qualifications systems and frameworks?
- How are countries and the region dealing with those issues and needs for adaptation?
- Which aspects of the SADCQF need revisiting, improvement, or substantive revision (reconstruction) to respond and stay relevant and fit-for-purpose in the context of transformation of learning, skills needed, qualifications, technology, greening, industrial revolution (4th and 5th)?
- How can this adaptation of SADCQF – to become more “future-ready” – be conceived, planned, taken forward?
- Inputs and commitments from member countries into this process: what are the essential elements, and how can they be incorporated? And from SACD Secretariat?
- What are the expectations of SADCQF from the ACQF process and further implementation?

Annex 2: Level descriptors of SADCQF

Level	Knowledge	Skills	Autonomy and responsibility
10	Makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge in the field of study through research and scholarship.	Conducts original research which is evaluated by independent experts against international standards. Demonstrates problem solving ability and critical evaluation of research findings for academic discussion.	Demonstrates full responsibility and accountability for all aspects of advanced research work.
9	Demonstrates mastery in theoretically sophisticated subject matter, showing critical awareness of current problems and new insights at the forefront of the discipline area.	Conducts original research deploying appropriate research methods and processes primary and secondary source information using rigorous intellectual analysis and independent thinking and applies knowledge in new situations; and demonstrates independent thinking, problem solving, critical evaluation of research findings and ability to make judgements based on knowledge and evidence.	Shows independence, initiative and originality and the ability to manage own and group outcomes in complex and unpredictable situations.
8	Demonstrates critical understanding of the principles, theories, methodologies, current research and literature of the discipline.	Demonstrates capacity to use a coherent and critical understanding of the principles, theories and methodologies of a particular discipline. Selects and applies appropriate research methods and techniques, and critical analysis and independent evaluation of information.	Operates within the context of a strategic plan with complete accountability for management of resources and supervision of others.
7	Demonstrates knowledge of a major discipline with possible	Demonstrates intellectual independence, critical thinking and analytical rigor, and	Designs and manages processes and works

	areas of specialisation, including command of the ideas, principles, concepts, chief research methods and problem-solving techniques of the recognised discipline.	advanced communication and collaborative skills in complex and variable contexts.	with broad accountability for determining, achieving and evaluating personal and group outcomes.
6	Demonstrates specialist knowledge in more than one area and ability to collate, analyse and synthesise a wide range of technical information.	Demonstrate ability to apply specialist knowledge and skills in highly variable contexts and formulate responses to concrete and abstract problems.	Manages processes and works with complete accountability for personal and group outcomes.
5	Demonstrates a broad knowledge base with substantial depth in some areas, ability to analyse information and construct a coherent argument.	Applies a wide range of technical and/or scholastic skills in variable contexts using standard and non- standard procedures, often in combination.	Works independently under broad guidance and can take some responsibility for supervising the work of others and group outcomes.
4	Demonstrates a broad knowledge base, incorporating some abstract and technical concepts, and ability to analyse information and make informed judgements.	Applies a moderate range of technical and/or scholastic skills which are transferable in familiar and unfamiliar contexts, using routine and non- routine procedures.	Shows ability for self-direction, requiring little supervision, and complete responsibility for own outcomes and some responsibility for group outcomes.
3	Demonstrates basic operational and theoretical knowledge and ability to interpret information.	Demonstrates a range of well- developed skills and ability to apply known solutions to familiar problems.	Works under general supervision with some responsibility for quality and quantity of output.
2	Demonstrates recall and a narrow range of knowledge and cognitive skills.	Can carry out processes that are limited in range, repetitive and familiar.	Applied in directed activity under close supervision.
1	Demonstrates basic general knowledge and numeracy and literacy for everyday purposes.	Can follow simple instructions and perform actions required to carry out simple concrete tasks requiring no special skills.	Works under close supervision in familiar situations and structured contexts.

