

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK – KYRGYZSTAN

The contents of this paper are the sole responsibility of the ETF and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU institutions.

© European Training Foundation, 2021

Reproduction is authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1 NQF snapshot

Kyrgyzstan adopted a decree on a 9-level national qualifications framework (NQF) in September 2020, updating the concept adopted in 2016. The framework includes qualifications from general education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, and adult education. Its levels are described in learning outcomes.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MLSD) currently lead development of the national qualification system (NQS), which task includes the implementation of the NQF. Other key actors in the NQS' development are the Agency for Primary Vocational Education and Training (APVET) and the Chambers of Commerce and Industry¹.

Some qualifications can be awarded via validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Kyrgyzstan has formally adopted an NQF. The country has developed several methodological tools, and piloted standards, curricula, and validation of nonformal learning. However, stakeholder engagement is for the time being limited to a narrow set of actors and institutional arrangements are not yet settled. Key features of the qualification system remain to be progressed, including implementation of a quality assurance system for qualifications and application of learning outcomes in the qualifications themselves. Kyrgyzstan has therefore reached the adoption stage.

1.2 Policy context

The EU and Kyrgyzstan are currently negotiating an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, expected to be signed in 2021.

Kyrgyzstan is a developing country with a youthful and growing population. Its 6.4 million people are projected to increase to 7.5 million by 2030².

In the last 8 years the country has sustained stable economic growth; in 2018 GDP rose by 3.5%³. Agriculture and construction are key industries, while the service sector is expanding quickest. But poverty is widespread. In 2019, 20.1% of the population was still below the poverty line⁴; poverty is most entrenched in the countryside.

More than 700,000 Kyrgyz are labour migrants, the majority travelling to the Russian Federation⁵. Their remittances are an important source of national revenue.

¹ The Ministry of Education and Science is currently being reorganised. It is planned that APVET become a department within the Ministry rather than function as an autonomous agency.

² UN 2019 World population prospects, <https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/>

³ World Bank

⁴ WB open data

⁵ <https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/news/current-migration-situation-and-trends-kyrgyzstan#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20report%20of,were%20in%20the%20Russian%20Federation.&text=Almost%2040%25%20of%20Kyrgyz%20migrants%20to%20Russia%20are%20women.>

There are pronounced gender divides in the country's activity and employment rates. The activity rate was 60.1% in 2017 overall, but 45.9% for women, while the employment rate was 55.9% overall, but 41.8% for women.

Unemployment is relatively low, at 6.9 % in 2017. However, for young people aged 15-24 it was 14.8% the same year and higher still for young women at 21%⁶. The informal economy is extensive, indeed in 2018 it was estimated that 71% of all employment was informal⁷.

The National Development Strategy 2018-2040 calls for the country to become a favourable destination for foreign investment within the Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Belt and Road Initiative. Development of export-oriented, local natural and human resources-based light and processing industries are key.

The Strategy's education component provides for an education and training system which equips people with labour market-relevant skills, encourages lifelong learning, and offers inclusive access to education.

The Covid 19 outbreak required urgent solutions to ensure continuity. Web and TV- based distance learning was launched in early April 2020, but with more provision for general education than for VET. It proved especially difficult to maintain practical training - strict lockdown regulations cancelled all practice in enterprises, while distance learning could not substitute for this deficit. The lockdowns revealed gaps in the country's digital and distance learning readiness, but it remains to be seen if these shortcomings will prompt systemic changes in education and training.

1.3 NQF legal basis

There are several legal acts which respectively establish the NQF or provide for its development.

A joint Order on the adoption of an NQF was issued by MES and MLSD on 17 March 2016. This regulation provides the basis for future NQF development, outlines the NQF's purpose and structure, and describes the correspondence between the Kyrgyz NQF levels and those in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The Amended Law on Education of the Kyrgyz Republic, adopted on 2 May 2019, adapted the concepts of national qualification system, national qualifications framework, professional standards, and sectoral frameworks⁸.

On 30 September 2019, the NQS Concept was adopted by the Government, while the related Action Plan was approved on 16 March 2020.

A Government Decree of 18 September 2020 formally adopted the 9-level Kyrgyz NQF, updating the 2016 Order.

⁶ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

⁷ ETF Torino Process report 2018-2020, reference to data of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

⁸ <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111918?cl=ru-ru>

2. POLICY OBJECTIVES

2.1 Education and training reforms

Approximately 35% of upper secondary students are enrolled in VET programmes.

