National Qualification Framework (NQF) to Promote Quality in Higher Education: Perspectives of English Educators in ASEAN Countries

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Abstract. The qualification Framework has been widely researched for the past two decades. Implementing a National Qualification Framework (NQF) aims to ensure Quality, thus promoting the accountability of the educational program in a country. This research explores the perspectives of English educators in ASEAN countries teaching at the higher education level on NQF implementation in their respective countries and how it is reflected in their professional practices. This study employs the qualitative research method; the data collected was an open-ended survey using Qualtrics[XM] and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The research participants are English educators in ASEAN countries. The research objectives are to determine their understanding of the NQF and its implementation in their teaching context. This research explores the educator's views on English programs and teaching English in general, which unravels the crucial aspects of their understanding of the qualification framework and how it is translated into their professional practice, as well as the challenges they face in the process. The result shows common themes concerning their conception of NQF, their implementation level, and the challenges in the personal and broader scope, which include the top-down policy approach issues, diverse ability of the English educators, and disparity among regions which lead to inequality in education. This initial study is expected to inform policy and practice and further reference for future research on NQF and its influence in ASEAN member countries.

Keywords: National Qualification Network · English educators · Quality of education · Qualitative study

1 Introduction

The National Qualification Framework (NQF) has been reforming the education system since late 1990, initiated by primarily English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England, and Scotland [1]. This framework, later in early

2000, was adopted by most countries in the world, including South-East Asian Countries as members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and most countries in the European Union (EU) [2]. The driving force behind establishing the Qualification Framework is the benefit of having a clear qualification framework comparable with the international standard. In European countries, the establishment of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) is "to strengthen transparency and comparability of European qualifications, to support mobility and progression of students and workers across national and institutional borders" [3]. While ASEAN Reference Qualification Framework (AQRF) primarily aims to compare their educational qualification and learning outcomes.

Generally, the regional qualification framework introduces 'equivalent and mutual recognition of skills and qualification within regions and key sectors' [4]. Similarly, AQRF also supports the ASEAN community in achieving the objectives of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015, which promotes the mobility of skilled laborers within ASEAN countries. Ultimately, ARQF is used as a reference for their member states to establish their own. The term 'reference' means that AQRF does not necessarily impose on the member states to set up national qualifications. And even if the member states establish one, the ARQF functions as a neutral for all member countries [5].

The qualification framework can be defined in a specific way depending on the country. Qualification signifies a completed educational training process linked to the competencies document, particularly in a particular area (such as a lawyer or teacher) [2]. For example, the Indonesian Qualification Framework (IQF) is a framework for ranking competency requirements that can compare, balance, and combine the disciplines of education, job training, and work experience to recognize work competencies in line with the organizational structures of different industries (DGHE 2012). IQF is stipulated in presidential regulation no.8/2012 article 1 and decree no. 12/2012 on higher education article 29 [6]. The two documents are essential in the Indonesian education reform itself since it marks the government's determination to align the graduates' competencies with the needs of the labor market [7]. It brings upfront the requirements for education and training providers to restructure the learning outcomes to meet the demand of actual work situations as often the discourse of misaligned education and industry emerges. It is paramount for education reform to address the issues [8].

