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# **National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) for Nepal: Necessity or Waste of Money? Experts' Standpoint**

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## **Abstract**

*A purpose of this study was to understand whether NVQF is the necessity for the sustainable prosperity of TVET sector of Nepal or just a waste of money. The study had been carried out applying qualitative methodology in the form of narrative enquiry. The understanding and perception of five TVET experts were detailed with the help of following questions, viz. (a) how do you perceive for the necessity of NVQF in Nepal and (b) what are the major challenges and how can we cope with these challenges for the successful implementation of NVQF in Nepal. The experts' understanding and experiences revealed that not only NVQF but also NQF are in dire need to streamline the education system of Nepal. However, there are many challenges and issues both at the policy level and at the implementation stage. These challenges and issues need to be strategically addressed from the very beginning of the NVQF project; otherwise, it could be just like "pouring water into sand".*

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**Keywords:** National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF), National Qualification Framework (NQF), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL).

## **Context**

A vast majority of people agrees that with the vision of "Skilling Nepal for People's Prosperity" and with this, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector of Nepal is booming day by day. Certainly, several key personalities and National/International development/donor agencies should be attributed for their positive reinforcements to systematize Nepal's TVET sector. In contrast,

another group of people expresses their indignation by blaming the system for selecting the project without identifying the tangible needs of the country. Also, they claim that the projects are being selected due to the influence and pressure from donor agencies or simply being done for donors' sake. Likewise, another group of people suggest that the system should rather be more selective of the projects and do some homework to identify the potential benefits

and should have some strong bargaining power before accepting any kind of project. These concerns from aforementioned groups are raised time and again, but are often highlighted especially when a new potential project appears on the horizon. In this connection, recently launched Nepal Vocational Qualifications System (NVQS) Project is not an exception. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) via Swisscontact is supporting the Ministry of Education of Nepal to establish a National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) and a corresponding National Vocational Qualification Authority (NVQA) (Swisscontact, 2015). NVQS project of Nepal expects that the NVQF/A provides pathways of progression from informal short courses to the formal TVET programs and progression paths especially for disadvantaged youths with the lower level skills to higher levels and easy transitions between the pillars of the education system, improve the quality and labor market relevancy of TVET offers and expands their coverage of the labor market, and establishes equivalencies with vocational qualification systems to overseas labor markets (Swiss Development Cooperation, 2014).

### **Initiatives for NVQF in Nepal**

In Nepal, the concept of NVQF has not been emerged accidentally. For the long time, the TVET experts who were working for TVET sector of Nepal (Adhikary, 2013; Basnet and Basnet, 2013; Ghimire, 2013; Sharma, 2014) have realized the importance and have been advocating for the necessity of NVQF. Sharma (2014) claims NVQF opens up access to wider population, develops a system of lifelong learning, recognizes prior learning acquired from informal and non-formal means and harmonizes qualification awarded by several bodies, facilitates horizontal and vertical mobility of learner, and promotes wider recognition of the earned qualification. For Adhikari (2013), NVQF provides a mechanism for transferring the control of vocational education from training providers to employers and protects school-leavers who otherwise may get stuck doing unskilled job throughout their lives. Likewise,

Ghimire (2013), states that educational authorities of Nepal do not recognize prior learning and current informal/non-formal learning for horizontal and vertical movement in formal educational streams at different level. The development and implementation of NVQF opens the door to mainstream school dropouts and non-schooling youths. Similarly, Basnet and Basnet (2013) advocate for NVQF to ensure a standardized and trustworthy certification system.

Likewise, the TVET policy, 2012 (2069 B.S.) has tried to address the concept of NVQF by making a policy of firm integration of TVET programs and pathways to achieve one of its objectives to provide market based quality TVET programs and recognition of the prior learning (RPL) (MOE, 2012).

