With ASEAN continuing to deepen its economic integration, movement of skilled labour has become an increasingly critical aspect to accelerate the region’s economic growth, especially in facilitating trade in services in ASEAN, where demand of specific services is often challenged by the shortage of specific skilled workers in one country. Therefore, facilitating the movement of skilled workers is seen as an important element to enhance intra-ASEAN economic integration, particularly for trade in services.

In achieving this objective, recognition of the qualification of skilled workers across ASEAN Member States (AMS) is one of the important areas. This is particularly due to the fact that there are different education and training systems prevailing among ASEAN Member States that make the understanding and recognition of each other’s qualification standard challenging. Recognising this issue, ASEAN developed the ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework (AQRF) as a common reference for comparing education and training qualifications in the region. As a cross-sectoral initiative, the AQRF was endorsed by the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) and the ASEAN Education Ministers (ASED) in 2014; and by the ASEAN Labour Ministers (ALMM) ad referendum in 2015.

The framework’s scope and components

The AQRF consists of eight levels of qualifications addressing all education and training outcomes, from basic to the most advanced skill-level, and goes beyond formal learning to cover informal and non-formal learning as well.
The AQRF encourages the use of learning outcomes as the basis of qualifications, focusing on the results of learning (i.e. knowledge, skills, competence, etc.) rather than inputs (i.e. length of study, number of credits, etc.). Learning outcomes support the transfer of qualifications, including credit transfer and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

To provide a reference point for the levels in National Qualification Framework (NQF) and National Qualification System (NQS), the eight-level of qualifications under the AQRF provides broad description for each of the eight hierarchical levels of complexity of learning outcomes. The level descriptors encompass the notion of competence, which is the ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills. The level descriptors of the AQRF (as shown in figure 1) include two domains: (i) Knowledge and Skills, and (ii) Application and Responsibilities.

The translation of NQF or NQS into the AQRF is undertaken through a referencing process. Referencing is a process that establishes the relationship between the NQF or NQS of an AMS to the AQRF. AQRF therefore promotes transparency and trust among AMS of their NQF or NQS. It is important to note that the participation of AMS in AQRF referencing process is on a voluntary basis.

To implement the AQRF, ASEAN has established an AQRF Committee in 2017, comprising of high-level officials from the education, labour and trade sectors. To-date the Referencing Reports of Malaysia and the Philippines had been successfully endorsed by the Committee, while the Referencing Reports of Indonesia and Thailand are expected to be completed and endorsed within 2019.

The AQRF initiative has been supported by the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) Economic Cooperation Support Programme (AECSP) since 2011. The formal support had continued until the end of the NQF Phase IV project in June 2019.

The benefits of AQRF for the General Public

AQRF facilitates freer movement of skilled labour through enhancement of and international trust to the education and training system of AMS. It therefore complements the other ASEAN initiatives to facilitate freer mobility of skilled labour and business people such as the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRA) that facilitates recognition of qualifications of professional service suppliers licensed or registered by authorities of other AMS, as well as ASEAN Agreement on Movement of Natural Persons (MNP) that regulates the entry and stay of foreign service suppliers to another AMS' market.
Recent Updates

The 35th ASEAN Summit

At the 35th ASEAN Summit, in Bangkok, Thailand, on 2-4 November 2019, the Leaders gathered to discuss cooperation under the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. Moreover, the Leaders adopted the ASEAN Leaders’ Vision Statement on “Partnership for Sustainability”, which aims to ensure sustainability in all dimensions, including sustainable security through the deepening of strategic trust, sustainable economic growth and sustainable development as well as sustainable human security.

Conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

At the 3rd Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019, Fifteen of the 16 RCEP Participating Countries (RPCs) announced conclusion of all 20 chapters of the RCEP Agreement, and essentially all market access commitments on goods, services and investment. With all 20 chapters of the Agreement already concluded, RCEP Participating Countries are making preparations for signing of the RCEP Agreement in 2020.

ASEAN launch of the Initial Rolling Priority Pipeline of Potential ASEAN Infrastructure Projects

The Initial Rolling Priority Pipeline of ASEAN Infrastructure Projects (“Initial Pipeline”) was announced at the 24th ACC Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand on 2 November 2019. The Pipeline aims to attract more infrastructure investments. It contains viable and sustainable infrastructure projects that can enhance the movement of people, goods, services, and innovations across ASEAN. Two booklets were specially prepared to provide more information on the approach and context in developing the Initial Pipeline as well as overview and financing options analysis for the projects. The booklets can be found here and here.

ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0

To ensure ASEAN’s readiness to fully utilise the opportunities arising from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), so as to foster the region’s economic growth, as well as to maintain ASEAN centrality and affirm its role as a key player in global production networks, ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0 at the 35th ASEAN Summit. This declaration provides direction for further development of ASEAN strategy in advancing 4IR.

ASEAN and China agreed on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

With the announcement of the Initial Pipeline of ASEAN Infrastructure Projects, The Leaders of ASEAN and People’s Republic of China agreed to actively support the development and financing of ASEAN infrastructure projects. The Leaders also encouraged the promotion for innovative infrastructure financing through the mobilisation of private capital by encouraging financial institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank Group, and funds such as the Silk Road Fund to support infrastructure development through diversified and sustainable financing in the region.

ASEAN Integration Report 2019

The ASEAN Integration Report (AIR) 2019 was officially released on 1 November 2019. The AIR 2019 provides a comprehensive assessment of progress and achievements in ASEAN economic integration since the adoption of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 in 2015. The AIR 2019 highlights progress made during the four years of the AEC Blueprint implementation towards achieving its vision for AEC 2025.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 7th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Minerals and Related Meetings</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>11-13 Dec 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 16th Meeting of ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Electronic Commerce</td>
<td>Ha Noi</td>
<td>6-9 Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN Trade Facilitation Joint Coordinating Committee (ATF-JCC) Meeting</td>
<td>Ha Noi</td>
<td>9-10 Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 10th Meeting of the Committee of the Whole for the AEC (CoW),</td>
<td>Ha Noi</td>
<td>11 Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Meeting of the Senior Economic Officials for the 51st ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting (SEOM 1/51)</td>
<td>Ha Noi</td>
<td>12-14 Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 23rd ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting and Related Meetings</td>
<td>Jerudong</td>
<td>12-16 Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>