

Introducing the NVQF for more Open and Flexible Skills Domain in Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Phenomenon of Qualifications Framework

National vocational qualifications (NVQ) are competence- based qualifications acquired at workplace that demonstrate that the holder has the (nationally benchmarked) skills and aptitude required to perform the job in question. These qualifications are organised at different levels and are awarded to demonstrate the level of work- based competency the learner has achieved. They could provide avenues for upward progression in the labour market and into higher level education and training routes if desired. Usually, these qualifications are designed on the basis of 'National Occupational Standards' (NOS), which define the standards of performance required for competence in an occupation. The NVQ practice started from the UK and Commonwealth countries, but it has now spread widely in the world. It may be noted from the onset that nowadays most countries, including the UK, operate the more comprehensive National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which goes beyond vocational skills to embrace qualification and credit transfer for the entire education system. But the original NVQ concept introduced in 1986, which illustrates the essence of the system, is described below.

1.2 Rationale and Structure of NVQs as Introduced in 1986

Introduction of NVQs in UK was sequel to the report of the Working Group, chaired by Oscar de Ville, set up to review qualifications in England and Wales, which drew attention to many deficiencies in the then national system of training, skills, and competitiveness. In particular the report showed that,

'...there were millions who left school with few, if any qualifications, entering a world of work which would offer little or no training, no opportunity to develop themselves and no recognition for any competencies they did develop. The traditional apprenticeship system started to collapse. Young people failed to find training, skill shortages arose, businesses, the national economy and the UK's competitiveness suffered.' (Senker, 2003)

The Government therefore tried to achieve the solution by providing a qualifications system that, among other things:

- would recognize the skills people already had;
- was consistent, reliable and well structured;
- was realistic and accessible with scope for progression; and
- should have the full support of all involved.

The result was the first 5-Level National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF), shown in Fig. 1, below, which was organized into a coherent classification based on the competence levels required.

Table 1: First NVQF Developed in UK

Level 1	Competence in routine work activities: Very low level
Level 2	Competence in a significant range of varied work activities, performed in a variety of contexts
Level 3	Competences in a broad range of varied complex work activities: “Craft” level
Level 4	Competence in technical or professional work activities: Technician or Supervisor level
Level 5	Competence which involves the application of a range of fundamental principles; significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of resources

The above table shows the basic scheme of a qualifications framework. It defines levels and specifies the level–descriptors. It is basically an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. Any existing qualifications can be located at the appropriate level for comparison and articulation.

Clearly, a Framework is essentially just a qualification template. It would require job specifications experts and industry-based practitioners, to design work units/modules and structure for each individual occupation. The Framework sets out the scope of competence required; which can be realised in many different learning situations. The key concern is what the learner must know or be able to do whether learning in a classroom, on-the-job, or less formally.

1.3 Goals of National Qualifications Framework

The NVQF is an instrument, which has already been introduced in several countries and is used to classify competence levels necessary for every job, from the beginner’s to the highest professional level. It is equally beneficial for trainees in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, as well as for the industry and employers. Reasons for introducing NQF/NVQF vary across different countries. However, in most cases they include: (a) promoting lifelong learning; and (b) enhancing quality assurance and recognition. These two categories of qualifications framework goals have been concisely described as follows (Tuck, 2007):

(a) Promoting Lifelong Learning,

including objectives such as:

- *improving understanding of learning routes and qualifications and how they relate to each other*
- *improving access to education and training opportunities*
- *creating incentives for participation in education and training*
- *making progression routes easier and clearer/ improving learner and career mobility*
- *increasing and improving credit transfer between qualifications*
- *increasing the scope for recognition of prior learning (RPL)*

(b) Quality Assurance and Recognition

including objectives such as:

- *ensuring that qualifications are relevant to perceived social and economic needs*
- *ensuring that education and training standards are defined by agreed learning outcomes and applied consistently*
- *ensuring that education and training providers meet certain quality standards*
- *securing international recognition for national qualifications*