In comparison, Thailand initiated the national qualification framework in 1999, aiming to establish an education quality assurance system at all levels of education [9]. The policy was officially approved by the cabinet under the name of the Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF) in 2013 with the main objectives of promoting lifelong learning and restructuring education for employment to combine all qualifications under a single framework [5]. TQF attempts to establish connections between educational requirements and occupational norms. On the other hand, Myanmar is firmly committed to establishing NQF to improve the Quality of human resources in the country by adhering to the AQRF. On the first draft of the Myanmar National Qualification Framework (MNQF), Objectives, level of qualification, and descriptors are set. Although the official documents have yet to be evidence, a clear description of MNQF is selected and made its way into the National Education Policy [10].
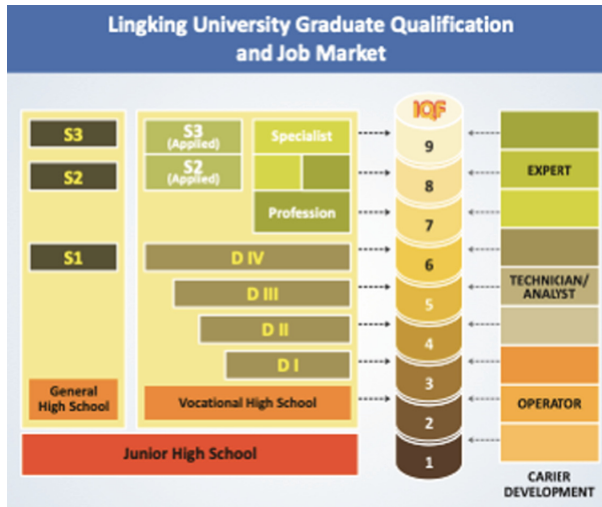
Fig. 1. A mutual equivalent towards IQF qualification level between education pathways, both formal and non.formal, and occupational/career pathways

In the earlier development of NQF, [1] elaborates on the distinction between qualification framework and qualification system, drawing from the OECD report (2004), which explains that "A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved" (2007, 2). Meanwhile, a Qualifications systems include "all aspects of a country's activity that result in recognition of learning" (2007, 4). Below is a sample of the Indonesian Qualification Framework and its level of descriptors linking with the job market and equivalent learning outcomes [11] (Figs. 1 and 2).

English is the working language is ASEAN, and AQRF support is crucial to support AEC and ASEAN Socio-cultural community [14], which seeks to build national skills frameworks as a step-by-step approach to a framework for ASEAN skills recognition. English has been the official language of ASEAN based on the ASEAN charter article no. 34/2009 [5] stating that "the working language of ASEAN shall be English." Thus, English has been used as a lingua franca in ASEAN regions [12] that path the way for regional integration and mobility of skilled labor in ASEAN and as part of the blueprint of the ASEAN Economic Community 2015 [13]. According to the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, ASEAN will have a single market and manufacturing base. Free movement of products, services, capital, labor, and investments will promote the growth of production networks in the area and strengthen ASEAN's position as a worldwide supply chain. Considering the importance of mastering English as a lingua franca in the region and NQF as an instrument of recognition of skills and competencies, it is, therefore, essential to conduct the study of English educators in ASEAN awareness of qualification framework (QF) and how it will influence their professional practice.

The objectives of this study are twofold: 1) to what extent the English educators of ASEAN countries comprehend the national qualification framework in their respective
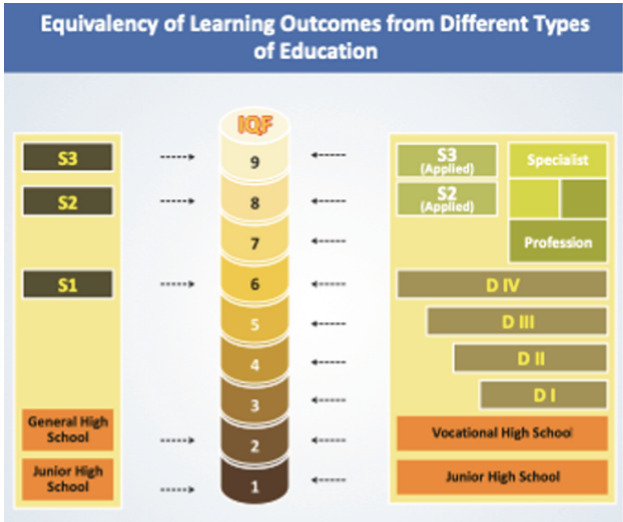
Fig. 2. Equivalent qualification leveling of learning outcomes between academic and professional education stream

countries, and more importantly, 2) to find out how the national qualification framework is implemented or reflected in their teaching. Ultimately, this research investigates English educators' perspectives of National Qualification Frameworks in their respective countries and how they influence their professional practice.

