

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

In 2003 the Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET) established the Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF), which sets out an integrated system of levels common to academic and vocational qualifications. The Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL 2010a, 2010b) has recently made efforts to reform the KQF through the development of National Competency Standards (NCS) and the introduction of qualifications grounded in learning outcomes. These new measures are designed to strengthen links between industry, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and the qualifications system, helping to raise the status and significance of TVET (Seung II Na, 2012).

1. CHALLENGES THE NQF WOULD NEED TO ADDRESS

One of the challenges the KQF seeks to address is the significant imbalance between vocational and academic qualifications in terms of student numbers. The primary reason for this imbalance is that Korean society places a very high value on academic qualifications, which the Korean education system separates sharply from vocational qualifications. Vocational education is considered a second-class option in the Republic of Korea (Seung II Na, 2012).

Nevertheless, despite such a highly educated youth population, the country is facing several challenges: (1) it has one of the highest youth unemployment rates among the OECD member states (Park, 2011); (2) the schism between the labour market and higher education creates societal instability; (3) the links between industry and higher education sector is weak in terms of the level of workforce training (Woo, 2010); (4) the skills mismatch ironically forces young people to seek more education, while employers have to invest more in on-the-job training for new recruits; (4) academic degrees are currently not linked to the national qualifications standards; (5) the academic learning culture of higher education does not promote the full appreciation and value of recognising non-formal and informal outcomes through the assessment of prior learning.

A further challenge relates to the nature of the TVET System in the country. Since TVET has traditionally focused on the high school level, post-secondary TVET and lifelong learning have been neglected in TVET policies. As the country enters a knowledge-based economy and skills requirements continue to rise, TVET in schools as well as in post-secondary and higher education institutions need to properly respond to the change.

The government is taking a number of measures to dispel the negative perception of TVET and to improve its quality. Firstly, it is trying to open pathways to higher education for vocational education graduates. Vocational High School students are being given the option of taking academic subjects so that they can later apply for admission to universities. In some schools, academic and vocational students share as much as 75 per cent of a common curriculum. Secondly, a new type of high school, modelled on the German dual education system and known as a Meister¹ High School, was launched in 2008 to provide education geared towards industrial and business demands (Seung II Na, 2012).

¹ The German term for master craftsman.

A further concern, however, is the variety of the vocational qualifications system in terms of types of vocational qualifications, awarding authorities, and certification procedures (KRIVET, 2001). There are three major types of qualifications in South Korea: (1) National Technical Qualifications (NTO) focusing on manufacturing, services and business; (2) National Qualifications of Non-Technical Categories (NQNTC) including 120 vocations, such as lawyer, accountant and patent expert; and (3) private qualifications (PQ) including areas such as computers, language skills, sports and health, leisure and recreation activities, social welfare, counselling and civil engineering (Framework Act on Qualifications, 2011).

The lack of coherence among the vocational qualifications continues since they are issued by various government authorities. Furthermore, the criteria for the vocational qualifications are too complicated and disconnected to allow comparisons with each other. Additionally, it is difficult to grasp exactly how qualifications cope with a certain demand from an industry. Finally there is a lack of incentive to further competence through acquiring a qualification.

In response to the above lack of coherence, the quality, relevance and credibility of qualifications became an issue. Since 2002, the country began to introduce a competency-based approach in its curricula and methods of teaching as well as develop occupational standards. This was also in response to the criticism leveled at TVET in 1990s that it was not reflecting skill requirements of a new economy.

Quality is not the only issue in the education and training system. Demographic challenges such as low birth rate are calling for accessibility to higher education and VET for as many learners as possible, particularly for adult learners.

2. MAIN POLICY OBJECTIVES

The aims of the KQF and NCS are:

- to improve coordination among ministries responsible for TVET policy;
- to align TVET qualifications obtained in high schools and junior colleges with national technical qualifications and underlying standards (OECD, 2009, p. 1);
- to strengthen TVET beyond its present theoretical orientation and make it more practical and outcomes-based, so that it delivers the kind of human resources employers say they need;
- to build ladders of occupational and educational progression, so that dental mechanics can become dentists and legal and accounting clerks can become lawyers and accountants (Jeong-Yoon, 2012);
- to make learning and assessment activities more like real work and less like school;
- to strengthen the competitiveness of companies and the nation by recognizing informal learning;
- to link the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning to technical and vocational qualifications (Jeong-Yoon, 2012);
- to raise the perceived value of informal and non-formal learning by improving their quality with reference to the criteria and standards in the KQF and NCS.

3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

The KQF was initiated by the Ministry of Education in consultation with other departments including the Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL) and the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

The Republic of Korea has been developing an articulation system between its traditional higher education system and vocational training and qualifications systems such as the Korean Skills Standards (KSS), the National Occupation System (NOS) and the Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF). NOS has been developed and operated by MOEL and the KSS by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

KSS and NOS were integrated into the NCS in December 2010 by the Office for Policy Coordination. These efforts are designed to link various VET systems and vocational qualifications systems and to enhance the development of the competence-based VET system. Furthermore the purpose of the merger was to reinforce an overall coordinating function and to conduct effective qualifications-related policy.