In addition, the strategic plan of Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) for 2014-2018 has kept “Establish NVQF to ensure its compatibility with education framework” as one of the goals **Invalid source specified..**

Now a question arises. How can something that has been established as a very dire need from a policy level and from other researchers considered to be a waste of money? However, with previous track history of some of the donor-driven projects that have not proved to be sustainable and effective, the question of whether granted resources are being utilized suitably is also a concern, School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) for example. Ghimire (2015) claims that SSRP is a failure due to the lack of legal provisions to realize its vision. Nevertheless, the ministry has termed SSRP as a success (Ghimire B. , 2015). Amidst such different perspectives, I argue that there seems to be no definitive answer to whether SSRP can be labeled as a failure or success. For this, educationists really need to analyze the overall project selection procedure. However, the current concern is NVQS project. Firstly, can NVQS project become a success? Secondly, what can we do to make sure NVQS project is successfully and sustainably established and implemented?

With all these concerns in mind, the present study attempts to explore the perceptions and understandings of TVET experts on NVQF. The understandings and experiences of TVET experts when adequately tapped will provide the ways out to cope with the challenges and threats regarding the successful and sustainable establishment and implementation of NVQF/S in Nepal.

### **Global practices of NVQF**

Many countries have already established NVQF and now Nepal is on the way to establish it. The countries that have already establishing NVQF believe that it may help them to ensure the quality of their national education system, provide the flexibility and opportunity to advance for learners, get international recognition and ultimately flourish the country's economic level by fulfilling social requirements (Tuck, 2007).

With an exception to South Korea (UNESCO, 2014), most of the developed countries such as China, Germany and United States of America (USA) practice NVQF for horizontal and vertical movement from one stream to the other and also recognize prior learning. Here I portray practices of NVQF in some of South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The rationale behind selecting South Asian countries is: to some extent, the Nepalese context is culturally, socially, economically and geographically similar to these countries.

**Sri Lanka:** The NVQF of Sri Lanka that was officially launched in August 2004 has adopted the level descriptors of the New Zealand National Vocational Qualifications. The Sri Lankan NVQF consists of seven levels of qualification. Level one to four cover the competencies required at the craft level and award certificates; level five and six for middle level technical qualifications award diploma; and level seven is for the bachelor's degree level (ADB, 2011). As per the report published by Asian Development Bank in 2011, the NVQF of Sri Lanka provides quality assured and nationally consistent TVET that

is relevant to the Sri Lankan context and is of an international standard. NVQs are based on national competency standards identified by industry stakeholders. The University of Vocational Technology (UNIVOTEC) is responsible for developing curricula, teacher guides and learner guides in Sri Lanka (ADB, 2011). Sri Lanka has successfully established NVQF in a relatively short period and working hard for its effective operationalization (Maclean, Jagannathan, & Sarvi, 2013).

**Bhutan:** Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC) has developed the Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF). The framework encompasses all the qualifications that enable comparison of university, vocational, and monastic education (Bhutan Accreditation Council, 2012). The Bhutan Vocational Qualification Framework (BVQF), systematized to streamline and unify TVET system in the country, ensures unified recognized national vocational qualifications, recognition of prior learning (RPL), linkage between TVET and tertiary education and provision of credit for part of a qualification and enforcement of quality assurance framework (Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, 2013). BVQF consists of five levels of qualification. Level one to three cover the competencies required at the semi-skilled to master craftsman stage and awards certificates, and level four and five is for supervisor or managerial personnel and awards diploma. The department of occupational standards is responsible for developing, implementing and monitoring the BVQF and quality assurance system in the country (Bhutan Accreditation Council, 2012). Level one to three is comparable to class X to class XII of general education respectively. However, these national certificate levels are only equivalent and make comparable demands in terms of learning outcomes (Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, 2013).

**Bangladesh:** The National Skills Development Council (NSDC) as the highest and apex body is mandated to establish policy to guide the overall TVET system including monitoring of all the

activities related to the development and implementation of the NTVQF, whereas, Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) is responsible to implement the NTVQF (Mia, 2010). NTVQF of Bangladesh consists of six levels, with an additional two pre-vocational levels. Pre-vocational level serves as entry points into TVET, level one to five lead to certificate and level six leads to diploma, i.e. the entry points for higher education degree levels. Qualifications are defined against nationally-recognized competency standards (Allais, 2010).