In the Kyrgyz system, students can enter initial VET (IVET) or secondary VET (SVET) after basic secondary education i.e. after 9 years' schooling; or after full secondary education, i.e. 11 years. It is also possible to enter IVET without having completed basic secondary education.

Initial VET (IVET) providers are the vocational lyceums and vocational schools. They deliver the following:

- programmes combining general secondary education with VET, lasting a minimum of 3 years;
- VET programmes, following primary school, with a duration of 1-2 years;
- post-secondary VET programmes, following general education; duration minimum 1 year;
- retraining and upskilling VET courses, with a duration of up to 1 year.

Secondary vocational education programmes are delivered in secondary vocational and higher vocational education schools. Secondary vocational education (SVET) provides training and retraining of middle-level specialists after basic general education, or general secondary education, and leads to qualifications equivalent to level 5 in the Kyrgyz NQF.

The standard periods of full-time study in SVET are 1 year 10 months after secondary education, or 2 years 10 months of full-time study after basic general education.

The Education Development Strategy 2021–2040 guides the education and training reform programme, including further development of the NQS. It comprises supporting elements such as methodological development, improvement and updates of VET content based on occupational standards, independent assessment and certification in line with the NQF.

NQS-related objectives of the 2012-2018 National Development Strategy are supported by international projects led by external donors, who have been key players in Kyrgyz VET development. These projects include:

- the 2nd Vocational Education and Skills Development project⁹, and the Skills for Inclusive Growth Sector Development Programme¹⁰, both run by the Asian Development Bank (ADB);
- Applying G20 Training, coordinated by ILO-G20¹¹;
- Promotion of employment and vocational qualifications, led by GIZ¹².

These programmes foster development and application of occupational standards, competence-based curricula and implementation of independent certification.

In all the Central Asian countries, the influence of the old Soviet tariff qualification system, which regulated the labour market and education provision through classifiers of occupations, plus

⁹ <https://www.adb.org/projects/38298-023/main#project-documents>

¹⁰ <https://www.adb.org/projects/50024-002/main>

¹¹ https://www.ilo.org/moscow/news/WCMS_561945/lang--en/index.htm?ssSourceSiteId=skills

¹² http://www.giz-employment.kg/promotion_employment/

qualification characteristics and state educational standards, remains apparent. There is still a tendency to consider qualifications as a licence to practise, rather than as a passport to multiple careers and lifelong learning.

2.2 Aims of NQF

The NQF is intended to:

- support the development of sectoral qualifications frameworks and occupational standards;
- make qualifications from the different education and training sectors more transparent and comparable to one another;
- act as a reference to develop new qualifications;
- support recognition of national qualifications, at home and abroad;
- encourage lifelong learning broadly.

The government is developing the NQF to serve users including government agencies, employers, enterprises, educational organizations, and learners and citizens.

3. LEVELS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND QUALIFICATIONS

3.1 NQF scope and structure

The NQF has 9 levels. The NQF legal acts allow for inclusion of sublevels to respond to labour market need or changes in the education and training system. Descriptors are described in learning outcomes, and divided by knowledge, skills, and personal competences.

The NQF accommodates qualifications from general education, VET, higher education, and adult education.

General secondary education or VET qualifications are placed at NQF levels 2 to 5, while levels 6 to 9 are reserved for higher education.

The NQF allows for award of qualifications via formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Sectoral qualifications frameworks are still to be implemented. However, an Asian Development Bank (ADB) project has developed a methodology to guide development of such frameworks in future and has already drafted a sectoral framework in pedagogy, which has been submitted for approval to the Ministry of Education¹³. It consists of 6 levels, equivalent to levels 4-9 in the new NQF¹⁴.

Currently a number of occupational classifiers are applied in the country, usually mapped to programme, rather than NQF, levels.

The Education Development Strategy identifies that the absence of regular updating mechanisms for the lists of Initial VET (IVET) and Secondary VET (SVET) occupations and related curricula is a

¹³ <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/about/proekty/aziatskij-bank-razvitiya/programma-razvitiya-sektora-navyki-dlya-inklyuzivnogo-rosta/16-politicheskikh-mer/politicheskoe-dejstvie-3/>

¹⁴ <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/about/obcuzhdeniya/>

weakness of the Kyrgyz education system and envisages a gradual transfer from the lists of IVET and SVET occupations to flexible and permeable mechanisms based on labour market needs and in line with the NQF.

