Conference Theme:
Managing Diversity: Sustainable quality assurance processes

Sub-Theme 4:
Qualifications frameworks and their links to quality assurance (including involvement of stakeholders)

Paper Title:
Quality assurance and national qualifications frameworks feed off each other to achieve quality - a Pacific perspective

Lemalu Lafi Sanerivi

INQAAHE Conference Theme: Managing Diversity: Sustainable quality assurance processes

Relevant Conference Sub-Theme: National qualifications frameworks and their links to QA (including involvement of stakeholders)

Paper Title: Quality assurance and national qualifications frameworks feed-off each other to achieve quality – A Pacific perspective

Abstract:

The Pacific regions' population of around 10 million people is dominated by Papua New Guinea with a population of 7 million, and then the remainder is made up by the rest of the small Pacific island nations, a population of just over 2 million. Over the last ten years, there has been an exponential growth of national qualifications frameworks in the Pacific region with Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu engaged in similar developments. In addition, a Pacific regional qualifications framework is in place as a referencing device in order to understand the qualifications from each of the national systems. The natural question is 'why'? Is it not possible to address the 'quality' of provision and the 'quality' of qualification programmes and courses without national qualifications frameworks? Can qualifications be accredited and compared without qualifications frameworks?

The answer is more than just a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Qualifications frameworks, whether national or regional, must be underpinned by a robust quality assurance system that is rigorously applied to give qualifications frameworks meaning and value. The design of programmes and courses need to adhere to how the definitions of qualifications, the level descriptors and credit profiles of qualifications frameworks, for mutual understanding and comparability of qualifications and their component courses.

This paper discusses the relationship between quality assurance, the national qualifications frameworks and the regional framework, and stresses the interdependence of each to achieve quality education and training in small Pacific states. Indeed, quality assurance (QA) and national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) drive each other. The value of institutional quality assurance is acknowledged. However, it is the quality assurance of programmes and courses that is critical in relating to NQFs. National qualifications frameworks with their associated level descriptors, definitions of qualification types, and credit profiles, ensure 'common rules' or standards are applied and understood in designing programmes and courses. Both QA and NQFs are important instruments for the Pacific where *people* are their basic resource for socio-economic development.

Quality assurance and national qualifications frameworks feed-off each other to achieve quality – A Pacific perspective

A. Introduction:

Of the 16 Pacific Forum islands countries, seven have determined to develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Australia and New Zealand have qualifications frameworks over the last twenty or more years. Recently, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have developed qualifications frameworks. Cook Islands and Niue are aligned with the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands are accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) of the United States. Kiribati is exploring possibilities of either developing their own or be aligned with the framework of another country. This leaves Nauru as the only country without an NQF although some indication has been made that its education and training system is aligned with the Australian State of New South Wales.

The belief that underscores the development of national qualifications frameworks is that NQFs will transform each country's post-school education and training sector (PSET) through having a coherent structure that organises all qualifications on offer by its PSET sector complemented by a common quality assurance standard. NQFs are administered by national accrediting agencies that are supported by government legislations and regulations that facilitate administrative operations and its regulatory function on matters such as the registration of institutions, and the accreditation of courses and programmes that lead to the award of qualifications.

The Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF), a *meta-framework*, has also been developed as a referencing instrument to 'promote the recognition and transparency of qualifications across borders, social and economic progress, and lifelong learning' (Keevy 2010). The PQF facilitates comparability of Pacific qualifications that help the mobility of learners, academics and labour.

The PQF is supported by the Pacific Quality Assurance Framework (PQAF) developed in response to the Brisbane Communiqué from the Asia-Pacific Education Ministers' meeting in 2006[1]. The PQAF describes in broad terms the quality standard within which each Pacific country's quality assurance strategy operates. The PQAF facilitates the establishment of mutual recognition arrangements with the quality assurance standards of each of the Pacific Island countries.

For such an important instrument at the national and regional level in the Pacific, regular consultation with relevant stakeholders is paramount in ensuring continued relevance and acceptance of NQFs and the PQF. Everyone wants quality education and internationally recognised qualifications. This is critical for the small Pacific states where the domestic labour markets cannot absorb their surplus labour, and opportunities for further studies are very limited and expensive.