1.4 Inherent Flexibility and Openness in National Qualifications Framework

NVQs are not obtained by writing professional examinations per se. The assessments are done on the spot at learner’s work place. NVQF is a government directed programme that regulates the structure, titles and quality assurance specifications for vocational qualifications across the whole country, for uniformity. The assessment is usually undertaken by the Awarding Bodies, which work closely with qualified and licensed Assessors and Verifiers, in line with the standards laid out by the

NVQF. It may include a written and oral component, as well as practical demonstration of particular set of skills.

The unique advantage of this type of qualification is that learners/candidates do not have any limitation based on age, period or location of training, provided it is in the same industry. Assessment can be done whenever the candidate is prepared for it.

NVQF provides the learners with ample choice of the time, place, and pace of their study. It is also possible to receive credit, towards the target qualification, through Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), and work place assessment for knowledge and skill acquired elsewhere, or at different times. All these are significant features of Open-Distance-Flexible-Learning (ODFL). These features collectively accommodate vast differences in experiences, interests, and ages between learners and provide ample scope for the constructivist nature of learning demanding active problem-solving by the learner himself or herself.

The NVQF system foresees awarding qualifications on the basis of achievement, rather than the years of study completed. And level descriptors play the key role in the assessment of achievements required to be awarded qualification.

The main purpose of level descriptors is to allow the learners, awarding organisations, employers and the public to understand the range of knowledge and skills required to complete a particular level. Thus level descriptors indicate the outcome of learning and do not deal with the process of learning. Candidates require no formal entry qualifications. However, in reality candidates must be able to read and write to understand the National Occupational Standards and provide evidence of competence.

1.5 Nigeria's NVQF Initiative: Journey so Far

Nigeria's move to introduce vocational qualifications framework began in 2004, with a sensitization seminar organised in partnership with British Council. This was followed by a long period of study of NVQFs in other Commonwealth countries, by personnel of National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and other government agencies concerned with skills development. Then to kick off the actual development, the Hon. Minister of Education inaugurated a National Steering Committee, in December 2010, to produce the first draft of Nigeria's grid of qualification levels and level descriptors.

2. CURRENT SITUATION OF NIGERIAN TVET SECTOR AND EXPECTED OUTCOME OF INTRODUCING NVQF

2.1 Disconnect between Training and Requirements of Industry

According to a recent observation, which also reflects popular perception (Stambler, 2012), Nigerian TVET sector is currently largely characterized by a problem of disconnect between the needs of Nigerian industry and the nation's output of trained technical workers. In many other countries, TVET is an integral part of economic development strategies. But in Nigeria, rather than creating the necessary synergy between education and industry, the TVET system has largely deteriorated over the past three decades.

2.2 Motivation for Introducing NVQ in Nigeria

The move towards the development and institutionalisation of NVQF in Nigeria is essentially driven by three (3) key goals, namely: to enhance the relevance of TVET qualifications, provide vehicle for recognition of informal skills and to engage industries more effectively in developing the competence of their employees. This is because:

- i. There exists poor articulation between qualifications and actual skills needs in the workplace, because educational institutions have been largely disconnected from industrial and socio-economic needs by consistent neglect of competence and placing undue emphasis on 'paper qualification.
- ii. Large part of the Nigerian population had been excluded from formal education system, hence there is the need to put in place a system that will widen access to education and TVET. In particular, the out-of-school at different level of education eventually find themselves at the non formal sector of the economy where the training is neither standardised nor recognised.

Therefore there is the need to put in place a system that will facilitate their integration into the formal education system.

- iii. Industries need to take part in the competency-based skills training of their workers and such training should be given recognition in the national system of educational qualifications.
- iv. Assessment and evaluation processes in TVET institutions, remain largely 'academic', in spite of global trend towards industry-based standard.