Annex 3: SADCQF level descriptors: issues - summary of responses (survey and interviews)

Challenges	Gaps
Poor understanding on what is present or absent at each level leading to level descriptors being open to misinterpretation	No definitions of the domains or an indication of how each domain is organised into sub-domains whether implicit or explicit, and no underpinning principles for domains
Lack of clarity regarding the competency differences distinguishing the level descriptors for post graduate diplomas from those of master's degrees	Non-certified qualifications and competencies not captured
Lack of progression in the level descriptors to explicitly reflect the progression in complexity of learning from level to level	Disaggregation of level descriptors within level 8 to cater for different disciplines/fields

Outdated descriptors not reflecting global changes and new developments, a lack of skills required for future work environments	No proper alignment and harmonisation of occupational standards and descriptors for all levels
Very generic, with no clear distinctions between qualifications falling under the same band but in different sectors/fields	Inadequate explanation of level descriptors at Level 6 and 7 of SADCQF.
Too simple level descriptors (in terms of degree of complexity for the lower level qualifications)	
Poor alignment of level descriptors of the SADCQF with existing NQFs and institutional level descriptors	

Annex 4: SWOT Analysis

The analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges related to the internal and external environment of the SADCQF is derived from the documentary review and views and recommendations gathered via the survey and interviews with EXCO members and other experts.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Commitment and ownership by SADC member states.	Absence of a Qualification Management Portal or Website at the SADC Secretariat.
Existence of legal and strategic instrument and framework.	Slow implementation due to poor uptake of activities.
Member states' technical leading and championship.	Inadequate thematic and intersectoral platforms for collaboration among member states on key programmes of the SADCQF implementation.
Regular monitoring by SADC organs' platforms.	Resource constraints - lack of human resources and capacity for driving the SADCQF at regional or national level i.e. dedicated personnel for SADCQF implementation.
Self-financing of programme activities and governance platforms.	Sustainability of initiatives, i.e. electronic communication platforms of SADCQF.
Model for development of NQFs in SADC member states.	Poor dissemination of SADCQF implementation information in member states.
The architecture of the framework compares well with international practice.	No continuous monitoring on the status of development of NQFs in the region.
Clear Implementation Model with six programmes that have implementation tools.	Lacking a futuristic orientation to address the impact of technological advancement and future work expectations.
Existence of Implementation Plan - initially a 2-year plan and currently the 5-year financial implementation strategy (2019) showing the requirements and activities for each of the 6 programmes.	Poor utilisation by member states of the online SADC Monitoring System with SADCQF indicators.
Involvement of all Member States in the Governance.	

Opportunities and challenges

Opportunities	Challenges
Digital Platforms for peer learning networks and peer review/support.	Difficulty in establishing the Implementation Unit to manage the process.
Review and revision of the SADC Protocol on Education and Training.	Insufficient knowledge of the Protocol as legal instrument governing the SADCQF.
Leveraging with the ACQF process for peer learning on the role of RQF qualifications portal management.	Breaks in knowledge management of SADCQF initiatives due to staff turnover in the leadership of certain programmes and in the representation in the TCCA.
Creation of interlinkages and synergies with ongoing work of the Southern African Migration Management (SAMM) Project as part of the implementation of the SADC Labour Migration Plan.	Emerging competing priorities - COVID 19.
Initial cooperation with other continental qualifications frameworks, i.e. EQF.	Prioritisation of implementation of SADCQF in terms of human capacity and budgets at national and regional level.
Existence of Memorandum of Cooperation with International Partners and Organisations complemented by Action Programmes that are in line with SADCQF, i.e. EU, ILO and UNESCO.	Leveraging of the trans-national qualifications framework of small states of the Commonwealth.
	Benchmarking to ongoing review processes by other regional QFs such as EQF, ASEAN QRF and Trans-national QF.
	Possibility of closer cooperation and comparison with EQF.

Annex 5: Databases and registers of qualifications: experiences from Europe, United States, New Zealand, Hong Kong

1. Europe – European Qualifications Framework and qualifications databases

Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and availability of targeted funding from the EU budget (Erasmus+ and other programmes) has contributed to development and operationalisation of NQFs across the 38 involved countries, including qualifications databases accessible online. An overview of progress of EQF implementation is summarised in Table 1:

Annex 5 – Table 1: Main outcomes of EQF implementation (as of February 2022)

Feature	EQF
Region/community	European Union (EU) and other countries with specific status of cooperation 38 countries: 27 EU Member States and 11 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey).
Establishment and legal basis	Council Communication: 2008 Council Recommendation revised in 2017, repealing the Council Recommendation of 2008
Referencing criteria and procedures	10 criteria and procedures

RQF scope and levels	Comprehensive; Inclusive of all sub-sectors and modes of learning (including non-formal and informal). 8 levels Descriptors: knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy
Countries that referenced / aligned NQFs to RQF	36 countries (out of 38) referenced to EQF and these reports are published . 5 countries have updated referencing reports in the period 2019-Feb 2022 (The Netherlands, Latvia, Ireland, France and Italy)
Use of EQF levels by countries	33 (out of 38) use EQF levels on their qualifications' documents (diplomas, certificates, supplements) 23 use EQF levels on their national qualifications databases
Countries with functioning NQFs	37 (out of 38) The large majority have developed and made accessible online digital qualifications databases / registers.