2 Method

This research uses using qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry. This study uses a survey with open-ended questions for data collection, unraveling the research partici- pants' perspectives on the national qualification network in their respective countries and to what extent the qualification framework is implemented in their classroom practice. The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics XM ® TM to adhere to the challenges of space and time to gather the data from participants in ASEAN countries. Nevertheless, the process was not as challenging since technology during the pandemic made online data collection in research more normalized. Thus, consent and data protection were not issues at this stage.

To obtain data from English educators from the ASEAN region, the authors re- connected with the alumna of the BUSELEP (Brunei-US English Language Education Program) Network, an initiative to gather English Educators from ASEAN countries to improve the teaching of English as the official language of ASEAN in collaboration The University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Brunei and East-West Center (EWC), the University of Hawaii, Manoa, the USA [15]. This program is funded by ASEAN organizations aiming to improve people-to-people diplomacy through enhancing educa- tion and international relations. With snowballing sampling, 18 English educators from 18 different universities in ASEAN countries were involved in the data gathering. The

number mentioned only represents some ASEAN countries since the data recorded that 9 participants responded to the survey questions, even though 18 entries were recorded. The survey is anonymous, and the participant's data is fully protected. Considering the national qualification framework is applied at the higher education level, the participants involved in this research are teaching in higher education fields in their respective countries.

For this reason, they can look into implementing the national qualification framework in terms of curriculum, the structure of the study program, and learning outcomes. As the researchers of this study are also part of the network, it is essential to state the positionality as in-betweeners [16] and that it is impossible to detach one completely from personal biases as interaction within the study context is indispensable. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge a certain degree of individual subjectivity in this study.

The data analysis implements Braun and Clarke's reflective thematic analysis approach, which allows the authors to interpret reflectively and enables the researchers to identify and analyze patterns or themes that emerge from the data set. It is inductive in the process that themes are constructed from the data generated using the six stages of thematic data analysis [17]. The six-stage process of data engagement using reflexive data analysis by Braun and Clarke was started by 1) getting familiar with notes and transcription; 2) initial systematic codes; 3) generating themes from the data; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and refining themes, and 6) writing up the result of data analysis[17]. Referring to the stages, the authors are at the first stage of transcribing the interview verbatim, then coding the exciting features and generating critical themes related to research questions and what emerged from the data. The next stage is an ongoing analysis process to refine the data and ensure a clear definition of each data. Lastly, the final stage is writing the result by having the emerging themes prominent in the discussion section.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

The survey recorded 18 participants' entries. The demographic is presented in Table 1, which informs the distribution of the participants from ASEAN member states. The table shows that the number of research participants only represents some members of ASEAN countries, thus. It is crucial to understand this study's limitations. AQRF is a reference instrument for ASEAN member states for the NQF; however, it is neutral on its stance, and in fact, some member states still need to officially set up NQF in their education system. Instead, a similar context, such as in Singapore, which is called the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ), is a national credentialing system [10]. The results or product of this guide can be viewed from two aspects, namely physical and content aspects, as follows.

The participants involved in this study are English educators at higher education levels with more than ten years of teaching experience, as shown in Table 2, indicating their exposure to NQF implementation in the education system in their respective countries. Table 3 shows the area of expertise that signifies the English educators' familiarity with the education system and its changes throughout their teaching careers. NQF is strongly tied to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Subsequently, the role

Table 1. Participants' country of origin

Country	%	Count
Indonesia	16.67	3
Malaysia	16.67	3
Thailand	22.22	4
Philippines	0.00	0
Brunei Darussalam	0.00	0
Vietnam	11.11	2
Laos PDR	5.56	1
Cambodia	5.56	1
Singapore	0.00	0
Myanmar	22.22	4
Total	100	18

Table 2. Teaching experience

	%	Count
Less than five years	5.56	1
Between 5–10 years	22.22	4
More than ten years	72.22	13
Total	100	18

of preparing quality graduates and improving their competitiveness in the job market is not only the responsibility of those teaching English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) but also the English Educators for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). The composition of research participants who teach EGAP and ESAP shows that NQF is for all English educators to understand (Fig. 3).