It is in recognition of these and other issues that NBTE is spearheading the introduction of a system which will improve the quality, accessibility, linkages and recognition of qualifications within Nigeria and internationally.

3. DEVELOPMENT SO FAR TOWARDS INSTITUTIONALIZING NVQF IN NIGERIA

3.1 Initial Steps

As indicated earlier, the first formal step towards incorporating NVQs in Nigeria's skills mix started in 2004, through a partnership between NBTE and British Council. A stakeholders' workshop was held in Kaduna, which drew large number of NVQ enthusiasts from industrial and education sectors. It was unanimously agreed that to enhance access and equity in education and employment, it will be imperative to institutionalise NVQF in Nigeria. Subsequently, many other consultative and sensitization meetings followed, and study tours were undertaken to various countries, including UK, Malaysia, and Korea, to observe the operation of such national skills frameworks. However, one important step that was omitted was to undertake a needs survey for NVQF among the public and private sectors of the economy.

3.2 Recent Developments: Six-Level NVQF and Federal Government Decision

The NVQ initiative, which had hitherto received little high level support, was given a boost with the inauguration of a National Steering Committee on NVQF, by the Hon. Minister of Education. The steps taken so far include:

- a) Inauguration of a National Steering Committee on NVQF, by the Hon. Minister of Education, on 16th December 2010, and production of draft Framework by March 2011 (see Fig. 1).
- b) Zonal industry consultation in June 2011, at Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kano, to enable stake holders nationwide make input in the draft Framework.
- c) A 3-day consultative meeting with representative of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Geneva and NVQF stakeholders on occupational classifications and the development of NOS; in April, 2012.
- d) Training for the operational staff from NBTE and NABTEB, on processes of Assessment and Verification, was carried out at Interlink College London between April and July, 2012.
- e) Strategy meetings were held with several Government agencies, between October and December 2012, on the procedure and logistics for the commencement of development of NOS.
- f) Federal Executive Council decision of 10th April 2013, to approve the Six- Level NVQF proposed for Nigeria, and directive to the Office of Head of Civil Service of the Federation to incorporate the NVQF in the Public Service Scheme.
- g) Development of 13 National Occupational Standards, for the delivery of NVQs, during a 3-week workshop in Lagos, held April-May 2013. Staff of Interlink College, London, served as the facilitators. These standards cover key occupations in Energy, Hospitality & Tourism, Construction and Service industry.

3.3 Implications for Nigeria's National Policy on ODFL

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NERDC, 2004) does not categorically envisage key role for TVET in open and distance learning. However, the Policy states that the goals of distance education (ODFL) shall be to:

- provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who otherwise would have been denied;
- meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their work place;
- encourage internationalization especially of tertiary education curricula;

