MAURITIUS

Developed following the enactment of the Mauritius Qualifications Authority Act of 2001, the Mauritius Qualifications Framework (MQF) aims to give new impetus to the education and training landscape in Mauritius. The MQF belongs to the second generation of qualifications frameworks, together with countries such as Singapore, Mexico, Namibia and Malaysia (among the first generation countries are England, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Ireland). While forged within the Mauritian context, the MQF was significantly influenced by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework, and the South African National Qualifications Framework (Allgoo, 2011, p. 58).

1. CHALLENGES THE NQF WOULD NEED TO ADDRESS

One of the most significant challenges currently facing Mauritius is the need to make education and qualifications more relevant to the world of work. In order to do this, it is necessary to raise the status of vocational training. According to Dr Kaylash Allgoo, Director of the Mauritius Qualifications Authority, if problems like the skills crisis, unemployment and lack of social mobility in Mauritius are to be solved, it is vital to change the perception that vocational qualifications are for people of lesser intelligence (Allgoo, 2013).

A further problem concerns the certification system in Mauritius, which until now has been disorganized and fragmented. Prior to the introduction of the MQF, there were a large number of education and training providers offering a huge variety of courses. There was no standardization as to subject area, level, duration, or quality. The certificates offered by these providers often contained no information about the outcomes of learning achieved as a result of course attendance. As a result, the career pathways available to qualification holders were limited, many being hampered in addition by historic regulations and bureaucracy. The system was widely seen as elitist, since only a fortunate few were able to gain entry into reputable institutions. Moreover, the certification system did not recognize learning, skills and knowledge acquired in informal or non-formal settings (Keevy, Charraud and Allgoo, 2011, p. 57).

Lacking natural resources, Mauritius' only resource is its human capital. As in all parts of the world, rapid technological change in recent years has created a powerful demand for new skills and left the unskilled less employable. In this unforgiving labour market, the gap is widening between those who are sufficiently qualified to stay afloat and those who are not. It is therefore essential that Mauritius gives its citizens the opportunity to gain the skills and qualifications they need to sustain themselves throughout their lives.

2. MAIN POLICY OBJECTIVES

With these challenges in mind, the MQF was established to:

- raise the value of vocational qualifications;
- integrate education and training;
- improve the quality of training provision and provide quality assurance;
- promote the mutual recognition of Mauritian and foreign qualifications;

- give learners a clear indication of the level of their learning and the possibilities for further progression; and
- recognize and formally certify competences obtained outside the formal education and training system.

3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

Following a study conducted by the Scottish Qualifications Authority in 1998, the Government of Mauritius was advised to set up an NQF to bring order to the existing 'jungle of qualifications' (Keevy, Charraud and Allgoo, 2011, p. 57). The MQF was eventually developed by the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA), which was established in 2002 following the MQA Act of 2001. At its outset, the MQA performed the dual role of regulator of the TVET sector and guardian of the MQF. The MQA Act was amended in 2005, giving the MQA the new function of evaluating and establishing equivalences between qualifications obtained in the primary, secondary or post-secondary sectors and those obtained in non-formal and informal settings, for example through workplace learning. The MQA also establishes equivalences between foreign and local qualifications.

The MQA has set up 20 Industrial Training Advisory Committees (ITACs) comprising experts from both the public and private sectors. In the course of this work, a number of fruitful collaborations have been set up to develop qualifications in particular areas. For example, the MQA has worked together with the Mauritius Institute of Health (MIH) to develop qualifications in the health and social care sector. Such collaborations have been consolidated over the years and sustainable relationships have been built with the stakeholders involved.

Qualifications are included in the MQF based on their potential to equip learners with the skills required to meet the demands of the economy. ITACs oversee the quality, relevance and international comparability of MQF qualifications, making sure that they are 'fit for purpose' and accord with industry expectations. So far the MQA has generated some 143 qualifications together with 3,710 unit standards in the following sectors: agriculture, automobiles, adult literacy, beauty and hairdressing, building construction and civil works, early childhood education and care, electrical and electronics engineering, furniture making, handicrafts, health and social care, ICT, jewellery making, language, management, mechanical engineering, printing, seafood and marine industry, textiles and apparel, tourism and hospitality, and transport and logistics. MQF qualifications are offered by both public and private providers.

Only nationally recognized qualifications from accredited awarding bodies are included in the MQF. At present there are four awarding bodies: the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development (MITD), the Mauritius Institute of Health (MIH), the University of Mauritius and the University of Technology, Mauritius. International awarding bodies include the City and Guilds, and the Association of Business Executives.

One of the functions of the MQA is to register and accredit training institutions in Mauritius. Currently around 525 training providers are registered with the MQA, offering TVET programmes both with and without awards. Training institutions have to meet strict requirements regarding safety, security, finances, equipment, resources and infrastructure. The MQA has formulated a set of quality assurance standards in accordance with the MQA Act 2001, starting with the registration of training institutions and staff, and the accreditation of programmes. Institutions are registered for up to three years subject to continued compliance with conditions and regulations in order to safeguard the interests of learners. The MQA accredits courses through a three-stage process as follows:

1) A self-evaluation report is prepared by the training institution based on criteria defined by the MQA.
2) The report is validated following an on-site visit by a team appointed by the MQA.
3) Accreditation is recommended by the accreditation committee and approved by the Director of the MQA.