3.2 Discussion

Three main themes generated from the data correspond to the research questions on the English educators' perspectives towards NQF and its implication in their professional practices. The significant themes that emerged are the English educators' understanding of the framework and what it entails, which leads to the context of qualification framework implementation in their teaching. The finding also highlights the challenges of implementing NQF in their teaching context in their respective countries. Finally, they encounter challenges in the framework's performance in personal and broader contexts.
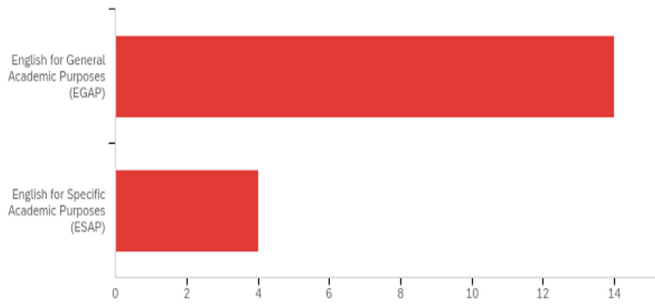
Fig. 3. Area of expertise

a. Understanding of the national qualification framework

The importance of NQF has been acknowledged globally, leading to the establishment of national and regional qualification frameworks, such as in the European Union and ASEAN. The data makes it interesting how English educators view and understand the NQF and how it influences their teaching. The emerging themes in their understanding of NQF are related to guidelines, standards, learning outcomes that match the industry, and graduates' Quality for improving competitiveness in the job market. The quote presented is verbatim from the research participant's responses to the open-ended survey. In their opinion, National Qualification Framework is

"To have a set of prescribed standards and regulations for education providers in Malaysia to ensure excellence and uniformity in all types and levels of education provided to students in Malaysia" [18].

"It (NQF) is the guide for what to teach, and eventually, it will suit all the needs for Cambodia's education goal. It will help standardize all teaching and training across the country to ensure that all higher institutions follow the norms." [18].

A similar understanding also emerges on the idea that NQF is a standard or framework that will ensure Quality across the nation.

"NQF aims to provide a standard qualification framework for reference all over the country. This helps different regions have the same standardized level, making educational Quality more reliable. It presides over and cooperates with relevant ministries and regulatory authorities in comparing undergraduate education levels in the Vietnamese Qualifications Framework with ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and other national qualifications frameworks" [18].

"In my opinion, the purpose of implementing NQF is to provide standardized education for all the universities in my country (Thailand)." [18].

b. The Influence of NQF on their professional practice

As NQF serve as a reference for an educational institution to design curriculum and syllabus design that caters to the learning outcomes which match the needs of the job market and improve their graduate's competitiveness in the industry, themes on the influence of NQF in their professional practice come out in varying degree. Although

some of the research participants deducted that there is a direct impact of NQF in the English study program in their context, there are also who mentioned that NQF guidelines on learning outcomes and profile of graduates resulted in the design of curriculum and evaluation in their study program. The most prominent themes are a clear definition of the graduate profile, developing relevant skills for the job market, accountability, and standard evaluation. Some English educators also mentioned the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as their standard guideline in their teaching.

If MQF is implemented fully and adhered to, it will improve students' competencies much as it's the standard of good practice across Malaysia. So, if it's fully implemented, all students will experience similar benefits in their educational processes regardless of context and setting. I understand it as a prescribed standard and regulation for the teaching and learning process, and it is implemented in general course planning. At the classroom level, not really. Only in available course planning, not in terms of specific course content" [18].