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[1] The Brisbane Communiqué is the result of the Asia Pacific Education Ministers meeting in Brisbane in 2006 where they urged the development of an Asia-Pacific regional quality assurance framework benchmarked against appropriate international standards. The full text can be found at www.apqn.org

B. The National Qualifications Frameworks

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed an exponential and global growth of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in around 130 countries. The development of NQFs focussed around the notions of *lifelong learning* and *building pathways* between vocational and higher education. These developments have improved the layout of the education and training environment into a more transparent system with identifiable quality aspects that facilitates international understanding of what 'quality' is irrespective of the size and complexity of the education and training system.

The Pacific states only caught up with this global groundswell in the first decade of the 21st century. The aspirations and expectations of the benefits of NQFs are universal and include the comparability and equivalences of qualifications from different providers within an education and training system, recognition of qualifications beyond country shores, accessing the global labour market and further educational opportunities, are a few among others that are more country-specific. Prior to the development of NQFs in the Pacific states, each provider of education and training services had their own institutional quality assurance system (most systems were working understandings and not documented) but there was a marked absence of a national quality standard, let alone a regional framework for quality assurance. By the end of 2012, almost all Pacific states have either developed their own NQF or can access an NQF of another country, for improving coherence of their PSET sector and recognition of their qualifications.

Through the Pacific Islands Forum that comprise 16 Pacific countries including Australia and New Zealand, parallel developments of NQFs have ensued where synergies not only within Forum island countries themselves but also informed by global activities, have helped guide the growth of NQFs. Indeed, Australia and New Zealand were among the first generation of NQFs developed and much work, resources and learning have been committed since the initial paradigm shifts. The Pacific states have benefitted from these developments as they can learn from the painful and expensive lessons learnt by these and other first generation systems, and hence avoid potentially expensive pitfalls.

After the revision of the Australian and the New Zealand Qualifications frameworks in 2011, several similarities were noticeable in the architecture of these two frameworks and most of the Pacific national qualifications frameworks such as:

1. Each NQF has ten levels where:
   a. Level 10 is Doctorate degrees;
   b. Level 9 is Masters;
   c. Level 8 is for the Bachelor (hons) and Post Graduate Certificates and Post Graduate Diplomas;
   d. Level 7 are the Bachelors and Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas;
   e. Levels 5 and 6 are two levels of Diplomas; and

<ol type="f" start="6">
Levels 1 to 4 are four levels of Certificates.

<ol start="2">
Each qualifications framework Level has the following characteristics:
<ol type="a">
A level descriptor that defines in broad terms the knowledge, skills, competences appropriate to someone with a qualification from a certain NQF level;
A group of qualifications at a certain framework level are defined in terms of the combination of courses with learning outcomes from other levels that together make up a qualification from that particular level; and
Predetermined credit profiles estimate the number of credits that result from the mix of courses (as in b above) that make up a qualification from a qualification framework level.

Most have unified structures where all education and training sectors[2] are included and all types of learning[3] are recognised;
All qualifications frameworks are outcomes-based; and
Most qualifications frameworks are credit-based.

The development of national qualifications frameworks necessitates the establishment of state-owned national accrediting agencies or national qualification authorities. These agencies are governed by government legislations and regulations that empower the agencies in regulating the registration of PSET institutions, the accreditation of their programmes, and in some cases, linked to the disbursement of any government funding to the PSET sector.