3.2 Types of qualifications

In VET, the following qualifications types are offered:

- initial VET diplomas, equivalent to level 4 in the NQF;
- short-duration certificates in vocational training, retraining and upskilling; equivalent to level 3 in the NQF;
- secondary VET diplomas, equivalent to level 5 in the NQF.

Secondary education, both general and VET, concludes with a final exam and state certification. To enter higher education, applicants must pass a national exam or test administered by the Centre for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods.

In higher education, a Government Decree adopted in 2011 a 2-level structure of higher education, by introducing bachelor's and master's degrees.

3.3 Quality assurance of qualifications

State educational standards for all levels of education specify the requirements for the quality, structure, conditions of implementation, general and vocational competences, and learning outcomes of curricula.

Model state educational standards were approved in 2018 for initial VET¹⁵ and in 2019 for secondary VET¹⁶.

Educational standards are used for the development of curricula, for mechanisms and criteria of education quality control, and for the accreditation of providers and curricula.

External quality assurance of qualifications developed by VET providers is implemented through independent accreditation. The National Accreditation Council (NAC) was set up in 2014 in order to coordinate certification of independent accreditation agencies and monitor their activities. There are currently seven independent accreditation agencies¹⁷. So, the NAC authorises independent accreditation agencies which then accredit schools and other providers.

A Government decree was issued in 2015¹⁸, specifying accreditation criteria for initial, secondary, and higher VET institutions. Criteria concerning curricula stipulates that it should be formulated in learning outcomes developed jointly with stakeholders from professional associations and industries.

In 2018, the majority of educational institutions passed accreditation procedures, applied either by MES or by one of the independent accreditation agencies.

¹⁵ <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/12065>

¹⁶ <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/11724?cl=ru-ru#p2>

¹⁷ <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/about/nacionalnyj-akkreditacionnyj-sovet/reestry/>

¹⁸ <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/98206>

The traditional system of assessing the quality of education of the VET students and graduates includes evaluation of their current academic performance, interim and final state certification. The final state certification commission includes external experts or employers, though the degree of their involvement in the final decision-making process varies.

The VET system has been piloting for several years a model of independent certification of graduates, as well as validation of nonformal learning, supported by the GIZ programme "Promotion of Employment and Vocational Qualification".

3.4 Use of learning outcomes and standards

The development of occupational standards and their translation into competence-based curricula has been carried out through international projects.

During 2013-2019, the ADB 2nd Vocational Education and Skills Development project developed occupational standards for 45 qualifications and 26 competence-based training curricula for VET in 7 priority economic sectors. Another ADB project, Skills for Inclusive Growth and Sector Development, developed, during 2020, occupational standards for 15 specialities and 10 occupations taught in Kyrgyz VET colleges and lyceums.

These standards will be applied in the curricula of centres of vocational excellence across the country.

An ILO-G20 project developed occupational standards for 6 qualifications in the gas, milk processing and tourism and hotel sectors.

Educational standards for initial and secondary VET stipulate that programmes should be based on labour market need.

3.5 Credit systems

Kyrgyzstan ratified and brought into force within its territory the Lisbon Recognition Convention in higher education in 2004¹⁹. In 2011, Government Decree number 496 adopted a 2-level structure of higher education, by introducing bachelor's and master's degrees expressed in credits, in order to strengthen integration with the international education community²⁰.

In 2018, Government Decree number 160 adopted a model state educational standard for secondary VET. It introduced a credit system for secondary VET programmes. Adoption of a credit system in initial VET is also envisaged by the Education Development Strategy 2021-2040.

¹⁹ Formally, the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (11/04/1997). It is an international convention jointly developed and adopted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, which binds signatory countries to adopt fair practices in recognising HE qualifications.

²⁰ <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/92802>

4. INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

4.1 Governance and institutional arrangements for the NQF

MES and MLSD lead development of the NQF and the wider national qualification system (NQS) strategy. MLSD monitors and reports to the Government on the implementation of the NQS Action Plan.

The Agency for Primary Vocational Education and Training (APVET) is responsible for initial VET; it also develops legislation on validation.

The NQS Action Plan for 2020-2021 foresees the creation of a National Qualifications Council (NQC), which would be the coordinating agency for the NQF. Legislation to establish the Council is being prepared and national consultations with relevant Ministries and stakeholders are being conducted with the support of ADB.

