

MALAYSIA

Malaysia's economy has grown more than tenfold since the 1980s and successive governments have committed themselves to building a knowledge-based economy, as reflected in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9th MP) (2006–2010) (Government of Malaysia, 2006). In response to this economic plan, the Government of Malaysia also formulated a National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) to make Malaysia an international hub of excellence for higher education. In pursuit of this objective, the Prime Minister called for a 'higher education revolution' which led to the establishment of a new Ministry of Higher Education in 2004 and the launch, in August 2007, of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA).

Following these reforms, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) was developed in successive stages, through exploration exercises, a series of consultations with key stakeholders, and a national consultation that led finally to approval by the government. The MQF is designed as a unified system of qualifications offered on a national basis by all educational and training institutions, including colleges, universities, vocational institutions, professional bodies and other higher education institutions in the public and private sectors, and taking into account workplace training and lifelong learning experiences (MQA, 2010).

1. CHALLENGES THE NQF WOULD NEED TO ADDRESS

The main challenges stated in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) were eventually to be addressed by the MQF. These were: to widen access to education and increase equity; to improve the quality of teaching and learning; to empower Institutions of Higher Education (IHE); to intensify internationalization (collaboration with foreign IHEs); to promote participation in and recognition of lifelong learning; to promote the recognition of prior learning; to promote alternative educational pathways and mobility between programmes (see also Ministry of Higher Education, 2010); to overcome differences in public and private higher education (in for example nomenclature, entry requirements, credits and duration); to coordinate the various programmes offered; and to enhance the legitimacy and relevance of qualifications in society and working life (Vassu, 2012).

2. MAIN POLICY OBJECTIVES

In addressing the challenges stated in the NHESP, the MQF as stipulated in Section 35 of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 aims to:

- encourage partnerships between the public and private sectors;
- set qualification standards and reinforce policies on quality assurance;
- ensure accuracy and consistency in the naming of qualifications;
- support flexible education by providing a choice of educational pathways and recognizing prior learning (RPL);
- link certificates and diplomas with undergraduate and postgraduate degree level education;
- encourage people to view academic and vocational qualifications as equally valid;

- establish a common currency for credit accumulation and transfer;
- articulate links with qualifications from other countries;
- provide clear and accessible public information.

3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

The MQF is overseen by the State as regulator through the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), and the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR). Other stakeholders include professional bodies and examination and certification bodies (Vassu, 2012).

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) succeeded two previous quality assurance bodies, the Lembaga Akreditasi Negara¹ and the Quality Audit Division of the Ministry, which dealt with public and private higher education providers respectively. As guardian of the MQF, the main functions of the MQA are to manage and implement the framework, to provide quality assurance and programme accreditation, to facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications, and to maintain the Malaysian Qualifications Register. All types of higher education providers are brought into the purview of the MQA (Allais, 2010).² The increased mobility of learners and workers alike in today's education and labour market means that recognition of qualifications is more important than ever. Accreditation of a programme or qualification is the main mark of quality for recognition by various authorities and bodies. Although accreditation is not compulsory according to the Malaysian Qualifications Act, it is made mandatory by other regulations and policies, thus ensuring compliance with the framework. Programmes are accredited if they meet the requirements of the framework. They are then eligible to be registered in the Malaysian Qualifications Register.

4. LEVELS AND DESCRIPTORS AND THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

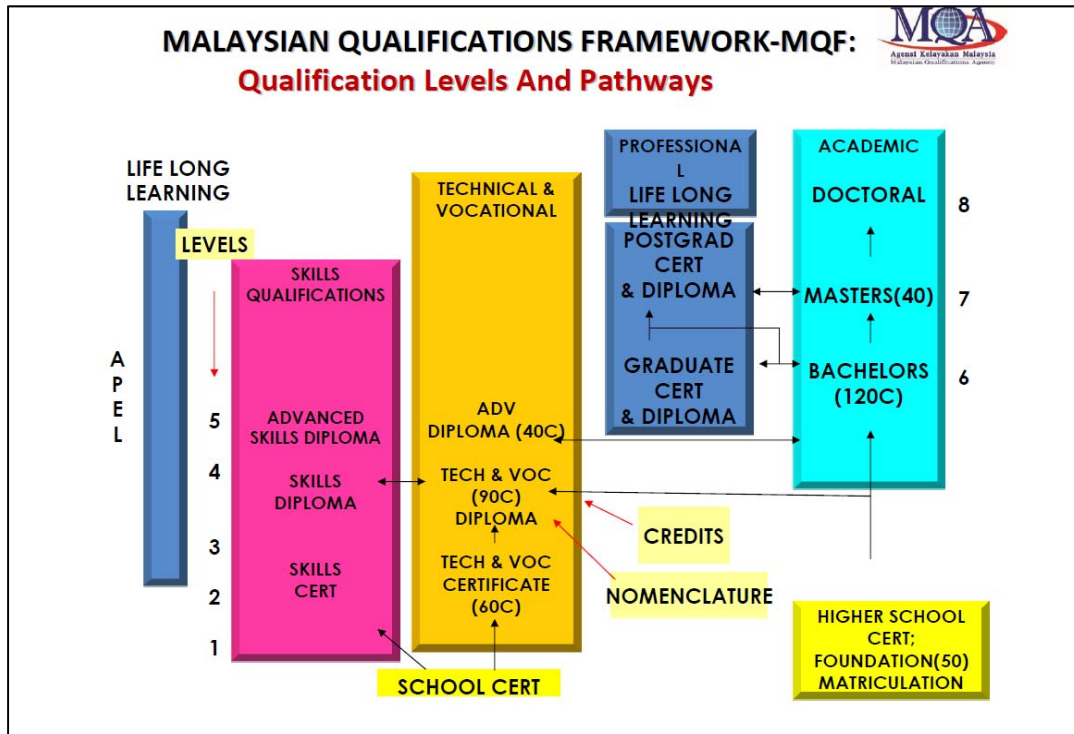
The MQF develops and classifies qualifications based on a set of nationally agreed and internationally benchmarked criteria. It sets out academic levels, learning outcomes, and a credit system based on student academic load. Academic load includes all the activities the student undertakes to achieve a defined set of learning outcomes, such as lectures, tutorials, practical activities, retrieval of information, research, field work, and sitting for examinations. The criteria of the MQF are accepted and used for all qualifications awarded by higher education providers (MQR, 2009).