Figure 1: The relationship between NQFs and Quality Assurance
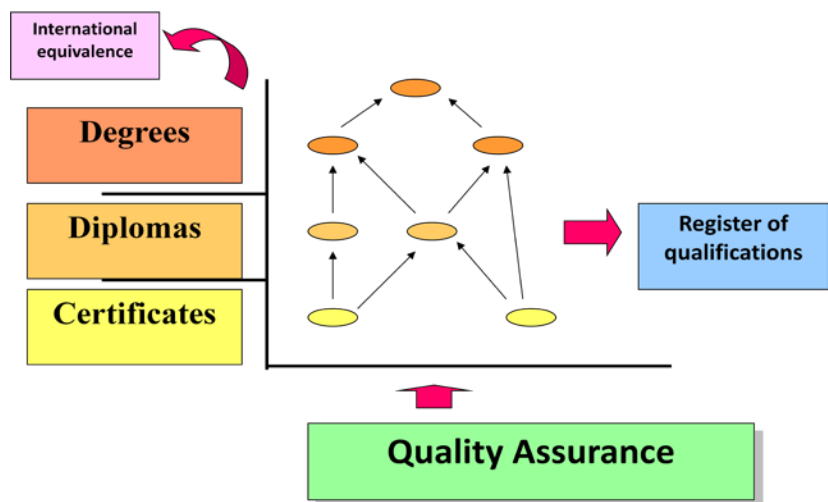
The NQFs are underpinned by a robust programme quality assurance system that supports it as in Figure 1. Qualification frameworks and programme quality assurance are inextricably bound together. Without quality assurance, the Framework matrix would be just a 'nice picture'. The rigor of implementation of the quality assurance measures confirms for all stakeholders (national and international) that qualifications from an education and training system or institution meet expected standards and carry the integrity of the awarding institution, and home country.

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[2] School, technical and vocational, higher education and community education
[3] Formal, non-formal and informal learning

The above characteristics of NQFs facilitate the comparison of qualifications across different qualification systems. This is enabled through the analysis of the level descriptors, definitions of qualification types, and credit profiles of the various QFs against the Pacific Qualifications Framework.

It is also important to note that a Pacific education and training system may not offer the complete scope of qualification types on its NQF. Recognition of foreign qualifications that enter a country is vastly enhanced through having defined their characteristics on the NQFs. Detailed information may still be solicited from the awarding institution, but the broad outcomes of a particular qualification in terms of knowledge, skills and competences are already clearly defined and accounted for.

C.   The Pacific Qualifications Framework

From the meeting of the Pacific Forum Education Ministers in 2001 in Auckland New Zealand, it was agreed to '*consider the setting up of a regional qualifications framework, covering basic, primary, secondary, TVET and tertiary education benchmarked against appropriate international standards and qualifications[4].'* The establishment of a Project Team within SPBEA[5] to develop the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) did not eventuate until February 2009. However, by 2009, several Pacific countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu) had progressed the development of their national qualifications frameworks.

The development of the PQF as a *meta-framework* and its related policies and operational procedures, were informed by global developments in regions such as Europe's Bologna Process, the South African Development Community and by more mature and established national systems such as in Australia, New Zealand and even some of the Pacific national systems. The architecture of the PQF adopted a unified structure in terms of sectors and fields of education and training. In this structure, there is no distinction between academic, school, technical and vocational education, and community learning. The underlying factor is on outcomes of learning in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. Discrimination between the levels of qualifications is determined by the broad outcomes statements of qualifications assessed against the level descriptors of the PQF.

The architecture of the PQF is unified[6] (or integrated and comprehensive) with ten levels, and very similar to the NQFs discussed earlier where:
  (i)   Level 10 is Doctorate degrees;
  (ii) Level 9 is Masters;
  (iii) Level 8 are the Post Graduate Certificate and Diplomas and Bachelor (hons);
  (iv) Level 7 are the Bachelors and Graduate Certificates and Diplomas;
  (v) Levels 5 and 6 are Diplomas; and

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[4] Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2007. *The Complete Forum Basic Education Action Plan 2001 - 2007*
[5] South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment
[6] A Framework that comprise all sectors of education and training rather than one particular sector

(vi) Levels 1 to 4 are Certificates.

This close similarity between the architecture of the PQF and NQFs enhances mutual understanding of the framework properties, and facilitates inter-framework referencing.

The PQF, at a minimum, address the following three key areas.

– provides a *common structure for referencing* and understanding the qualifications from diverse education and training systems in the Pacific;
– introduces a *regional quality assurance standard* for institutions and accrediting agencies; and
– facilitates the *accreditation of programmes and the international recognition and benchmarking* of Pacific qualifications.