4.2 Roles and functions of actors and stakeholders

In principle, broad stakeholder involvement in the NQS is foreseen. The NQS Strategy calls for the NQF and wider NQS to be developed in close cooperation with professional associations, trades unions, educational foundations, employer bodies, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, ministries, and providers.

But in practice, beyond the governmental institutions, stakeholder engagement in developing the NQF has so far been limited. There are few big employers in a country whose economic activity is dominated by SMEs. Therefore, there are few employers which have the resources and expertise to contribute to education and training strategies.

Further, where present, stakeholder contribution is usually consultative rather than cooperative in nature.

However, some employers are aware of and understand NQF concepts via their involvement in the various international and donor-driven projects on the qualification system. For example, the Asian Development Bank ran a project on developing and updating occupational standards and modular curricula, which engaged employers and other stakeholders in advising on curricula content.

One area where sectors are active in the country's qualification system is validation of nonformal learning. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry has a role in coordination of independent certification, which engages employers in the assessment committees. Involvement of employers is also specified as one of requirements for independent accreditation of educational institutions.

5. RECOGNISING AND VALIDATING NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING AND LEARNING PATHWAYS

5.1 VNFIL arrangements

Expanding the system of validation of nonformal and informal learning is an aim of the Education Development Strategy 2021-2040.

A pilot validation and independent certification model has been implemented since 2017 with support of the GIZ project, Promotion of Employment and Vocational Qualifications.

The Coordination Council for Independent Certification under the Chamber of Commerce and Industry develops and coordinates the system of independent certification in Kyrgyzstan. It is composed of representatives from sectoral organisations, MLSL, APVET and enterprises.

Currently, the Centre of Independent Certification in Catering and Food Services provides independent certification services.

To date, 1,500 graduates have undergone independent certification in 8 sectors with support from GIZ. In 2018 the validation methodology was tested for several occupations in personal care and food and catering sectors; 11 candidates were awarded qualifications.

In 2019 the Agency for Primary Vocational Education and Training piloted validation in the construction industry, catering, the beauty industry, housing and utilities. Currently, the Agency is developing legislative proposals for validation²¹.

6. NQF IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

6.1 Key achievements and main findings

The inclusion of NQS elements in the country's strategies and implementation plans, and the recent approval of the NQF, confirm that the NQF is a priority.

Various donor-funded projects have developed elements of a qualifications system, including occupational standards, modular curricula, VNFIL, and careers guidance.

6.2 Qualifications registers and databases

There is currently no database or national qualifications register. However, the NQS Action Plan provides for creation of a qualifications database.

²¹ <http://www.kesip.kg/novosti/validacziya-%E2%80%93eto-priznanie-vsex-vidov-professionalnyix-kompetenczij-i-znanij.-nezavisimo-ot-vremeni-i-mesta-ix-priobreteniya-poluchennyix-neformalnyim-i-informalnyim-metodom>

6.3 Qualification documents

Ministries are seeking to better integrate the various careers advice services available.

Information is provided via a range of media and sources nation-wide, including audio-visual information on sectors, specialised TV and radio programmes, and regular coverage of vocational guidance activities on the newly launched website <https://bilim.akipress.org/>.

The Agency for Primary Vocational Education and Training has collaborated with ADB and GIZ in a number of careers guidance projects, which have produced guides and other tools.

There is currently no national open access resource providing information on skills needs forecasts.

6.4 Recognition of foreign qualifications

The VET Unit within the Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for the recognition of foreign higher education degrees. The Kyrgyz Higher Attestation Commission coordinates recognition and *nostrification*²² of PhD academic degrees and titles received in foreign countries, and issues certificates of equivalence.

Kyrgyzstan is a member of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). EEU member countries implement mutual recognition of qualifications and degrees for labour migration purposes (except for education certificates in pedagogy, law, health, pharmaceuticals)²³.

7. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORK/ OTHER FRAMEWORKS

7.1 Referencing to regional frameworks

Kyrgyzstan is not a member of the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna Process), but its NQF and wider higher education reforms are strongly influenced by Bologna and the EQF, which can be seen in the NQF's structure, its functions, and its learning outcomes basis. The inter-ministerial Order on the NQF explicitly refers to these frameworks as influences.

7.2 International cooperation

Kyrgyzstan participates in the EU's European Education Initiative in Central Asia (EEI), which fosters cooperation - both between Central Asia and the EU, and among the CA countries themselves - in order to strengthen educational reforms in the region.