The MQA also approves non-award courses intended to upgrade the skills and employability of Mauritians. Approval of non-award courses not only ensures the quality of education and training offered, but also encourages lifelong learning. However, non-award courses are not registered on the MQF.

4. LEVELS AND DESCRIPTORS AND THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

The MQF is a 10-level framework ranging from the Certificate of Primary Education at Level 1 up to the Doctorate at Level 10. It covers all three education sectors: primary and secondary education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and tertiary education. This tripartite structure allows for the integration of academic and vocational awards. Each level of the MQF is accompanied by a level descriptor which states expected learning outcomes. The focus on learning outcomes represents an important shift in attitude.

Table 1.The Mauritian National Qualifications Framework

LEVEL	PRIMARY / SECONDARY EDUCATION	TVET / WORKPLACE	TERTIARY EDUCATION	LEVEL
10			Doctorate	10
9			Master's Degrees e.g. M.A., M.Sc., M.Phil. Postgraduate Certificates, Postgraduate Diplomas	9
8			Bachelor with honours, conversion programmes	8
7			Bachelor (ordinary degree)	7
6		Diploma	Diploma	6
5	HSC/GCE 'A' Level/BAC/IBAC	Certificate	Certificate	5
4				4
3	SC/GCE 'O' Level			3
2				2
1	Certificate of Primary Education			1

Source: Allgoo, 2010.

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

A significant proportion of the Mauritian labour force built their careers through apprenticeships without having undergone any academic or formal training. Such people, who were previously shut out of the education and training system, are catered for under the MQF through mechanisms for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Under the new system, informal and non-formal learning have the same status and value as formal education. This constitutes a major reform of the TVET sector in Mauritius.

The MQA introduced the concept of RPL into the Mauritian education system with the aim to 'recognize and validate competences for the purpose of certification obtained outside the formal education and training systems'. RPL renders visible and rewards knowledge and skills no matter what learning environment they were acquired in, allowing individuals greater mobility within the labour market. People who have dropped out of the education and training system can now re-enter it without starting again at the lowest level. Through validation of their prior learning, they can acquire qualifications from levels 2 to 4 of the MQF. This boosts their self-esteem and promotes lifelong learning.

The RPL model has been widely accepted by all stakeholders. Employers have welcomed RPL since it provides them with qualified and well-motivated personnel. Since the pathways for further learning have been clearly defined, some trade unions have shown greater interest in the system.

RPL candidates' knowledge and skills are assessed under the MQF by matching them against a fixed set of unit standards, which are the building blocks of qualifications. An MQF qualification comprises an average of 25 unit standards. Each unit standard is developed for a specified level and defines the depth and breadth of the subject matter at that level. If an applicant's knowledge and skills satisfy the outcome requirements of a qualification, s/he can acquire either a full formal qualification or a record of learning through RPL.

Pilot RPL projects have been funded by the National Empowerment Foundation. Training of RPL facilitators and assessors is an ongoing process with the ultimate aim of implementing RPL in all sectors. Awareness campaigns have been organized throughout the island to inform the public about the development and benefits of the MQF and RPL.

The RPL reform in Mauritius would not have been possible without the vital support of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources.

6. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Mutual recognition and harmonization of qualifications frameworks across the globe is rapidly becoming a necessity. In pursuit of this goal, the MQA has signed memorandums of technical cooperation with Botswana, Namibia, Seychelles, Ghana, The Gambia, Tanzania, Zambia, Réunion and Barbados. The MQA is working in close collaboration with countries in the African region through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), an initiative of ministers of education of small states, which aims to build human resource capacity in small commonwealth countries to stimulate an increase in the courses offered in these countries, and to facilitate the transfer of credits and qualified people across borders.

The Southern African Development Community Regional Qualifications Framework (SADC RQF) was developed with the purpose of simplifying, structuring, classifying and valuing the many existing qualifications within Member states and across the sub-region. It is hoped that the work of the SADC RQF will facilitate the mobility of learners and skilled workers in the region. However, the RQF is still a long way from being operational.

7. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The process of designing and implementing the MQF has led to an enhanced synergy between academia and the TVET sector as well as between education and training, and the world of work. This is partly due to the improved visibility of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning as a result of the MQF.

Cooperation and capacity building are at the forefront of the Mauritian Government's plans for the future of the MQF. A significant number of international students are expected to enroll in TVET programmes in Mauritius in the near future. In preparation for this influx, the government plans to set up a control cell at the level of the MQA and a software application for student tracking. Such a system would serve as a reporting tool which would help to further Mauritius' ambition to become a knowledge hub and a centre for educational excellence.

In the next phase of consolidation, the MQA plans to intensify its efforts to increase public awareness of the benefits of NQF. This will entail holding seminars and conferences across Mauritius and Rodrigues, as well publishing press advertisements, pamphlets and brochures. The maintenance of the MQF itself, however, remains the core priority of the MQA.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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