For discussion on
9 July 2013

Legislative Council Subcommittee on Poverty

Qualifications Framework

Purpose

      This paper briefs Members on the development of the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (QF) and how QF promotes social mobility.

Background

2.   In 2008, the Government launched QF to establish an accessible articulation pathway to promote lifelong learning with a view to continuously enhancing the quality, professionalism and diversification of our local workforce. QF is a seven-level hierarchy covering qualifications in the academic, vocational and continuing education sectors. All qualifications recognised under QF are quality assured. QF provides a clear articulation pathway and multiple progression pathways to help learners pursue further studies and career development.

3.   In the past few years, we have devoted our manpower and resources to developing the important elements of QF, for example –

    (a)   establishing Industry Training Advisory Committees (ITACs);

    (b)   drawing up Specification of Competency Standards (SCSs) for industries;

(c)   implementing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism in industries;

(d)   promoting Specification of Generic (Foundation) Competencies (SGC);

(e)   maintaining a Qualifications Register (QR);

(f)   introducing Award Titles Scheme (ATS) and the use of QF Credit;

(g)   publicising and promoting QF; and

(h)   building up network with QF authorities and quality assurance bodies of other places proactively to enhance understanding and mutual trust and facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications.

(a) ITACs

4.   We have set up ITACs for different industries under QF. At present, 19 industries [1] have set up ITACs, covering 46% of the workforce in Hong Kong. ITACs provide a platform for the stakeholders of the industries such as employers, employees, professional bodies and other related persons to exchange views on the development and enhancement of manpower. ITACs are also working closely with the Education Bureau (EDB) to implement QF. We shall continue to reach out to the stakeholders of other industries to explore the feasibility of setting up new ITACs.

(b) SCSs

5.   ITACs are tasked to draw up SCSs for the relevant sectors, which set out the skills, knowledge and outcome standards required of

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[1]   Printing & Publishing, Watch & Clock, Chinese Catering, Hairdressing, Property Management, Electrical & Mechanical Services, Jewellery, Information & Communications Technology, Automotive, Beauty, Logistics, Banking, Import & Export, Testing, Inspection & Certification, Retail, Insurance, Manufacturing Technology (Tooling, Metals and Plastics), Elderly Care Service and Security Services.

employees in different functional areas of the respective sectors. Stakeholders will be consulted on the draft SCSs which, after finalisation, can provide a basis for course providers to develop training programmes to meet the needs of the sectors. When these programmes are successfully accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), the qualifications and programmes will become QF-recognised. ITACs also design the progression pathways of the industries based on the SCSs for practitioners to plan their personal career development.

6.   The ITACs have made good progress in drawing up SCSs of their respective industries. Twelve of these ITACs have drawn up their SCSs, and the other ITACs will complete drawing up their SCSs successively so as to specify the competency standards of various levels of their industries for human resources management purpose. So far, more than 450 SCS-based courses have been developed by education and training providers. SCSs are now gaining acceptance by some employers as useful guides for the development of in-house training and human resources management, such as staff recruitment and performance assessment.

(c) RPL

7.   QF not only covers qualifications obtained from academic education and training, but also enables formal recognition of the skills, knowledge and relevant experience acquired by practitioners in the workplace through the RPL mechanism which is based on the SCSs of various industries. Practitioners may pursue further learning with their RPL qualifications as a starting point to acquire higher and broader qualifications.

8.   Under the RPL mechanism, there is a five-year transitional period[2] for each participating industry in order to encourage greater participation of those practitioners who have worked their way up from junior positions, and allow sufficient time for practitioners to adapt to and

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[2]   The five-year transitional period for the first three industries implementing the RPL mechanism, namely Watch & Clock, Hairdressing and Printing & Publishing, expired on 31 May 2013. Upon careful deliberations, the ITACs concerned decided to extend the RPL transitional period for the said industries for an additional two years to 31 May 2015.

accept the mechanism. During the transitional period, practitioners may apply for recognition of qualifications at QF Levels 1 to 3 by producing documentary proofs of their years of relevant working experience, without the need to take any formal assessment tests. Upon expiry of the transitional period, practitioners seeking recognition of qualifications at QF Levels 1 to 4 are all subject to assessment. This is to enhance the credibility and acceptance of qualifications attained under the RPL mechanism.

9.   At present, the RPL mechanism has been implemented in eight industries[3]. As at end May 2013, over 7 400 applications involving more than 14 600 clusters of competencies at QF levels 1 to 4 were processed by the assessment agency. Almost all applicants (99.3%) were successfully awarded Statements of Attainment in recognition of the competencies they acquired. Applicants who failed in the assessments were offered free-of-charge counselling service by the assessment agency to better prepare them for further assessment, if they so wish.