An initial referencing of the PQF against the Australian and New Zealand qualifications frameworks revealed the following:

> *Although there are minor variations with the domains across the levels of the three qualification frameworks, each level needs to be compared in broad terms noting the interplay of the domains. As such there is broad equivalence between the ten levels of the PQF and the two major qualification frameworks reviewed. (Bateman, 2012)*

The summary is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of the analysis of the PQF, AQF[7] and NZQF[8]

QF	Alignment of Levels									
Pacific QF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Australia's QF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
New Zealand's QF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Summary			NZQF - responsibility domain if included would lift the level slightly.	NZQF - responsibility domain if included would lift the level slightly.			PQF and AQF appear slightly higher with notion of autonomy.		

Further discussions with the relevant Australian and New Zealand authorities to confirm this initial referencing of the PQF against the AQF and the NZQF will be pursued in 2013.

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[7] Australian Qualifications Framework
[8] New Zealand Qualifications Framework

Qualifications frameworks from Fiji, Samoa and Tonga were individually referenced against the PQF by analysing the level descriptors, qualification type definitions and credit profiles. The individual referencing Tables are in Appendix 1, but the general result is summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of the one-to-one relationship between selected NQFs and the PQF

Levels	Australia QF	New Zealand QF	Fiji QF	Tonga QF	Samoa QF	P Q F
10	Doctorate	Doctorate	Doctorate	Doctorate	Doctorate	**Doctorate**
9	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	**Masters**
8	PG Diplomas	PG Diplomas	PG Diplomas	PG Diplomas	PG Diplomas	**PG Diplomas**
7	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	**Bachelors**
6	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	**Diploma**
5	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	**Diploma**
4	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	**Certificates**
3	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	**Certificates**
2	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	**Certificates**
1	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	Certificates	**Certificates**

The initial referencing as reflected in Table 2 above are preliminary attempts at alignment as some of the Pacific countries' NQFs are still going through adjustments and fine-tuning. Generally, there is a one-to-one relationship between the NQFs considered and the PQF. If the above relationships are accepted for now, then the function of the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) as a *meta-framework* is guaranteed. At the same time, the PQF needs to be referenced against qualifications frameworks of other systems beyond the Pacific in order to extend and further confirm this function.

The second and more significant element for scrutiny is the rigor of quality assurance practices applied to institutions, their programmes and courses that confirm for all stakeholders that Pacific qualifications do meet international standards.

In late November 2012[9], the Pacific has a regional workshop on *Quality Assurance and Mutual Recognition*[10] that will confirm the relationships between national quality assurance strategies that support each of the NQFs and the Pacific Quality Assurance Framework (PQAF) for the PQF. By the beginning of 2013, national and regional quality assurance objectives, approaches, procedures,

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[9] This Paper is submitted on 15th November but the Pacific Regional Workshop on *Quality Assurance and Mutual Recognition* is scheduled for 20 – 22 November 2012

[10] A Pacific component of the APQN Mutual Recognition project, facilitated by Dr Jan Cameron of NZUAAU

standards and scope, would foster mutual professional trust amongst the Pacific accrediting agencies and institutions.

D. The Pacific Quality Assurance Framework

The Pacific Quality Assurance Framework (PQAF) is the Pacific region's response to the Brisbane communiqué of 2006 by the Asia Pacific Education Ministers where they agreed *'to develop a quality assurance framework for the region linked to international standards....'* The PQAF underpins the application of the PQF as a *meta-framework*. The development of the PQAF was informed by developments by international quality assurance networks such as INQAAHE[11] and APQN[12]. The PQAF outlines in broad terms the quality principles that govern the relationship between the PQF and the various regional and national accrediting agencies as well as institutions. Mutual understanding of the robustness of the quality assurance strategies and professional trust in the rigor in application underscores these very important relationships.

In brief, the following are the six (6) main characteristics of the PQAF:

1. Vision:

The PQAF will facilitate the international recognition of Pacific qualifications and standards through improving mutual understanding and application of international best practice in quality assurance.

2. Mission:

The PQAF will empower accrediting agencies and all forms of Pacific post-school education and training institutions to collaborate in meeting and maintaining international standards that facilitate the international benchmarking of Pacific qualifications and standards; support mobility of learners and labour; and establish clear pathways for lifelong learning in order to improve personal, national and regional socio-economic development.