The MQF is an eight-level framework. It comprises three sub-frameworks: a five-level skills sector (known as the National Occupational Skills Standards); a VET sector (Certificates 1-3, the latter awarded in state polytechnics and community colleges); and a six-level framework for higher education qualifications, the three lowest levels of which overlap with the Skills and VET sectors (Allais, 2010, p. 37). The main characteristics of the system are shown in Figure 1 below.

¹ In May 1997, the National Accreditation Board (called Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN) in Malay) was established. Its key function was to assure the quality of all programmes and qualifications offered by private higher education providers. It developed standards and criteria for the conferment of awards and accredited courses that fulfilled the set standards and criteria. The number of institutions grew and a diverse range of programmes was offered, from certificate to doctorate. Foreign programmes in the form of twinning or '3+0' mode were popular amongst international students. The quality assurance of public universities remained the responsibility of their internal quality assurance mechanisms but was constantly monitored by the Ministry through its Quality Assurance Division (QAD).

² 'Higher education providers' are institutions which offer qualifications at post-secondary level.

Figure 1. The Malaysian Qualifications Framework



Source: MQA, 2010; Vassu, 2012.

The learning outcomes for each MQF qualification are indicated via descriptors. Learning outcomes are based on the following eight learning domains (Vassu, 2012), which remain constant across all levels:

1. Knowledge of subject area
2. Practical skills
3. Social skills and responsibilities
4. Values, attitudes and professionalism
5. Communication, leadership and teamwork skills
6. Problem solving and scientific skills
7. Managerial and entrepreneurial skills
8. Information management skills

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

When launched in August 2007, the NHESP identified lifelong learning as one of its seven primary goals. The national blueprint for lifelong learning has since been published (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). The MQF is an important instrument for realizing lifelong learning policy in Malaysia, which is important in the development of a knowledge-based society and economy (MQA, 2010). It is designed in particular to facilitate access to education for individuals and social groups who have missed educational opportunities. It does this by providing flexible educational pathways for all learners, systematically linking qualifications from different sectors (ibid.). A system of credit accounts and credit transfer will ensure that learners are able to progress both vertically and horizontally and to have their prior learning recognised, whether acquired formally, non-formally or informally. Work was initiated in 2010 to allow cross-sector mobility, i.e. between academic and vocational streams.

A number of courses now have flexible entry points in order to further promote lifelong learning. Adult learners and senior citizens ('lifelong learners') are permitted to make up five per cent of the student

body in higher education institutions. At present, six universities have been approved to practice the above mentioned system of flexible entry points for admission of adults and senior citizens. Assessment of prior experiential learning in these institutions may be conducted in stages (Gobaloo and Fahmi, 2013). Institutions will be required to provide quality assurance mechanisms to ensure proper, effective and genuine learning. Other measures, including financing and support systems, are also essential to lifelong learning plans.

In 2009 the MQA developed guidelines for the accreditation of prior learning. This was followed up in 2011 by work to develop instruments and criteria to assess prior learning, and to establish assessment centres. A number of techniques can be used to recognise an individual's prior learning. First, a portfolio of evidence is compiled relating to the learning outcomes of a subject or course. The portfolio may include reports (by referees or other relevant assessors), job descriptions, essays, artefacts and products made, designs, drawings, plans, test results and so forth. A written description of the individual's knowledge and skills may also be submitted. This should be authored by a qualified person, such as the applicant's employer (e.g. manager or supervisor) or client (e.g., student or customer). Finally, written or oral examinations may be conducted.

6. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The MQF is an important instrument for realising lifelong learning policy in Malaysia. Thanks to its design as a unified system of qualifications offered on a national basis, the implementation process was able to run smoothly.

The MQF's establishment of benchmarks has improved the international comparability of Malaysian qualifications. Bringing all higher education providers under one umbrella has made it easier to address stakeholder concerns effectively.

Malaysia plans to use the MQF to further harmonise qualifications for both public and private institutions, creating a common currency for accreditation and recognition across sectors. It also plans to develop a regional Qualification Framework for ASEAN, and to subject the MQF to ongoing review in order to ensure that the highest standards are maintained (Vassu, 2012).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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