

# HONG KONG SAR CHINA

The Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) grew out of the 1990 comprehensive education reform which included a complete reorganization of the lifelong learning system. In order to develop the continuing education sector and promote lifelong learning, in 2000 the Education Commission proposed the establishment of a comprehensive Qualifications Framework (QF) covering the vocational, academic and continuing education sectors. The Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government launched the HKQF in 2008 (EDB, 2012) with the intention of establishing a comprehensive and voluntary network of pathways between academic, vocational and continuing education, thus ensuring sustainable manpower development for the rapidly changing world.

## 1. CHALLENGES THE NQF WOULD NEED TO ADDRESS

During the past forty-five years, Hong Kong has undergone a dramatic transformation to become a leading international financial centre. To stay ahead in an increasingly competitive market, Hong Kong must constantly upgrade the capability of its workforce. However, with a shift in Hong Kong's economy towards highly skilled activities, jobs for workers with low educational attainment are disappearing rapidly while demand for workers with higher education continues to grow. To narrow this gap, the government has taken steps over the past two decades to provide workers with more effective training in order to motivate them to enhance their employment potential.

In response, the educational attainment of Hong Kong's workforce has improved significantly. The proportion of workers with tertiary education increased from 10 per cent in 1985 to 27 per cent in 2004 (EDB, 2004). However, with the proliferation of training programmes and qualifications comes the potential difficulty that learners may not know which qualification is recognized and thus which course to choose. On the other hand, when presented with an assortment of certificates, an employer may remain in the dark as to the actual level of competency of the holder.

## 2. MAIN POLICY OBJECTIVES

The main policy objectives of the HKQF are to:

- clearly define the standards of different qualifications;
- ensure the quality of qualifications;
- enable citizens to obtain recognized qualifications either through continuing education and training or through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism;
- ensure that education and training providers, employers and the public understand the range of qualifications available and appreciate how they can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce;
- delineate the links between different types and levels of qualifications, both vocational and academic;

- recognize workers' existing skills, knowledge, and work experience through an RPL mechanism developed for industries which have set out a Specification of Competency Standards (SCS<sup>1</sup>); and
- simplify and standardize the use of award titles through the Award Title Scheme (ATS) which is applicable to qualifications at all HKQF levels.

### 3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

In 2002 the Education Bureau (EDB; previously called Education & Manpower Bureau of the HKSAR Government) issued a public consultation paper on 'the proposed establishment of an HKQF and its associated quality assurance mechanism in Hong Kong' (EDB, 2004). This was followed by a series of other public consultations, pilot studies and seminars for industries, employers' associations, trade unions and professional bodies, culminating in the launch of the qualifications framework in 2008.

The Qualifications Framework Secretariat (QFS) is the executive arm of the Education Bureau and is responsible for implementing and promoting the HKQF.

Industry Training Advisory Committees (ITACs) play a pivotal role in the implementation of the HKQF and the development of Specification of Competency Standards (SCS). ITACs are established by industries with the assistance of the Education Bureau. Labour unions have participated in the existing ITACs for nineteen industries.

The ITACs have three main objectives:

1. To develop, maintain and update SCS and to formulate a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism for the industry concerned;
2. To promote the HKQF within the industry concerned;
3. To facilitate closer collaboration between the industry concerned and the Secretary for Education to discuss and advise on matters relating to the HKQF (Education Bureau-Qualifications Framework website).

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is a statutory body established under the HKCAAVQ Ordinance, Cap. 1150. This Ordinance of 1 October 2007 represents a legislative amendment of the HKCAA (Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation), and came into effect in order to expand the scope of the latter's services to cover accreditation of vocational qualifications. As of this Ordinance, the Council was renamed as HKCAAVQ. In accordance with the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (AAVQ) Ordinance, Cap. 592, which came into operation on 5 May 2008, the HKCAAVQ is in charge of quality assurance for the HKQF and associated learning programmes and providers. HKCAAVQ also takes up its statutory role of administering the Qualifications Register (QR) (Education Bureau-Qualifications Framework website).

To encourage people aged 18 to 60 to pursue continuing education recognized under the HKQF, a Continuing Education Fund (CEF) of 5 billion HKD (Hong Kong Dollar) was set up by the government in 2002. In order to provide fair and impartial reviews of the continuing education courses concerned, the CEF was reviewed by a committee of quality assurance and accreditation experts, as well as specialists from commerce, finance, education and training, and other industries.

### LEVELS AND DESCRIPTORS AND THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Table 1. The Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF): Choice of Award Titles for different levels

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<sup>1</sup>In the vocational sector outcome standards for qualifications are set by various industries and are called Specification of Competency Standards (SCS). Competency Standards can be grouped together to form a qualification at a particular level.