Now MOEL and its affiliates are responsible for operating the NCS (KRIVET, 2009). MOEL is responsible for refining vocational qualifications, and improving the practicability of vocational certificates and upgrading the system for producing work-oriented tests. MOEL also oversees the application of NCS in the labour market (KRIVET, 2009).

However, work to develop the NCS is implemented mainly by Human Resource Development Council(HRDC), which must then be approved by the Korean government, with research being conducted by KRIVET. Nine government ministries are responsible for the development of NCS in 20 industry categories, including agriculture and forestry, textiles, chemicals, machinery, electronics, environment, financial services, healthcare, culture, tourism, food processing and human services. Sector Councils (SC) help improve connections between education and training and industry, whilst the Ministry of Education harmonizes qualifications across the different sectors in consultation with the various stakeholders. Between 2002 and 2012, standards were developed for 85 fields and 331 jobs. In future standards are to be developed for 212 fields and 826 jobs.

The distinction between 'fields' and 'jobs' is important to understand. For example, the medical field has four subdivisions (here, 'jobs') in the Korean NCS: clinical medicine, nursing, basic medicine and medical specialisms that support clinical medicine such as clinical pathology and image medical sciences. It is expected that these standards will be widely used to structure TVET curriculum development.

4. LEVELS AND DESCRIPTORS AND THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Korea Qualifications Framework comprises the national competence-based standards (NCS). NCS is a concept which identifies and standardizes competences which are required for job performance. It is a comprehensive concept including ability such as knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to perform a job, and assessment of the ability. The NCS has been developed using the following procedures:

- development of comprehensive plan
- analysis of vocational structure and job,
- designing competence units
- standardisation of competences and levels,
- evaluation of basic competences,
- allocation of codes.
- and verification of vocational standards

The NCS serves as a channel for responding to the demands of industries and for reforming the curriculum of secondary schooling, colleges and educational delivery system. This competence-based system in particular focuses on problem-solving, communicating, relationship management and teamwork.

5. PROGRESSION PATHWAYS AND RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Korea's mechanisms for the recognition and accreditation of prior and/or non-formal learning have developed in tandem with KQF and NCS. Efforts are being undertaken to re-organise the national qualifications system in such a way as to allow learners to accumulate credits towards a qualification and a college degree via the Academic Credit Bank System.

About 500 education and training institutions participate in the ACBS. The Ministry of Education develops the basic accreditation plan and issues final approval by sending a certificate of accreditation to each institution, whilst NILE implements the plan, screens the documents and develops a final evaluation report for the Ministry of Education (Baik, 2013). The ACBS documents and recognizes outcomes from various non-formal learning activities by granting credits and conferring degrees when certain numbers of credits are accumulated. At present, six sources of credits are recognized by the ACBS:

- credits transferred from formal higher education institutions;
- credits obtained by taking part-time courses at formal higher education institutions;
- credits transferred by from non-formal education and training courses accredited by NILE;
- credits recognized for 'important intangible cultural properties' (the ACBS accredits master and apprenticeship programmes in the context of artistic activities regarded as traditional and cultural heritage);
- credits recognized for national vocational qualifications (above the level of industrial technician);
- credits transferred from the Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (BDES) (This system makes it possible to obtain an academic degree without attending a regular college or university by passing an examination conducted by NILE).

Of these six recognized sources of credits, the first two refer to universities. These credits are mostly accepted for an academic degree regardless of when they were awarded. Most ACBS accreditation, however, concerns non-formal education and training institutions. The number of credits obtained by acquiring national skills qualifications or by passing examinations depends on the level of difficulty of the exam.

The work of the ACBS is supplemented by the Lifelong Learning Account System (LLAS), a system designed to validate all types of learning by promoting the recognition and certification of both academic and vocational qualifications. The LLAS allows individuals to accumulate lifelong learning experiences and to 'invest' these experiences in moving up the career ladder.

6. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The Republic of Korea seeks to align its own qualifications framework with those under development in other countries of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) in order to allow for mutual recognition of qualifications across the region, thus enhancing educational and labour mobility.

7. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The KQF and the NCS still need to be better understood across the full range of agencies and sector authorities involved in education, training and employment. Universities in particular tend to guard their autonomy and only accept frameworks that reflect their existing practices. This attitude needs to change if the KQF and NCS are to bring about its full intended benefits.

In the future links to the KQF and NCS will make the ACBS and LLAS more reliable and convenient, not only for learners but also for employers and educators (Baik, 2013). ACBS could play a role in facilitating an NCS-based curriculum across the education and training institutions accredited by the ACBS. Credits from NCS-based education and training programmes might be a new way to link ACBS and TVET and in doing so, the ACBS might gain more leverage concerning the traditional HE and other systems.

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