



Republic of Korea

In 2003, the Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET) established the *Korean Qualification Framework (KQF)*, which is an integrated system of levels common to educational and vocational qualifications. Recently, the Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL 2010a; 2010b) made efforts to reform the KQF through the development of National Competency Standards (NCS) and the introduction of qualifications grounded in learning outcomes. As a result, links between industry, vocational education and training (VET) and the qualifications system will be strengthened. This should raise the status and significance of VET as a whole. (Seung II Na, 2012).

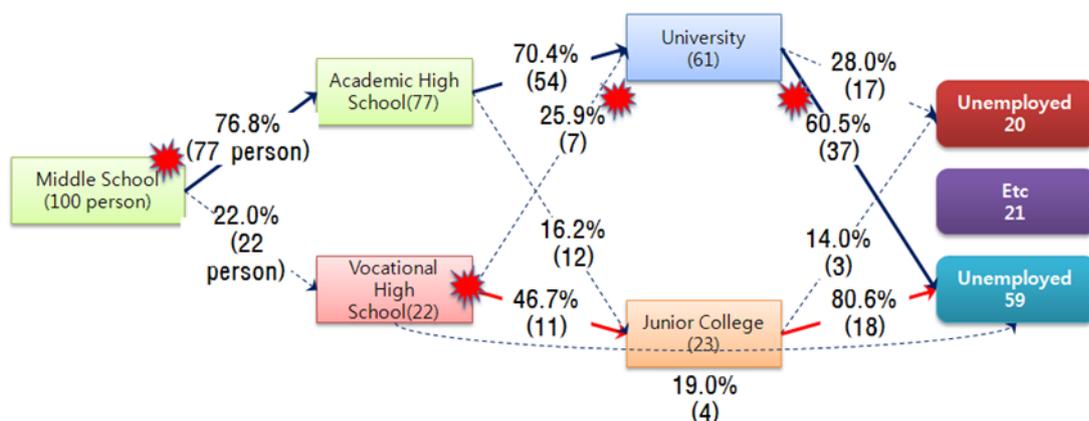
The Republic of Korea also seeks to align its own KQF initiative with those under development in other countries of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), in order to enhance mutual education and labour mobility together with mutual recognition of qualifications across the region.

The challenges that the NQF addresses

One of the challenges that the Korean Qualifications Framework seeks to address is the significant imbalance between participation in and the social value attached to vocational and academic qualifications. The reasons for this imbalance lie primarily with the fact that on the one hand, Korean society places very high value on academic qualifications and on the other hand its education and training provision clearly divides the academic from the vocational, as well as the formal from the non-formal. Simultaneously, Korea's enrolment rate in higher education is one of the highest in the world. Figure 1 shows that in the current year (2013) 17.4 per cent of middle school graduates are enrolled in Vocational High Schools, as against 82.6 per cent who enrol in Academic High School. 46.7 per cent of those who graduate from Vocational High Schools subsequently join Junior Colleges, as against 70.4 per cent who go to universities from academic high schools (KEDI, 2013). One of the reasons for the rapid expansion of higher education and the ensuing unemployment rate among higher education graduates is that vocational education is considered a second-class option in the Republic of Korea (Seung II Na, 2012).

In order to dispel the negative perception of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and to improve its quality, the government is taking a number of measures. First, 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. Second, a new type of high school, styled after the German dual system, and known as a Meister (the German-language term for master craftsman) High School, was launched in 2008 to provide education geared to industrial and business demands. So far, out of the 3,400 young adults graduating from Meister High Schools by February 2013, 93.5 per cent have found employment, virtually all of them full-time. Meister High Schools are hence judged to have been a resoundingly successful innovation in the VET school system (Personal communication, Dr Insub Park, NILE, 2013).

Figure 1: Educational pathways following middle school: academic and vocational streams



Source: Personal communication, Dr Chang-Hwan Oh, NILE, 2012; based on KEDI (2011)

Main policy objectives

The aims of the Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF) are:

- to improve coordination among ministries responsible for VET policy;
- to align VET qualifications obtained in high schools and junior colleges with national technical qualifications (and underlying standards) (OECD, 2009, p.1);
- to strengthen VET beyond its largely theoretical orientation 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 recognising informal learning;
- to link the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning to technical and vocational qualifications (Jeong-Yoon, 2012);
- to strengthen social consensus on the value of informal and non-formal learning by improving their quality in relation to the criteria and standards in the KQF and NCS.

Involvement of stakeholders

The KQF was initiated by the Ministry of Education in consultation with other departments including the Ministry of Employment and Labour and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. In addition, the Ministry of Human Resources Development Services (HRD Korea) sets standards for businesses and management qualifications, KRIVET develops educational models based on the NCS, and the National Institute of Lifelong Education (NILE) builds systems for continuing vocational education geared towards adult learning. Sector Councils (SC) participate to make education and training better

connected to industry. The Ministry of Education harmonises qualifications across the different sectors in consultation with the different stakeholders.