Mia (2010) claims that Bangladesh NTVQF intends to support a nationally consistent and transparent system for skills training and qualifications that is acceptable for both national and international employment and will be effective if it receives the sustained interest of the government, committed participation of industry and continuation of donor support.

Pakistan: Based on the National Skill Strategy 2009-2016, Pakistan started the process of developing NVQF in 2009 and officially launched it on the 4th of March 2015. It aims at bringing a paradigm shift by making TVET delivery efficient and marketable across the world (NAVTTTC, 2015).

The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) is the main authority that works with provincial Technical and Vocational Training Authorities (TEVTAs) to develop and implement the NQF. It defines levels, level descriptors and rules for equivalencies, and makes allowances for credit transfer, assessment, and recognition of prior learning (RPL) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014).

NVQF of Pakistan comprises of one pre-vocational level as entry point into TVET, level one to four lead to certificate and level five leads to diploma, i.e. the entry points for higher education degree levels. Each level of the qualifications is defined by a set of approved level descriptors describing the broad outcomes expected of achievers and the complexity

of skills and knowledge at that level (NAVTTTC, 2015).

In this way, no matter who developed or for which country it was developed, the philosophy and process of developing NVQF is almost similar. Only the difference is with the levels and the descriptors of the levels. Additionally, it is also observed that the NVQF is quite young and at the initial implementation stage in aforementioned South Asian countries. Hence, it might be quite immature and early to say anything about the impact and effectiveness of NVQF implementation in these countries.

On the contrary, in my understanding, it might not be that much effective to compare Nepalese context with the context of developed countries who claim that they are successfully implementing NVQF. Thus, I decided to utilize the experience and understanding of TVET experts who understand Nepali context sincerely; to explore whether NVQF for Nepal is necessity or waste of money.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a narrative enquiry approach of qualitative paradigm in which five TVET experts were interviewed, because the purpose of qualitative research is to provide a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon or problem (Creswell, 2007). I selected the site and participants purposefully following Creswell (2011) who explains that in qualitative research, researcher selects or identifies the sites or participants purposefully that helps researcher to understand research problem in the best way. The first participant interviewed in the study was Mr. Devi Prasad Dahal. Mr. Dahal is one of the TVET experts with more than 36 years of working experience in TVET sector and currently working as a team leader for NVQS project. Another participant Mr. Yam Bhandari, Director of National Skill Testing Board (NSTB), is literally responsible and accountable from CTEVT side for the success or failure of the project. Likewise, Mr. Saroj Devkota, Dr. Agni Prasad Kafle, and Mr. Chandra Bhakta Nakarmi who had worked for CTEVT and are

considered as the key contributors for the development of TVET sector of Nepal were also interviewed to gain in-depth understanding on the issue “NVQF: necessity or waste of money?”. The following questions guided the study: (a) how do you perceive for the necessity of NVQF in Nepal, and (b) what are the major challenges and how can we cope with for the successful implementation of NVQF in Nepal. I have referred these experts as the participants of my study and in order to maintain confidentiality, I have concealed their identity by just mentioning the term ‘participant’. Further, I have presented the findings based on the interview theme rather than the sequence of the names mentioned above.