The most recent update on the status of NQF implementation in EQF countries provides information on NQF databases/registers. Table 2 contains the internet links (URLs) to the existing and accessible national qualifications databases/registers. Some EQF countries are not included in the table due to lack of information on the most recent and functioning online register of qualifications.

Annex 5 - Table 2: EQF countries: national qualifications databases / registers

Country / NQF	Database / register of qualifications
Austria	Qualifications Register Connection to Europass in preparation
Belgium (Francophone)	Qualifications register Connected to Europass
Belgium (Flandres)	VKS Database connected to Europass (phase of testing)
Bulgaria	List of TVET qualifications: NAVET
Czech Republic	National Register of Qualifications Connected to Europass 1 448 qualifications
Denmark	UddannelsesGuiden (Education Guide)
Estonia	Qualifications Register-search Connected to Europass 4 279 qualifications
Finland	StudyInfo
France	RNCP – search Connection to Europass in testing phase
Germany	Qualifications Register-search Connected to Europass
Greece	Qualifications Register-search Connected to Europass
Ireland	Irish Register of Qualifications - QQI Connected to Europass
Latvia	Latvian Qualifications Database

	Connected to Europass
Lithuania	AIKOS – register of qualifications Connected to Europass
Hungary	Hungarian Qualifications Framework – register Connected to Europass
Malta	Malta Qualifications Database Connected to Europass 633 qualifications of all levels
Netherlands	NLQF Qualifications Database Connected to Europass
Poland	Integrated Qualifications Register Connected to Europass
Portugal	Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações Connected to Europass 391 qualifications (levels 2-5), 3 702 competence units, 8 536 units of training of short-duration
Slovenia	SQF Register Connected to Europass
Slovakia	SOK Register of qualifications

Other countries have well-developed and functional registers / databases of qualifications and credentials.

2. United States

- [Credential Engine](#) (United States) has a sophisticated technology, and services and analytical capabilities.
 - o [Credential Finder](#): is a tool for exploring all of the information published to the Credential Registry. As of 22/05/2022, the Registry contains 32 980 credentials
 - o [Credential Publisher](#): Publish to the Credential Publisher

3. New Zealand

- The search tool to find qualifications is integrated in the website of NZQA - [New Zealand Qualifications Authority](#).
As an example of the search function accessible for users of the register we found 1 116 qualifications of the type “Diploma” and 1 240 of the type “Certificate” – all levels and subject areas.
- The [register of NZQA-approved Micro-Credentials](#) contains 245 micro-credentials (as of 22/05/2022) at different levels of the NQF (levels 2 to 8).

4. Australia

- Australia: The [TVET database](#) integrates all accredited qualifications and units of competency and the details of all registered providers and their approvals to deliver specific education and training services.

5. Hong Kong

[Qualifications Register](#) (QR).

QR is a centralised online database containing information on quality assured qualifications and their operators and assessment agencies for Recognition of Prior Learning. All qualifications listed on the QR are quality-assured and recognised under the [Qualifications Framework](#). Under the Accreditation of Academic

and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance, the [Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications](#) is specified as the QR Authority.

Annex 6: Micro-credentials: debates and developments towards common understanding

1. Micro-credentials: expansion and need for common understanding

The number and diversity of micro-credential offerings have expanded substantially in recent years, accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Micro-credentials hold promises and challenges.

Existing definitions (from OECD, European Commission, UNESCO, Australian Government) point to key characteristics of micro-credentials:

- Referring to learning over a limited time and/or in a specific area
- May form part of or add to formal qualifications
- Potentially 'stackable' over time, adding to individual learning careers
- Given their limited size and focus, more flexible than traditional qualifications
- Based on assessed learning
- Frequently delivered in a digital form.

2. A country perspective: Australia

The Australian Government (2021) adopted the [National Micro-Credentials Framework](#), which uses the following definition:

A micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning or competency, with a minimum volume of learning of one hour and less than an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) award qualification, that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification.

What can constitute a micro-credential?

- VET skill sets or units of competency.
- Modularised, assessed components of existing higher education curriculum or subjects.
- Industry learning that is assessed (such as vendor certifications, professional learning).
- Other forms of assessed learning or competencies (e.g. Vocational Education/Higher Education /Industry courses not currently accredited by a regulatory authority, and those by other providers).