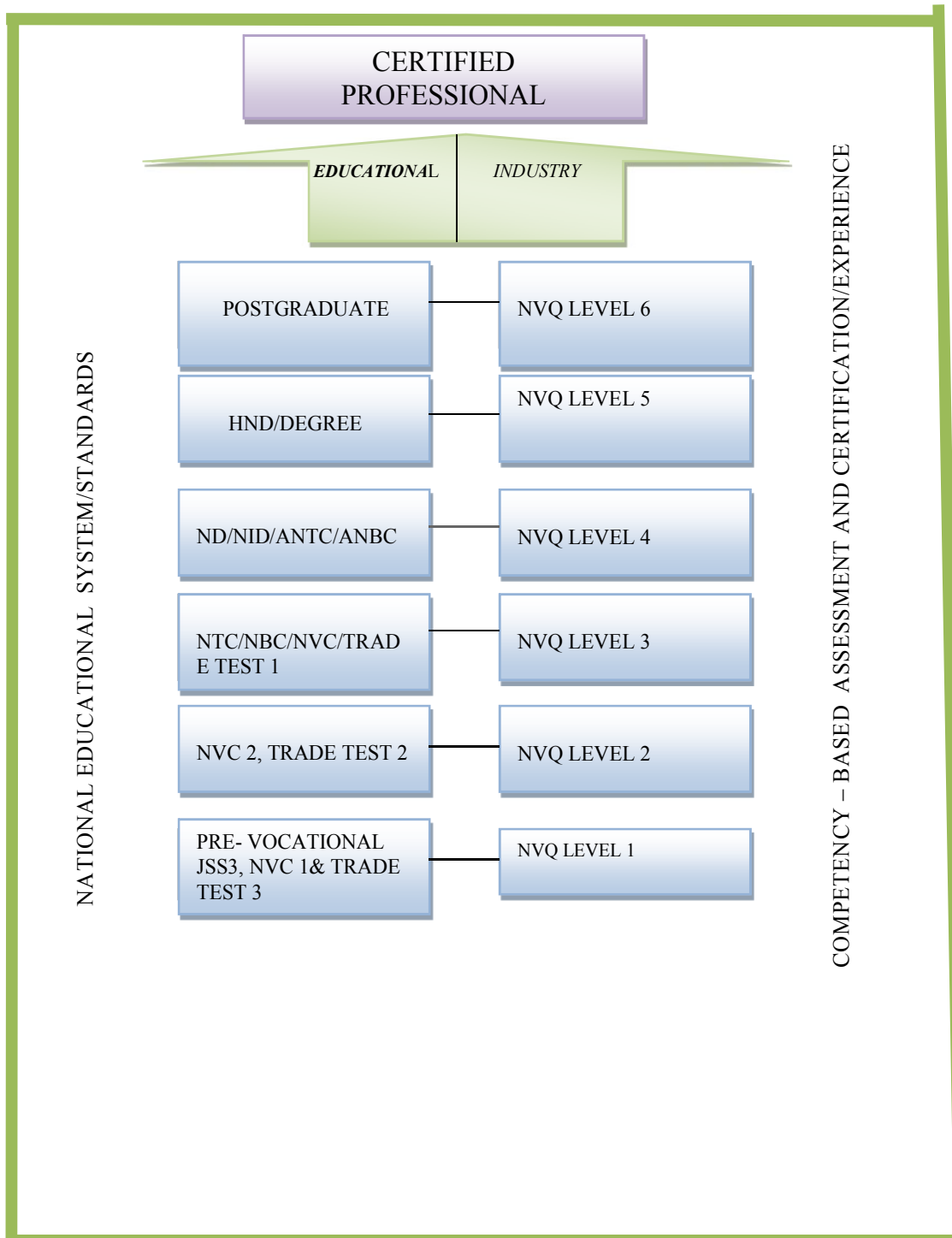


Figure 1: Approved NVQF for Nigeria

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- ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions by utilizing Nigerian experts as teachers regardless of their locations or places of work.

It could be seen from the foregoing discussions on NVQF that a successful delivery of NVQs will greatly facilitate all these goals; i.e, enhancing access to variety of skills for those who might have been disadvantaged, meeting needs of employers for on-the-job training , which is a feature of NVQF, encouraging internationalization through concurrent recognition of skills standards, and extensive usage of skilled practitioners from all nooks and corners of the country as Assessors and Verifiers.

It may also be useful to note that officials of the Federal Ministry of Education had often muted the desirability of an Open Polytechnic system, to be a counterpart to the Open University, and this idea now subsists in the NBTE, with a Desk Officer for ODL, as coordinator. NBTE has therefore also arranged for her staff to participate in several editions of the COL's Flexible Skills Development (FSD) Managers' course, various editions of which were organized online. Of particular interest to the Board were the flexible technologies that could be employed by institutions to enrich teaching and learning, especially by exploring the vast resources available on the web.