A notable action within the Initiative was the Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP) project, which included both broad policy dialogue and technical development components, including on NQFs.

Kyrgyzstan is a Partner country of the Erasmus + programme.

²² Nostrification - the process of granting recognition to a degree from a foreign university.

²³ <http://www.eurasiancommission.org>, Workers' rights in education in the member countries

Kyrgyzstan is a member of both the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), both of which are seeking to link member countries' education systems more closely.

In the recently adopted decision "On strategic priorities of Eurasian economic integration to 2025," the five countries of the EEU agreed on measures to support integration in labour migration, including achieving comparability of education systems and skills and qualifications²⁴.

As a SCO member, Kyrgyzstan takes part in the SCO University – a programme of cooperation and student exchange in higher education between the SCO countries²⁵.

7.3 International donor support

Donors, especially the EU, ADB, ILO and GIZ, have played a major part in developing the country's qualification system.

The EU has supported education and training via budget support for education sector reform, and through the Tempus programme in higher education. Initiatives such as NQF-Quadriga under Tempus have proposed methodologies to develop an NQF.

GIZ, ADB and ILO are all driving forward projects in areas such as standards and curricula.

8. IMPORTANT LESSONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Adoption of the NQF decree and the national qualification system concept and action plan signal the country's intention to reform its qualification systems on lifelong learning lines and to better meet labour market needs.

The NQS Action Plan specifies establishment of a National Qualifications Council, development of occupational standards, building of sectoral frameworks, piloting of certification in defined sectors and the creation of a national qualifications database of qualifications.

Kyrgyzstan will continue to need to draw on international support and finance to progress its NQF.

While the basic legal framework is there, stakeholder participation is limited in the range of bodies involved and in the nature of their role, which remains consultative and sporadic rather than cooperative and formalised. The government could start by launching a public information campaign on the added value of the NQS, engaging stakeholders in events and using other media to raise awareness of the NQF's role in the country's education and training system. Allocation of roles and functions to institutions remains to be carried out.

Development and application of quality assurance systems including accreditation of providers and validation of qualifications, is an important next step.

²⁴ <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/nae/news/Pages/14-01-2021-1.aspx>

²⁵ <http://uni-sco.ru/>

9. MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

ETF Torino Process report, <https://openspace.etf.europa.eu/trp/torino-process-2018-2020-kyrgyzstan-national-report>

ETF Covid mapping report, https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-07/etf_covid_mapping_v06_1.pdf

Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan “On education” and 2019 updates, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111918?cl=ru-ru>

NQF of the Kyrgyz Republic, <https://www.gov.kg/ru/npa/s/2709>

NQS Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/157131>

Education Development Strategy 2021–2040

National classifier of occupations of the Kyrgyz Republic, <https://mlsp.gov.kg/2019/04/11/obshherespublikanskij-klassifikator-zanyatij/>

Regulations on the activities of secondary VET institutions of the Kyrgyz Republic (including Model state educational standard), <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/11724>

Regulations on the activities of initial VET institutions of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/54384?cl=ru-ru>

Model state educational standard for initial VET in the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/12065>

Regulations on independent accreditation in the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/98206>

Eurasian Economic Commission, Workers’ rights in education in the member countries, <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/Pages/default.aspx>

University of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, <http://uni-sco.ru/>

ADB, Second Vocational Education and Skills Development Project, <https://www.adb.org/projects/38298-023/main#project-documents>

ADB, Skills for Inclusive Growth Sector Development Program, <https://www.adb.org/projects/50024-002/main>

ILO, “Applying the G20 Training Strategy”, <https://www.ilo.org/skills/projects/g20ts/kyrgyzstan/lang--en/index.htm>

GIZ, Promotion of Employment and Vocational Qualification, <http://www.giz-employment.kg/>

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB Asian Development Bank

APVET Agency for Primary Vocational Education

CAEP Central Asian Education Platform

EEI European Education Initiative

EEU Eurasian Economic Union

ECTS European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

ECVET European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

EEU Eurasian Economic Union

EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German development agency in international cooperation)
ILO	International Labour Organisation (UN)
IVET	Initial VET
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
MLSD	Ministry of Labour and Social Development
NAC	National Accreditation Council
NQC	National Qualifications Council
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualification system
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SVET	Secondary VET
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