10.   We shall continue to work closely with other industries with a view to extending the RPL mechanism to the sectors which have completed their respective SCSs. With the introduction of RPL mechanism to more industries and the improvement measures under the Qualifications Framework Support Schemes (QFSS), we envisage that more practitioners will benefit from the mechanism.

(d) SGC

11.   Generic (Foundation) Competencies are skills and knowledge that are shared across different industries and trades and are relevant to most people in the workplace. They are complementary to the industry-specific competencies which specify specialised skills and knowledge specific to an industry or profession. SGC covers four strands of foundation skills, namely English, Chinese, Numeracy and Information Technology. It sets out the foundation competencies from QF Levels 1 to 4.

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[3]   Printing & Publishing, Watch & Clock, Hairdressing, Property Management, Automotive, Jewellery, Logistics and Chinese Catering (the RPL mechanism of the Chinese Catering industry was launched on 7 January 2013).

12.   We have invited the Vocational Training Council to launch a pilot project, the Vocational English Enhancement Programme (VEEP), on the development of vocational English courses based on the SGC of QF.   A total of 21 courses in Transport Logistics, Import/Export & Wholesale, Hotel, Catering & Tourism, Retail, Banking & Finance and Generic Skills were rolled out from April 2011 to August 2012.   In the light of the positive feedback from the industries on the pilot project, the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) has approved the use of the Language Fund to continue providing VEEP to the industries for another three years starting from November 2012.

(e) QR

13.   The QR, a web-based database containing information on qualifications and their respective learning programmes that have been quality assured and recognised under QF, is available to the public free of charge.   As at end May 2013, there were over 7 600 academic and vocational qualifications, involving about 210 education and training providers, registered in QR.   Under the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance (Cap. 592), the HKCAAVQ is specified as the Accreditation Authority and QR Authority. HKCAAVQ will continue to ensure the quality and standards of the QF recognised programmes.

(f) ATS and the use of QF Credit

14.   EDB announced the introduction of the ATS and the use of QF Credit in October 2012.   ATS specifies the award titles that can be used for qualifications at various QF levels.   As for QF credit, it is a measure of volume or size of learning programmes recognised under QF. One QF credit consists of 10 notional learning hours, which takes into account the total learning time required through different modes of learning, including class attendance, on-line learning, practical learning, self-study, examinations and other assessment activities.   The adoption of QF credit will provide clear and transparent information on the size or volume of learning programmes and the efforts and outcome expected from learners to complete the programmes.

15.　　To facilitate lifelong learning, practitioners need a flexible learning mode in order to cope with their work and families.　Based on the QF credit, we are exploring the development of the credit accumulation and transfer system.　Under this system, practitioners can accumulate the credits of different programmes and training systematically and transfer the accumulated credits into recognised qualifications to minimise the possibility of repeated learning.　QF provides a common platform and a standardised benchmark to facilitate the arrangement of credit accumulation and transfer among different sectors and training institutions.

(g)　Promotion and publicity of QF

16.　　We adopt a multi-pronged approach in the promotion and publicity of QF to raise the awareness of QF by all sectors.　For instance, in 2012, we participated in some 10 briefing sessions organised by individual secondary schools, school head associations and youth groups to promote the awareness of QF among secondary students and the availability of competency standards as well as progression pathways of various industries.　In the first half of 2013, we participated in nine talks organised by school sponsoring bodies, youth groups and trade unions to further the promotion of QF.　Besides, we hosted a large-scale event, namely "QF Partnerships Commendation Ceremony", on 6 December 2012 to commend and show our appreciation to more than 100 organisations for their support and contributions to QF. Furthermore, on 4 and 5 May 2013, we set up a booth in the "Information Expo on Multiple Pathways 2013" to promote the awareness of QF among the public including students, learners, parents and educators.　In 2012 and the first half of 2013, we published over 20 and over 10 articles respectively in the newspapers and the publications of professional bodies, trade unions and trade associations to increase stakeholders' understanding of QF.

17.　　To mark the fifth anniversary of QF, we organised the QF Stakeholders Forum on 29 May 2013 to provide an opportunity for stakeholders from different sectors such as employers, employees, professional bodies, training providers and post-secondary institutions to get together and tap into their collective wisdom in promoting QF's

further development.

18.   We shall continue to enhance our network with the industries and relevant stakeholders through different types of activities including visits, seminars, exhibitions and experience-sharing sessions.