What does not constitute a micro-credential?

- Unassessed learning or courses, including work-integrated learning without an assessment.
- Badges which are obtained through participation only (i.e. without an assessment).
- Formal qualifications within the AQF and macro-credentials, including diplomas, certificates and master's degrees.

3. Research and debate on micro-credentials are growing

The growing appeal of micro-credentials is visible in the large range of research activities and publications, and policy initiatives addressing micro-credentials from various angles.

Research Observatory on Micro-Credentials

The [Research Observatory on Micro-credentials](#) (ROM) is an initiative of the [National Institute for Digital Learning](#) (NIDL, Ireland) in partnership with the European Consortium of European Universities ([ECIU University](#)). The aim of ROM is to provide a curated and regularly updated collection of major reports, policy initiatives, events and conferences, and research-related publications on the growth of micro-credentials in higher education and lifelong learning more generally.

Interested stakeholders, students, and researchers can access a large number of sources, articles, reports, policy documents, and videos at [Research Observatory on Micro-credentials](#), published since 2016 on the subject.

Annex 6 - Figure 1: Video - Unboxing Micro-Credentials. <https://youtu.be/Yo8BkzF513k>



The NIDL is playing a leading role in helping to shape the rapidly evolving micro-credentialing movement, such as:

- Strategic [partnership](#) with Digitary to support development of micro-credentials using this leading international platform.
- Launch of credit-bearing, stackable [micro-credentials](#) on the FutureLearn platform.
- Leading the development of a new MOOC (massive open online course), "[Higher Education 4.0: Certifying Your Future](#)", on micro-credentials on the FutureLearn platform.

UNESCO

In 2019-2021 UNESCO promoted a global debate towards a common definition of micro-credentials, based on extensive expert consultation, analysis of definitions from 15 countries and literature reviews. The key proposals and underpinning reflection were discussed in September at an international conference (UNESCO, 2021). The author of the report (Oliver, 2021) concludes "When it comes to micro-credentials, micro is the distinguishing feature, but to be accepted and trusted, micro-credentials must be seen to bear the quality hallmarks of credentials".

The related concepts mentioned by Oliver (2021) are useful to clarify the boundaries and intersections of micro-credentials and kin concepts:

- **Credentials** verify, validate, confirm, or corroborate a person's learning achievements, knowledge and preparedness for performing tasks. Credentials are diverse with regard to their scope, status and purpose.
- A large subset of credentials can be referred to as **macro-credentials**: generally, these include degrees, diplomas, certificates, and licences, often awarded by accredited, recognised or regulated educational and other institutions or organisations. They indicate learning achievement of a broad body of knowledge, transferable skills or technical proficiency and may take several years to complete. While some are pursued for personal or general educational advancement, others are associated with qualifying to practice a particular profession or to follow a particular career path.

- Another large **subset of credentials** can be referred to as **micro-credentials**: these are typically focused on a specific set of learning outcomes in a narrow field of learning and achieved over a short time. Micro-credentials are offered by commercial entities, private providers and professional bodies, traditional education and training providers, community organisations and other types of organisations. While many micro-credentials represent the outcomes of more traditional learning experiences, others verify demonstration of achievements acquired elsewhere, such as in the workplace, through volunteering, or through personal interest learning. Micro-credentials are often promoted as an efficient way to upskill workers across the lifespan.

The proposed definition (Oliver, 2021) states that a micro-credential:

- is a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do;
- includes assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider;
- has stand-alone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning; and
- meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.

4. Micro-credentials in vocational education and training

Research on micro-credentials in vocational education and labour market (company) context is less developed than in higher education.

Cedefop initiated a large-scale research strand on [Micro-credentials for Labour Market education and training](#) in Europe. A related international conference on 25 and 26 November 2021 offered a platform for debate, and attracted participants from over 40 countries. This research area addresses:

- The potential role of micro-credentials in vocational and professional education and training, in companies and labour market sectors.
- Learning more about the characteristics of micro-credentials, their added value to individual learners, employees, and employers, as well as their impact on existing qualifications and recognition systems.
- Understand whether we are observing a revolution in the way learning is being valued or whether micro-credentials are just a new name for something that existed all along.

Key findings of the first study of this research point to

- Uncertainty linked to the naming and function of micro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials emerging mostly in areas such as ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction, but also in sectors such as hospitality, human health, and social work.
- Clear benefits of micro-credentials with regards to the flexibility and responsiveness to labour market needs.
- The need for a wider awareness of micro-credentials.
- QA of micro-credentials is one of the most important aspects. However, QA processes differ and not all micro-credentials are quality assured based on the nationally established quality standards.