3. Objectives:

The overall objectives of the PQAF are to:
  i.   improve the quality assurance functions and responsibilities of *accrediting agencies*;
  ii.   cultivate and maintain a culture of quality within Pacific *institutions of learning*;
  iii. improve the *quality of programmes* for students and other beneficiaries within the region;
  iv.   ensure clarity and transparency in *quality assurance processes* and outcomes;
  v.   provide a measure of *accountability* for the investment of public and private funding;
  vi.   support and foster cooperation of *key stakeholders across national borders*; and

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[11] International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education
[12] Asia Pacific Quality Network

vii.   build *professional trust and promote stakeholder confidence* in the quality of Pacific education and training.

4. Scope:

The PQAF provides a strategic focus on the achievement of 'quality' in the following areas:

i.   the **accrediting agencies** have robust quality management systems for carrying out their quality assuring functions;

ii.   the **institutions** develop internal quality assurance processes to govern and guide all of their activities;

iii.   the **programmes** are designed, delivered and assessed following the most current and relevant methodologies that promote and support learner achievement; and

iv.   the **components of programmes**[13] have clearly defined learning outcomes, assessment methodologies that link with the complete qualifications it links with, and clear rules for successful completion.

5. Core values:

The core values espoused by the PQAF include:

i.   learning is a lifelong process;

ii.   quality education and training is a fundamental human right;

iii.   institutions and accrediting agencies are accountable and responsible to their multiple stakeholders;

iv.   diversity — of traditions, cultures, religious values, views, practices and beliefs — is respected; and

v.   regular consultations with multiple stakeholders are essential for continuing relevance and currency.

6. Underpinning Principles:

The following principles guide the application of the PQAF:

i.   **Integrity**: an ethical and trustworthy quality assurance system that instils mutual trust, confidence and understanding of education and training systems either within a country or in the Pacific region; members of quality assurance panels, whether internal or external, must be adequately trained to fully understand and carry out their role;

ii.   **Evidence-based**: all findings and conclusions are based on factual evidence that is accurate and directly related to the area being investigated;

iii.   **Independence**: any quality assurance activity being conducted (e.g. accreditation or audit) must be implemented by people who are independent of the area under review and they

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[13] May be defined as courses, papers, units, modules, or competencies or other form

must remain impartial until the activity is completed; the reports and conclusions of a quality assurance activity are not influenced by external parties;

iv. **Confidentiality**: any information collected is protected from unauthorised access and use, and the privacy of informants is protected;

v. **Balanced reporting**: any report produced must be complete, accurate and objective, covering both the strengths and weaknesses of a system or process; all audit reports must highlight the facts supported by adequate evidence; and

vi. **Fit for purpose**: The PQAF can be applied to any agency, institution or programme. The purpose will guide how the PQAF is applied, irrespective of the size, context, resources or complexity. The goal is to obtain accurate and authentic evidence for continuous improvement.

The relationship between the qualifications frameworks[14], national quality assurance strategies and the PQAF can be summarised as in Figure 2 below.
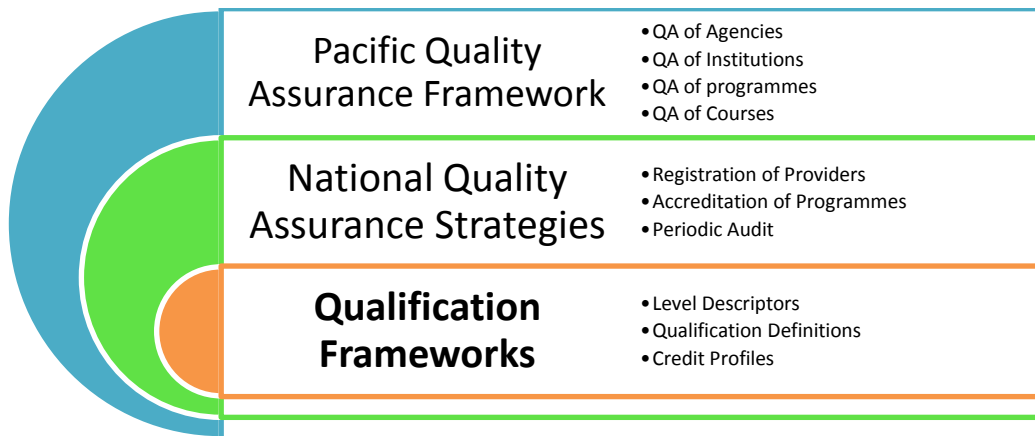

