



World Reference Levels: A global learning outcomes initiative to promote recognition of learning

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1. Introduction

One of the responsibilities of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is to keep the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) family and its stakeholders informed of the latest trends in NQF developments in the world. The intention of this article is to provide the most up-to-date information on the move to develop a set of World Reference Levels (WRLs), based on learning outcomes (i.e. what learners know, understand and can do after a learning experience). In a context where both people and their jobs have become, and will continue to become increasingly mobile, the purpose of the WRLs is to provide a global mechanism that describes levels of learning achievement, across different types of learning, in order to promote the recognition of learning.

This article outlines the progress in the development of the proposed WRLs. It also provides a brief description of the proposed WRLs model and the phases to completion. It concludes with an outline of SAQA's contribution to the learning outcomes agenda and its participation in other recognition initiatives at regional and global level.

2. Timeline: Origins and development of WRLs

The WRLs has its origins in the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), that took place on 14-16 May 2012 in Shanghai, organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The TVET Congress culminated in the adoption of the Shanghai Consensus which included the following recommendations:

- Exploring the development of international guidelines on quality assurance to guide recognition of qualifications based on learning outcomes, and
- Identifying a set of WRLs to facilitate international comparison and recognition of TVET qualifications.

As a first response to the Shanghai recommendation, UNESCO undertook, at national and regional levels, a *global study on the use of level descriptors for defining learning outcomes*. The study further gave rise to a clear roadmap to the achievement of the WRLs comprising four key milestones namely:

- Phase 1: Technical review of level descriptors at national and regional levels (completed with the global study),
- Phase 2: Conceptual development of the WRLs,
- Phase 3: Broad consultation, and
- Phase 4: Political process of defining and adopting WRLs.

To initiate the conceptual development of the WRLs, UNESCO spearheaded the following:

- September 2013 (Brussels): A workshop was held on *Engaging Global Conversations on Recognition of TVET Qualifications based on learning outcomes*,
- September 2014 (Paris): A platform of experts was established, comprising regional and international organisations working in the field of recognition of qualifications, to share expertise and work together. The Experts Committee also discussed the key insights from the global study,
- April 2015 (Paris): A 2nd Experts meeting was held to clarify how to take forward the work of the WRLs. In this regard, peer-learning activities (PLAs) were conducted to

- develop common guidelines around the formulation of learning outcomes to support cross-border recognition of qualifications,
- December 2015 (Paris): A 3rd Experts meeting was held to discuss the outcomes of the PLAs and how these can be used to develop international guidelines,
- May 2016 (Cape Town): A 4th Experts meeting focused on examining the methodology of a comparative study on level descriptors in qualifications frameworks. The meeting also explored the use of digital tools in promoting student and labour mobility,
- November 2016 (Brussels): A 5th Experts meeting examined the progress on the development of a model for the WRLs. This model was based on a comparative analysis of level descriptors used in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQFs), and
- June 2017 (Paris): A 6th Experts meeting further discussed the WRLs model and the possibility of undertaking a field-testing exercise.

3. The WRLs model

The WRLs model has two parts namely a WRL matching tool and a WRL eco-system.

The matching tool provides a common language that can be used to compare learning. As described earlier, the matching tool has its underpinnings in a detailed analysis of qualifications frameworks and other hierarchical outcomes-based structures related to recognition of learning across contexts, and has been discussed and revised as a result of expert engagements at various intervals in its conception. It was agreed that it should be field-tested to assist improvement and also shape issues for future piloting.

The matching tool has been placed in a wider WRL eco-system with the intent to assure the quality of the tool and its application. The WRL system will be piloted at a later time. It is envisaged that the piloting will address a number of issues raised in engagements with experts.

3.1 The WRLs matching tool

The WRLs matching tool has three components- stages, factors and concordances:

3.1.1 Stages:

These stages are four broad reference levels which indicate the distinctive stages of progression in education and training, generic employment or career pathways. They provide summaries of the capacities associated with each of the four stages. Also included is a description of lower and higher phases of the capacities associated with each stage.

3.1.2 Factors:

Each of the four stages is broken down into eleven descriptions which are significant for determining the levels of qualifications, credentials or competences. These factors are formally defined and have a hierarchical set of statements outlining what individuals will be able to do regarding each factor at each of the four stages.

3.1.3 Concordances:

There are fifty six definitions and illustrations of the main concepts in the stage descriptors and factor statements. The intention of the concordances is to provide a bank of ways to illustrate how the concepts in the stages and factors are expressed in a range of frameworks. It is envisaged that this bank of illustrations will assist in the application of the WRLs.

Practical field-testing of the matching tool will present an opportunity for participants to comment on, or raise broad and specific issues about, the clarity and effectiveness of the

stages, factors and concordances. Ideally, the field-testing events should focus on TVET qualifications/ credentials, but it is also considered helpful to include general and academic qualifications or credentials. Preferably, participants should encompass a range of perspectives/ cultures, including vocational and academic course/qualification developers, teachers and trainers, and occupational standards developers or human resource managers from different parts of the world. Feedback from the field-testing will be used to inform a user-manual to guide the use of the WRL matching tool when it becomes operational. The completion of the field-testing and broader piloting of the WRLs will bring to a close the conceptual development phase of the WRLs and offset broader consultation. The conclusion of the consultation phase will move the process into the final phase which involves the political process of adopting the WRLs.

4. SAQA's contribution to learning outcomes methodologies

Thus far SAQA, along with World Skills International and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have volunteered to partake in the field-testing of the WRLs. Participation in the field-testing will present an opportunity for SAQA to, reflect on the ¹*Level Descriptors for the South African NQF*, draw on the experience and possibly improve the South African Level Descriptors.

In addition to being willing to field-test the WRLs, SAQA has been involved in the research and writing of level descriptors at national and regional levels and serves on the Committee of Experts dealing with the conceptual development of the WRLs.

SAQA is also involved in other regional and global initiatives to promote mobility and recognition of learning by making skills and qualifications more transparent and recognised including:

- Playing a key role in setting up the *Addis Convention on mutual recognition of higher education qualifications in African states* in South Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC);
- Assisting in driving implementation of the SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF);
- Playing a major role in setting up verification structures on the African Continent and in SADC for example the African Qualifications Verification Network (AQVN) and the SADC Qualifications Verification Network (SADCQVN);
- Serving on the Executive of the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) which drives the global agenda to digitise learner records;
- Developing policy on the misrepresentation of qualifications (a first in the world). SAQA also serves on the Executive of the GDN Taskforce on misrepresented qualifications; and
- Chairing the Education Sector Committee (ESC) of the South African National Commission (NATCOM) for UNESCO.

5. Conclusion

This article has provided a brief description of the proposed WRLs, a major global initiative based on learning outcomes under the oversight of UNESCO. The WRLs, once operationalised will promote recognition of learning by providing a global mechanism that describes levels of learning achievement across different types of learning. The NQF family needs to, not only take cognisance of this important development in the global use of learning outcomes to promote mobility across regional and global borders, but also the potential that this development offers South African stakeholders to reflect on and strengthen the South African NQF.

¹ The South African Level Descriptors, which SAQA developed in consultation with the Quality Councils in South Africa, provide the overarching learning outcomes for all qualifications registered on the NQF in South Africa. NQF qualifications are framed in terms of Exit Level Outcomes (ELOs) and their Associated Assessment Criteria. Further all modules or subjects in NQF qualifications are also learning outcomes-based.