### **TVET Experts’ Standpoints for NVQF**

Regarding the first question, “How do you perceive for the necessity of NVQF in Nepal?” one of the participants expressed:

*In my understanding, though NVQF is in dire need of the country, this particular project has been launched without sufficient homework and planning. I mean to say that this project only aims to cover a small block of NQF. It misses the grand picture of the overall educational system, which ought to be covered for a smooth integration. When the focus is small block, several problems will definitely emerge and we will need other projects to combat those problems. Currently, a program offered by one university is not even recognized by other universities. Similarly, there are no provisions for credit transfers even within national universities. If all these things are considered, and more homework is done to understand the problems better, there might be a feasible united project structure that covers the whole of NQF.*

Similar to his understanding, another participant thus shared:

*No one questions the necessity for NVQF. It is a must for every country. However, the argument over whether NQF should have*

*been implemented first is valid. I do not know who initiated the project, and how it came about. However, it is very short sighted in terms of implementation vision. It does not take into consideration the kind problems that might be encountered in the future. Also, it rests upon the assumption that the general education sector will accept it. If that assumption fails, the project might fail as well.*

In contrast to these two experts, the other three participants had slightly different

understandings. In this connection, one of the other participants explained:

*We are in fact very late in implementing NVQF. This is of dire need. Let me explain the importance with a simple example. Let us say there is a working plumber who, for reasons such as not being able to finance his/her education or due to lack of interest, had decided to drop out of school. However, even after realizing the benefits of being educated and the positive impact it could bring upon his/her career, it is very difficult for him/her to go back to school even if he/she is capable of funding it himself/herself. For cases like these, there should be a provision to recognize his/her skill, educate via tuition/coaching or self-study and test cognitively so that he/she can progress further. Therefore, I claim that if youths are not provided with this option, it is in fact a disadvantage for the country itself. Hence, NVQF is a must and we are already running late on implementation.*

In the same manner, another participant added:

*The project came about due to necessity. Also, there is not anything unique about the model and its implementation. The very reason of your enquiry defines the importance. Therefore, NVQF is a must.*

Likewise, the third participant of similar opinion,

especially with respect to career progression explained thus:

*For this, I would like to start with following two realities. The first reality is that so far, 310,000 formally, informally or non-formally skilled youths have been tested and certified by NSTB of Nepal. Most of them have been awarded with NSTB Level-I and Level-II. However, few of them have been awarded with Level-III and almost negligible have completed Level-IV. Level-III equivalents intermediate (10+2) level but only for employment purpose. Unfortunately, these graduates are not eligible to progress their education. This way, to some extent, we are blocking our youths to progress their career. The second reality is that the qualifications achieved from national level universities are not recognized easily in other universities at national level let alone at international level. Therefore, qualifications awarded from any national level institute should be recognized in all private and public sectors. Additionally, we need to envision in such a way that international educational institutions will also recognize the qualifications without any questions. This is however a major challenge. Hence, the qualifications framework is extremely important for the sake of recognition of any qualifications awarded for career progression not only within the nation but also outside the nation.*

With reference to the perceptions and understanding of five TVET experts as my research participants, I have analyzed that that all of them unanimously agree on the necessity of NVQF in Nepal. However, two of them are concerned that the project is ahead of its time and has come about without much homework. They expressed that the whole of NQF and not just the smaller NVQF block should have been advocated to be pushed forward.

Concerning the second question, “What are the major challenges and how can we cope with for the

successful implementation of NVQF in Nepal?” this is what they had to share:

*The first challenge is to make policy-making body aware of the recognition problem associated with NVQF. The project is doomed to fail if this is not done. Recognition of vocational stream is a long way to go. We are still dealing with coordination problems between universities. For example, if someone clears second year requirement at Tribhuvan University (TU); Kathmandu University (KU), Pokhara University (PU) or any other national level university or vice-versa, he/she would not agree to transfer the credit to adapt to their program. The provision has not yet been established which is a major blocker and threat for the success of NVQF. Therefore, policy makers should be made aware of this and concerned educational institutions should be brought on board for hassle free credit transfer provisions.*