Pacific Quality Assurance Framework	• QA of Agencies • QA of Institutions • QA of programmes • QA of Courses
National Quality Assurance Strategies	• Registration of Providers • Accreditation of Programmes • Periodic Audit
Qualification Frameworks	• Level Descriptors • Qualification Definitions • Credit Profiles

Figure 2: The relationship between NQFs and Quality Assurance Strategies

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[14] Whether national qualifications frameworks or the Pacific Qualifications Framework

E.   Of NQFs and Quality Assurance

For the Pacific states where people are their key economic resource, there is no question at all that the national qualifications frameworks (and the PQF) and a transparent and robust quality assurance system for the accreditation of institutions, programmes and courses leads to the international recognition of qualifications from their education and training systems. NQFs and quality assurance allows Pacific people to be committed to lifelong learning knowing that their qualifications (acquired from any accredited institution) or learning (formal, non-formal or informal) in general can be internationally recognised.

For small education and training systems as in the Pacific, quality assurance cannot exist without national qualifications frameworks as NQFs define the parameters for the learning outcomes of each qualification type.

Qualification frameworks and quality assurance are inextricably bound together. An NQF without quality assurance would fail in its most important design characteristics. Quality assurance is about building trust in the capability of an institution, and in the knowledge, skills and competences a programme endows its graduates with.

Employment prospects of graduates with qualifications may be dependent upon initially the assured reputation of the awarding institution, and secondly on the accredited status of the qualification gained from it. The confidence of end users of qualifications (employers in the private and public sectors, and the wider community) is maintained only through the transparent and rigorous quality assurance system that underpins the recognition of qualifications.

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Lemalu Lafi Sanerivi
Senior Educational Assessment Specialist
SPBEA
12th November 2012

Appendix 1: Tables from Referencing NQFs against the PQF

Qualifications frameworks from Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu were referenced against the PQF. The result was as follows.

Table A: Summary of the analysis of the Fiji Qualifications Framework (FQF) against the PQF

FQF Levels	Degree of alignment	PQF Levels
10	aligned	10
9	Fully aligned in the level 9 domain and descriptors, however slight variation in the credit requirement for Masters by coursework and thesis	9
8	aligned	8
7	aligned	7
6	aligned	6
5	aligned	5
4	aligned	4
3	aligned	3
2	aligned	2
1	aligned	1

Table B: Summary of the analysis of the Samoa Qualifications Framework (SQF) against the PQF

SQF Levels	Degree of alignment	PQF Levels
X	SQF Descriptors were too general. Need discussion.	10
IX	SQF Descriptors were too general. Need discussion.	9
VIII	SQF Descriptors were too general. Need discussion.	8
VII	aligned	7
VI	aligned	6
V	aligned	5
IV	aligned	4
III	aligned	3
II	aligned	2
I	aligned	1

Note: this analysis of the SQF against the PQF was before a review of the SQF in April 2012

Table C: Summary of the analysis of the Tonga National Qualifications Framework (TNQF) against the PQF

TNQF Levels	Degree of alignment	PQF Levels
10	Qualification titles and level descriptors are similar.	10
9	*Qualification definitions* and *credit profiles* require	9
8	further discussion for full alignment	8
7	aligned	7
6	aligned	6
5	aligned	5
4	aligned	4
3	aligned	3
2	aligned	2
1	aligned	1

Table D: Summary of the analysis of the Vanuatu TVET Qualifications Framework (VTQF) against the PQF

VQF Levels	Degree of alignment	PQF Levels
	VTQF does not have levels 7 - 10	10
		9
		8
		7
6	Domain and descriptors are similar but no credit requirement indicated, further discussion needed	6
5	Domain and descriptors are similar but no credit requirement indicated, further discussion needed	5
4	Domain and descriptors are similar but no credit requirement indicated, further discussion needed	4
3	Domain and descriptors are similar but no credit requirement indicated, further discussion needed	3
2	Domain and descriptors are similar but credit alignment needs more discussion,	2
1	Domain and descriptors are similar but credit alignment needs more discussion	1

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