"I understand that NQF leads to an outcomes-based education system. However, it largely depends on the curriculum, teachers' Quality, teaching methods, infrastructures, students' learning, and assessment methods. NQF is to promote the graduate competencies, review the curriculum, and change (into) the students-centered teaching methods". [18].

Specifically, the influence of NQF in teaching is elaborated as the following:

"It (NQF) helps raise their awareness of the importance of English in their future career, which subsequently feeds into shaping their motivation for learning. We are using an adapted CEFR stipulated by the Ministry of Education (MoE) as the criteria for teaching and assessing English language learners in our institution. (Furthermore), the implementation of NQF has required us to develop ourselves professionally by attending more PD programs which have helped us improve the Quality of teaching by employing methods suitable to the learning needs of the learners".

The most substantial influence of NQF in the education system is as mentioned in the following:

"(NQF) is to increase the Quality of students/graduates to be ready to face the real join field after College and Improve the Quality of our learning outcome to cope with the job field. (Thus, we need to) Increase the standard of English competency acquired by university students" [18].

"We can see that TQF has been embedded in the curriculum of English program through the Qualifications Standards, Program Specification, Course Specification, Course Report, Field Experience Report, and Program Report." [18].

c. Challenges to the implementation

Acknowledgment of the importance of NQF to improve the Quality of education, in general, is indispensable from the perspectives of the ASEAN educators. Despite the eminence significance of the framework, there are notable challenges that the educator observed from the implementation of NQF in their respective countries, among others are: the varying competencies of English educators, diversity among regions in terms of human resources and infrastructure, geographic challenges, and the most eminent

factor is the top-down policy approach in the implementation of NQF in the country. In addition, classroom-level challenges come to light regarding the performance of NQF, such as student-teacher ratio, learners' mixed ability, teachers' workload, and adapting to the newly implemented curriculum using an outcome-based.

"Lack of manpower/instructor is the biggest challenge, so for now, we may not be able to adhere to all aspects of criteria set by MQF." [18].

"It is challenging to implement a top-down policy, regardless of the differences among regions and areas. I am. in charge of students from remote and mountainous areas with a low level of English proficiency. Implementing NQF in English makes the teaching and learning process more standard, which is synonymous with a higher proficiency level" [18].

"The challenges are time and budget for its implementation. The varying competencies of the individual teaching staff may slow the progress". [18].

On the classroom level, the challenges of implementing NQF were apparent in terms of both student competencies and the Quality of teaching, with an emphasis on unrealistic learning goals for learners coming from rural areas.

"The challenges are teachers' quality, students and teacher ratio, facility and infrastructures, and teachers' workloads." [18].

"The purpose of implementing NQF in my country is to enhance the quality of education and training. (Although) The implementation of NQF in English study program still needs human resources and time". [18].

"NQF sets more precise goals for learners, even though the plans are sometimes unrealistic for some learners from rural areas." [18].

4   Conclusion

This study aimed to explore English educators in higher education in ASEAN, and their perspectives on NQF implemented in their respective countries. The research questions seek to look into their understanding of NQF, the influence of NQF in their professional practice, and the challenges in their professional context or broader scope. From the data presented, the research participants are well-versed with NQF and its implementation in their context. Their responses are of varying degrees; nevertheless, they acknowledge that NQF is pivotal as a standard or guideline to ensure the Quality of education in their country and a means to ensure that the learning outcomes are meeting the needs of an industry that improve the Quality of graduates and their competitiveness in the job market. Although the study involved participants from ASEAN countries, it is a small scale that cannot be generalized. Thus, the result might not be used as a claim for the general opinion representing all. The findings, however, might inform policy for further recommendation. Hence, it would be beneficial to investigate further in future research the impact of NQF at the classroom level and how the English program can be an essential part of NQF and its attempt to improve the education quality in the country facing the ASEAN Economic Community.

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