The National Occupation Standards Project (NOS) and the National Competency Standards (KSS) separately operated by the Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL) and Ministry of Education (MOE) was integrated into NCS in December 2010 by the Office for Policy Coordination. The purpose of this merger was to synchronise terminologies and avoid duplication of responsibilities, thus enhancing effectiveness and efficiency. Each government department now has clearer roles. The NCS Development project will be monitored by the Ministry of Employment and Labour. However, the work to develop the NCS will be mainly implemented by HRD Korea, and the research will be conducted by KRIVET. From 2002 to 2012, standards have been developed for 85 fields and 331 jobs. In future standards are to be developed in 212 fields and 826 jobs. The distinction between ‘fields’ and ‘jobs’ is important to understand. For example, the medical field has 4 subdivisions (here, ‘jobs’) in the Korean NCS: clinical medicine, nursing, basic medicine and medical specialities that support clinical medicine such as clinical pathology and image medical sciences. It is expected that the standards will be widely used to structure VET curriculum development.

Levels and descriptors and use of learning outcomes

As mentioned above, the Republic of Korea is at an early stage of KQF development, including its component levels and level descriptors. Like the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the KQF is designed to recognise knowledge, skills and attitudes. The KQF is anchored in the NCS, which designates the level of skills and competences attained in academic, non-academic, formal, non-formal and workplace learning. Its purpose is essentially to provide a standardised reference framework for assessing and validating competences required for successful job performance – that is, the KQF is oriented towards labour market and employer needs. KQF reference standards are based on thorough analysis of the occupational structure and specific job analyses, a process that involves experts both from industry and from the VET sector.

Progression pathways and recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning

Although the KQF and the NCS are still in the process of being established, the recognition and accreditation of prior learning and the non-formal mode of learning have developed in tandem. Previously, non-formal modes of higher education in Korea were not given formal recognition or credits, and school education was considered as the sole domain of education. Non-formal education was underestimated, even though it provided people with practical knowledge and skills. The Korean Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) recognises learning not only in school but also beyond school in diverse vocational training and skills related contexts.

The ACBS is an open-education system that recognises not only learning experiences gained in school but also those gained outside school. People with various educational backgrounds may obtain a bachelor’s or associate degree through ACBS. Article 1 of the *Act on Recognition of Credits* defines ACBS aims as follows: “This law aims to provide those who have completed recognised curricula with the opportunity to acquire a degree through credit recognitions. It thereby embodies the principle of lifelong learning and contributes to national and individual development”.

The ACBS documents and recognises outcomes from various non-formal learning activities by granting credits and conferring degrees when certain numbers of credits are accumulated. At the moment, six sources of credits recognised by the ACBS:

- formal higher education institutions;
- recognised non-formal education and training institutions;
- completion of the ‘accredited important intangible cultural properties’ curriculum;
- part-time courses;

- acquisition of national skill/qualifications (above the level of industrial technician);
- exemption exam courses in the system of academic degree acquisition through self-education.

Of the six recognised sources of credits, those from formal higher education institution and those obtained by taking part-time courses are from universities. These credits are mostly accepted regardless of when they were awarded. Credits obtained by acquiring national skill/qualification and credits are acquired by passing examinations depend on the level of difficulty of the exam.

Accreditation in ACBS mostly applies to accreditation in non-formal education and training institutions. About 500 education and training institutions participate in the ACBS. Whilst the Ministry of Education develops the basic plan of accreditation and issue final approval and sends a certificate of accreditation to each institutions, it is NILE that implements the overall plan, screens the documents and develops a final evaluation report to the Ministry of Education (Baik, 2013).

The *Lifelong Learning Account System* (LLAS) – a system for the recognition and certification of qualification in both academic and vocational contexts – allows individuals to accumulate different lifelong learning experiences and to ‘invest’ their learning experiences in moving up the career ladder (ibid.). It is a means of validating all facets of the learning experience.

Lessons learned

While both ACBS and LLAS were developed without any link to the NQF and the NCS, the present government is searching for ways to develop connections. In the case of the ACBS, which is directly linked to higher education qualifications, the need for KQF or NCS is relatively low. However, LLAS, which includes all levels and areas of training and education, requires a set of criteria that can be used across all sectors nationally and, hopefully, internationally. Although LLAS has tried to set criteria, there is difficulty in establishing equivalence between sectors. Needless to say, if LLAS is linked to the KQF and NCS, it will be more reliable and convenient, not only for learners, but also for employers and educators (Baik, 2013). The KQF still needs 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 largely reflect their existing practices.

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