A very successful Moodle e-Learning training workshop was organised by the NBTE's Centre of Excellence for TVET in September 2012. The week-long hands-on training exposed system administrators and other ICT specialists, from polytechnics and similar colleges of technology, to the Moodle platform, as applied in the setting up and management of virtual learning environment (VLE). This training attracted 44 ICT officers from 20 institutions. The success achieved in this workshop has now led to a more ambitious project in collaboration with **eLearning Consult** to create awareness on *"New and Emerging Flexible Technologies for Effective Teaching and Learning"*, due to start in November 2013. This is aimed at kick starting a web-based training that could enable academic staff to identify new technologies and apply them in teaching and learning in the Nigerian environment.

4. MAIN CHALLENGES OF OPERATING A SUCCESSFUL NVQF

4.1 Requirements for Operating NVQF

To appreciate the challenges of institutionalizing a successful NVQF, it is necessary to consider the typical setting under which such frameworks operate in most countries.

- a) The NVQ Framework is managed based on National Occupational Standards (NOS). Candidates are assessed on the job to ascertain their achievement or mastery of NOS before being awarded with the National Vocational Qualifications. The NOS are developed with inputs mainly from industry and regulated by guidelines from the NVQF regulatory agency.
- b) The operation of the Framework requires the overall supervision by an NVQF regulatory agency that works with Sector Skills bodies representing the various industries. The Framework embraces levels of increasing competence starting from semi skilled entry level to advanced level professional skills.
- c) A candidate is assessed by an industry-based certified Internal Assessor whose work is validated by both Internal and External Verifiers. The award is made on satisfactory assessment of all the required units of the occupation.
- d) Where awarding bodies exist, they are accredited by the regulatory agency, which also guides their operations.

4.2 Current Nigerian Environment for Institutionalizing NVQF

Considering the steps so far taken, as described in Section 3.2 above, it could be said that the political decision to embark on NVQF has already been taken with the decision of the Government to approve the Six-Level Scheme. However, considering the numerous components of a functional NVQF as outlined above, it is clear that there are so many other outstanding requirements to operate a vocational qualifications framework, and award qualifications. These represent the immediate challenges to be confronted. The following are the most conspicuous:

- i. **Who would be the NVQF Regulatory Agency?** In the absence of a special agency to play this role, regulatory bodies like NBTE could do it, with a substantial expansion of their resources. But ultimately, a special agency may be necessary.
- ii. **Who serves the Role of Sector Skills Bodies?** Such bodies do not currently exist in Nigeria, but the various industries can form special committees to represent their clusters, as an interim measure.
- iii. **Who awards the qualifications?** The only existing awarding body for TVET is NABTEB. With time other bodies can be commissioned by Government to play the role. But they have to be guided by NVQF Regulatory Agency.
- iv. **How would industry be involved in Assessment and Standard setting?** Primarily, these roles will be executed by employees from the industries. The precise modalities have to be decided by continuing consultation.
- v. **Who provides Quality Assurance and Control?** The NVQF Regulatory Agency.
- vi. **Who licenses the Operators?** The NVQF Regulatory Agency.

5. CONCLUSION

It is generally held that the most effective approach to building a vocational qualification framework is to start with clear policy aims. This is essentially satisfied in the case of Nigerian NVQF, as it is focused on developing more relevant and functional skill, extending qualifications to informal sector and engaging Industry in the processes of developing occupational skills and assessing the work force. But while the objectives are clearly stated, there is no proper understanding of how the Framework can best be developed and implemented, because many of the necessary functional bodies and operatives, such as Sector Skills bodies, Awarding bodies, Assessors and Verifiers, are yet to be in place.

In conclusion, it may be noted that the most important reason for recognising any NVQF agency is the validity of its quality assurance role. Three important measures of quality assurance are: validation of qualifications and/or standards; accreditation and audit of education and training institutions; and quality assurance of assessment leading to the award of qualifications. These roles could be played by the agencies mandated for quality assurance such as NBTE, but they have to expand the scope of their resources and operations extensively, to do this effectively.

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