*...we are on the verge of implementing NVQF without the implementation of NQF. We are actually taking the opposite path with this. There is a threat that if the main stream education sector does not accept NVQF to the core, there is no real possibility for a horizontal or a vertical movement. The policy making body is comprised of people who are acquainted with mainstream education. It is going to be extremely challenging to convince them. Therefore, either NQF should be implemented first or this project should simultaneously work on fixing the problems associated with implementing NVQF first. Also people who have come from RPL or non-academic background would benefit from some sort of bridge courses for horizontal or vertical movement. This is easier to accomplish if NQF is implemented first or alongside NVQF. Hence, firstly linkage between NQF and NVQF, and secondly horizontal/vertical movement for those who lack basic education are two major challenges that need to be*

*addressed. For this to happen, it is crucial to advocate that NQF should be implemented and coordinated at least simultaneously. Similarly, bridge course programs should be designed in coordination with all the stakeholders for youths to be able to complete basic education. Also, national level universities should be brought on board. The policy makers also need to be in sync with national level universities terms to accept qualifications and those conditions should be encompassed in the project design.*

Additionally, the perception of policymaking body towards non-formal learning needs to be changed. Our society treats “blue collar” workforce as lower level and relatively does not value them on the level that they deserve. It is really a challenge to change the stigma embedded in the society. In order to overcome the hurdle of changing perception of the policy makers, it is necessary to make them aware of current global practices on non-formal learning and the potential positive contribution it can bring about in the society

After the challenge of perception has been tackled, it is necessary to confirm that the developed framework is compatible within the standards requirements of domestic and international employers, and as well as international and national level educational institutions. These institutions should be willing to accept the framework without any hesitation. Secondly, it is also necessary to come up with a suitable timeframe to accommodate development standards, design of qualifications and implement the framework appropriately. It is absolutely essential to also make sure that the project timeline is not prolonged unnecessarily. However, that is also a massive challenge. On the same lines, if the proposed project implementation procedure is not in sync with the demands of employers and educational institution, regardless of them being national or international, the problem of ownership emerges. There is also the issue of trust. Employers demand competent workforce but are more or less

hesitant and untrusting towards non-formal graduates. This perception has to be changed. However, it is also gullible to assume that the qualifications will be compatible globally from the start. Therefore, the middle ground would be to find select countries, preferably a couple, and convince employers from those countries to suggest and help in the project and curriculum design phase so that the enrollee from the program can eventually be recruited after graduation.

Based on the aforementioned understanding of the TVET experts, one of the major challenges identified is to create awareness and feeling of ownership among the people who are working at policy level. This challenge can be strategically addressed by getting their support and involvement from the very beginning and at each and every stages of NVQF development progress so that they intrinsically support, advocate at their level and make NVQF friendly policies.

Another major challenge identified is the issue of recognition of the qualifications awarded for horizontal and vertical mobility and for employment both at domestic and international market. This issue has to be strategically addressed by getting the support and involvement of domestic and international employers who significantly consume Nepali workforce, and educational institutions/universities for horizontal and vertical mobility from the very beginning of development stages of level descriptors, qualification standards, bridge courses and programs. It will also solve the issue of time.

Additionally, it is also in dire need to maintain coordination and collaboration among the various educational institutions. It urges for National Qualification Framework (NQF) that reflects the horizontal and vertical mobility of the entire education system of Nepal. NVQF is only a segment of NQF and should be linked with NVQF. No matter who are working for other segments of NQF, but the concern is amalgamation of all these segments.

Hence, the key stakeholders who are working separately need to work together to develop a complete NQF.

### Conclusion

After scrutinizing the standpoints of some of the key TVET experts, it can be concluded that different opinions rose about the issue “*NVQF for Nepal: Necessity or Waste of Money?*” is not groundless. However, all the experts unanimously agree that NVQF and NQF are crucial to streamline the education system of Nepal. Nevertheless, there are many challenges and issues both at the policy level and at the implementation stage. Some of the key issues are recognition, linkage between NVQF and NQF, awareness at policy level, and the issue of coordination and collaboration among stakeholders. These challenges and issues need to be strategically addressed by involving all the stakeholders from the very beginning and each and every stage for the development and implementation of NVQF in Nepal.

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