QF Level	Choice of Award Titles for Different Levels						
7	Doctor						
6	Master	Postgraduate Diploma	Professional Diploma	Advanced Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	
		Postgraduate Certificate					
5	Bachelor		Professional Certificate	Advanced Certificate	Diploma	Certificate	
4	Associate	Higher Diploma					
		Higher Certificate					
3					Diploma	Certificate	
2							
1							
						Foundation Certificate	

Source: Qualifications Framework Secretariat, 2013

Qualifications recognized under the HKQF are characterised by three key features: (1) level, which reflects the depth and complexity of learning leading to the qualification; (2) award title, which specifies the area of study of the qualification; and (3) credit, which indicates the volume of learning leading to the qualification.

Hong Kong recently introduced the Award Titles Scheme (ATS) with the aim of standardizing and simplifying the titles of HKQF qualifications. The ATS should be seen together with the Operational Guidelines on Use of Credit and Implementation Timetable (Qualifications Framework Secretariat, 2012), which stipulate the following:

- The title 'Certificate' may be awarded for qualifications at Levels 1 to 6.
- Qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 may also use 'Foundation Certificate' as the title of the award.

- 'Diploma' can only be used for qualifications at Levels 3 to 6. A Diploma must carry a learning size of 60 or more credits. There is no minimum credit requirement for a Certificate programme.

ATS specifies which qualifiers (such as Foundation, Higher, Advanced, Professional and Postgraduate) providers may use in the titles of their qualifications. No qualifier is allowed for qualifications at Level 3 (i.e. Certificate and Diploma). Providers may choose to add 'QF Level' to the titles of their qualifications: for example, 'Professional Diploma in Business Management (QF Level 6)'. Providers may continue to use titles traditionally used for degree and sub-degree qualifications in mainstream education (i.e. Associate Degree at Level 4, Bachelor at Level 5, Master at Level 6, and Doctor at Level 7).

Providers who wish to use non-ATS specified titles for their programmes may apply for approval to the Review Panel on Award Titles, which is to be set up under the Education Bureau with effect from 1 January 2013. However, the use of titles outside ATS is not encouraged, as this would be contrary to the intention and purpose of ATS. Only in very exceptional circumstances should a provider consider using titles not specified in ATS.

#### **4. PROGRESSION PATHWAYS AND RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING**

A Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system provides the flexibility needed to suit individual learners' circumstances and minimize duplication of training. The CAT system allows learners to accumulate credits from diverse courses and convert them into a recognized qualification. One QF credit consists of 10 notional learning hours, which takes into account the total time likely to be required by an average learner in all modes of learning, including class attendance, private study, online learning, practical learning, examination, etc. The HKQF is expected to facilitate CAT arrangements between different sectors and training providers by providing a unified platform and common benchmarks.

The HKQF plays a particularly crucial role in secondary education, because the SCSs developed by industries will serve as a useful reference for Applied Learning Courses under the new structure for senior secondary education. These courses will provide students with a wider range of pathways, enabling them to master the skills required by various industries.

The major purpose of setting up a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism under the HKQF is to enable workers of various backgrounds to receive formal recognition of the knowledge, skills and experience they have already acquired. However, many employers and trade unions take the view that if workers have no intention to pursue further education, there is no need to implement RPL. Whether or not to implement RPL and how quickly to implement it are matters to be determined solely by the industries concerned. If ITACs think that the implementation of RPL will do their industries more harm than good, they may opt not to implement it, or to hold discussions before proceeding with the implementation.

## 5. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The Education Bureau is committed to developing Hong Kong SAR as the regional 'education hub'. To this end, the Education Bureau is considering how its policies might facilitate the admission of non-local students wishing to study in Hong Kong. With the rapid expansion of the market for continuing and post-secondary education in recent years, the Education Bureau believes that Hong Kong has the potential and the right conditions for recruiting non-local students, in particular Mainland Chinese (EDB, 2004).

## 6. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The smooth development of the HKQF since its implementation in 2008 can be attributed to the following points:

- Stakeholders and partners from various industries have supported and participated actively in the development of the HKQF, providing the valuable human resources needed in a knowledge-based economy.
- Nineteen industries have joined the HKQF, covering about 46 per cent of the total labour force in Hong Kong.
- Some industries have applied the results of the HKQF to their work, designing training courses in accordance with HKQF competency standards and applying these standards to human resource management (such as in designing recruitment advertisements, commending staff, formulating job descriptions, deploying manpower and organising internal training), or using the standards as references for performance benchmarking.
- Some training courses have passed the quality assurance mechanism to become HKQF-recognized courses listed in the Qualifications Register (QR).

The Education Bureau plans to step up its publicity efforts to promote the HKQF as a benchmark for quality in continuing education. Industry-specific websites should enable stakeholders in a particular industry (as well as the general public) to search for the latest information on education and training and the development of the HKQF in the industry concerned.

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Education Bureau. 2004. *Opening Ceremony of the International Conference on 'Internationalization of Lifelong Education: Policy and Issues'* 3 December 2004. Hong Kong, EDB.

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