(h) Co-operation with Other Places on QF

19.   We have been actively establishing network with QF and quality assurance authorities of other places to enhance understanding and mutual trust and promote co-operation.   In May 2011, the QF Secretariat and the Guangdong Occupational Skill Testing Authority signed the "Letter of Intent on Enhancing the Exchange on and Transferability of Vocational Standards and Qualifications Recognition between Hong Kong and Guangdong", witnessed by representatives from EDB of Hong Kong and the Department of Human Resources and Social Security of Guangdong.   The signing of the Letter of Intent was the first crucial step towards enabling the Hong Kong QF and the national vocational qualification system to articulate with each other in the future. In March 2012, EDB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP) to strengthen the links and co-operation between Hong Kong and Scotland on the development and implementation of QF.   Arising from the MoU, a QF International Conference was co-organised by EDB, the QF Secretariat and SCQFP in March 2013 with over 400 participants from education and training providers, trade associations, labour unions and Government departments.   Separately, at the sixth annual Structured Dialogue meeting between the European Union and the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region held in December 2012, both sides agreed to explore the feasibility of co-operation on QF.

Qualifications Framework Support Schemes (QFSS)

20.   The development of the various systems and mechanisms set up under QF has resources implications for stakeholders including assessment agencies, education and training providers and learners.   To alleviate the financial burden on the stakeholders, the Government

launched QFSS in May 2008 with a non-recurrent commitment of $208 million[4] for a period of five years approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council.   QFSS is made up of a number of financial assistance schemes, including accreditation grants to course providers, subsidy for QR registration fees, accreditation and start-up grants to RPL assessment agencies, and reimbursement of RPL assessment fees to practitioners.

21.   Starting from August 2011, we have relaxed the operating parameters of QFSS, including the scope, eligibility criteria and level of assistance to boost the development of QF.   We have also introduced a new one-off grant under QFSS to provide a greater incentive for education and training providers to develop SCS-based courses.   After the introduction of the improvement measures, the total amount of subsidies disbursed to education and training providers and practitioners under QFSS has been increased significantly from $18 million in end July 2011 to $59 million in end May 2013, including a total of 241 education and training providers applying for accreditation grant to cover the accreditation fees for about 3 950 qualifications.

22.   We shall conduct a comprehensive review of QFSS later this year and consider the way forward for QFSS beyond the 2013-14 financial year.

New Initiatives in the 2013-14 Budget

23.   The Financial Secretary announced in this year's Budget that starting from the 2013-14 financial year, the Government will allocate $10 million per year to support ITACs to launch new initiatives to further enhance the knowledge and skills of workers in the industries, and their competitiveness in the labour market.   These new initiatives include –

    (a)   *Award schemes:* introducing award schemes for outstanding practitioners to engage in learning activities (for example

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[4]   We informed the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council vide FCRI(2013-14)4 of the slight extension of QFSS to 31 March 2014.

competitions) in different places around the world to broaden their vision and establish network and linkage with the local or overseas industry partners.   We hope that these awardees will serve as exemplars and role models for their respective industries and help attract younger generation to pursue career in these fields and promote multiple pathways. Awardees will be invited to attend and participate in the promotional activities of the award schemes to share their experiences in engaging in competitions or learning activities;

(b)   *Designing training programmes and packages:* for those ITACs with at least one set of SCS completed, to design and develop SCS-based training packages which can be adopted on an industry-wide basis.   These training packages suit the needs of the industries and will benefit the employers, employees and those who wish to pursue career in related fields; and

(c)   *Stepping up promotion and publicity of QF:* to enhance the industries' recognition of QF, each ITAC can propose activities for the promotion and publicity of QF, such as –

- promote QF to various industry stakeholders to encourage practitioners to pursue continuous learning and enhance their skills and competitiveness;

- promote the wider application of SCSs, RPL and QF credits etc. under QF; and

- strengthen the links between the industries and the education sector (especially secondary schools) to promote the progression pathways of the industries and to make students, parents and schools aware of the multiple pathways in addition to the traditional articulation pathway.

Besides, the QF Secretariat will make use of existing resources to

promote and publicise QF as a whole.

Policies under Review by the Commission on Poverty (CoP)

24.   At its meeting on 25 April 2013, the Education, Employment and Training Task Force of the CoP noted the development of Hong Kong QF.   Currently, no QF-related policy is under review by the CoP.

Way Forward

25.   Looking ahead, the Government will promote co-operation between ITACs and the education and training providers.   This will ensure more relevant training opportunities to young people and in-service personnel, with a view to integrating education, training, business and employment seamlessly to enable our young people to make early career planning and facilitate social mobility.   Specifically, we shall –

(a)   continue to implement the tasks set out in paragraphs 4 to 19 above;

(b)   conduct a review of the effectiveness of QFSS shortly and consider whether it should be extended or expanded as mentioned in paragraphs 20 to 22 above.   We may consider regularising QFSS or operating it as a fund to support the sustainable development of QF with a view to continuously enhancing the quality of our workforce; and

(c)   implement the 2013-14 Budget proposal by supporting the launch of three new initiatives by ITACs as mentioned in paragraph 23 above.

26.   Members are invited to note and comment on the development of Hong Kong QF.

Education Bureau
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