The study mentions a trade-off between flexibility and regulation: “Micro-credentials are evidence of practical, flexible, on-demand, and short learning experiences. This is what makes them so attractive. Common European standards must preserve this attractiveness and not limit it through over-regulation and -formalization. It is thus central to find an appropriate balance between fostering trust and

transparency as part of a common approach without compromising the flexibility of micro-credentials” (Cedefop, 2021b).

5. Improving lifelong learning and employability in the European Union: towards a common approach to Micro-credentials

The EU is working to enhance lifelong learning. In this context the European Commission adopted in December 2021 two proposals: a) on micro-credentials; on b) on individual learning accounts. These proposals were announced in the [Skills Agenda](#) and in the [European Education Area Communication](#) of 2020. They will help tackle challenges related with upskilling and reskilling of the population, by opening up more opportunities for people to find learning offers, and employment opportunities. EU member states set a target of 60% of adults taking part in training by 2030.

For more information and access to the policy proposals (Council Recommendations) visit the [website](#), view the [infographic](#), and read the [Brochure](#).

Micro-credentials

Definition given by the proposal to a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability:

‘Micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.’

The European approach to micro-credentials is a key flagship to achieve a [European Education Area by 2025](#). They can be part of the learning offer included in individual learning accounts. This proposal of a Council Recommendation seeks to make micro-credentials work across institutions, businesses, sectors, and borders.

- The European approach to micro-credentials aims at providing a clear definition and European standards, allow for the learning outcomes of these small experiences to be easily recognised and understood by employers, learners and education and training institutions, as well as guiding principles to consider when designing or issuing high-quality micro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable.
- They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials.
- They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

Objectives of a European approach to micro-credentials:

- Enable individuals to acquire, update and improve the knowledge, skills and competences they need to thrive in an evolving labour market and society, to benefit fully from a socially fair recovery and just transitions to the green and digital economy and to be better equipped to deal with current and future challenges.
- Support the preparedness of providers of micro-credentials to enhance the quality, transparency, accessibility and flexibility of the learning offering in order to empower individuals to forge personalised learning and career pathways.

- Foster inclusiveness, access and equal opportunities and contributing to the achievement of resilience, social fairness and prosperity for all, in a context of demographic and societal changes and throughout all phases of economic cycles.
- EU Member States are recommended to use micro-credentials, where appropriate, as a tool to strengthen and complement existing learning opportunities, increase participation in lifelong learning

Principles to be considered

When designing and issuing micro-credentials some principles are recommended. They highlight the key characteristics of the European approach to micro-credentials. They are universal and may be applied in any area or sector.

1. Quality
Micro-credentials are subject to internal and external QA by the system producing them (e.g., the education, training, or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). QA processes must be fit-for-purpose, be clearly documented, accessible, and meet the needs of learners and stakeholders.
2. Transparency
Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable, and understandable with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.
3. Relevance
Micro-credentials should be designed as distinct, targeted learning achievements, and learning opportunities leading to them are updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs
4. Valid assessment
Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards
5. Learning pathways:
Micro-credentials are designed to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to stack, validate, and recognise micro-credentials from across different systems.
6. Recognition
Recognition has a clear signalling value of learning outcomes and paves the way for a wider offer of such small learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU. Micro-credentials are recognised for academic or employment purposes, based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad, when dealing with micro-credentials issued by formal education providers
7. Portability
Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g Europass), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. The infrastructure for storing data is based on open standards and data models. This ensures interoperability and seamless exchange of data and allows for smooth checks of data authenticity.
8. Learner-centred
Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in the internal and external quality assurance processes and their feedback is taken into account as part of the continuous improvement of the micro-credential.
9. Authentic
Micro-credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder

(learner), the legal identity of the issuer, and the date and location of issuance of the micro-credential.

10. Information and guidance

Information and advice on micro-credentials should be incorporated in lifelong learning guidance services and should reach the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, supporting education, training, and career choices.

Suggested critical information elements that any micro-credential should provide:

- Mandatory elements: learner identification, title of the micro-credential, country of the issuer, awarding body, date of issuing, learning outcomes, notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes, level of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable; type of assessment; form of participation in the learning activity; type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential.

The proposal also introduces recommendations on micro-credentials in education and training and in labour markets policies. This should enable people to learn new or additional skills in a tailored way, inclusive for all.

6. Sources on micro-credentials

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