



**THE AQRF GUIDELINES ON DIGITAL RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS
AND CREDENTIALS**

**ADOPTED ON THE SIXTEENTH MEETING OF THE
ASEAN QUALIFICATIONS REFERENCE FRAMEWORK (AQRF) COMMITTEE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid evolution of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped global education and employment landscapes. At the heart of this transformation is digital recognition, a pivotal innovation that allows qualifications and credentials to be issued, verified, and validated electronically. For the ASEAN region, adopting these secure, interoperable systems is essential to achieving the strategic goals of the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025 and the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRFC).

These Guidelines were developed under the AQRFC Work Plan 2020–2025 to empower the AQRFC as a regional framework by introducing standardized policies for digital recognition between ASEAN Member States (AMS). The document establishes a common language for "qualifications"—formal awards with distinct weight under the AQRFC—and "credentials," which include broader skills like micro-credentials and digital badges.

The Guidelines are organized into seven sections that bridge policy intent with practical implementation:

- Section 1: Foundations – Establishes the core definitions of digital recognition, distinguishing between formal "qualifications" under the AQRFC and broader "credentials".
- Section 2: Strategic Purposes – Outlines the primary drivers: enhancing cross-border recognition, promoting equity, and increasing system efficiency.
- Section 3: Regional Benefits – Highlights the impact on stakeholders, specifically empowering adaptive learners, accelerating national productivity, and elevating ASEAN's global prominence.
- Section 4: National & Institutional Roles – Focuses on the implementation of trusted systems and the critical need for stakeholder inclusion and capacity building.
- Section 5: Core Principles – Mandates that digital systems remain aligned with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) while ensuring data security and portability.
- Section 6: Implementation Roadmap – Provides actionable recommendations for AMS, including the integration with AQRFC pillars and the establishment of National Information Centers.
- Section 7: Oversight & Coordination – Designates the AQRFC as the primary body for regional governance, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

Figure 1 illustrates the integration of policy foundations, strategic implementation pillars, and regional outcomes defined within these Guidelines.

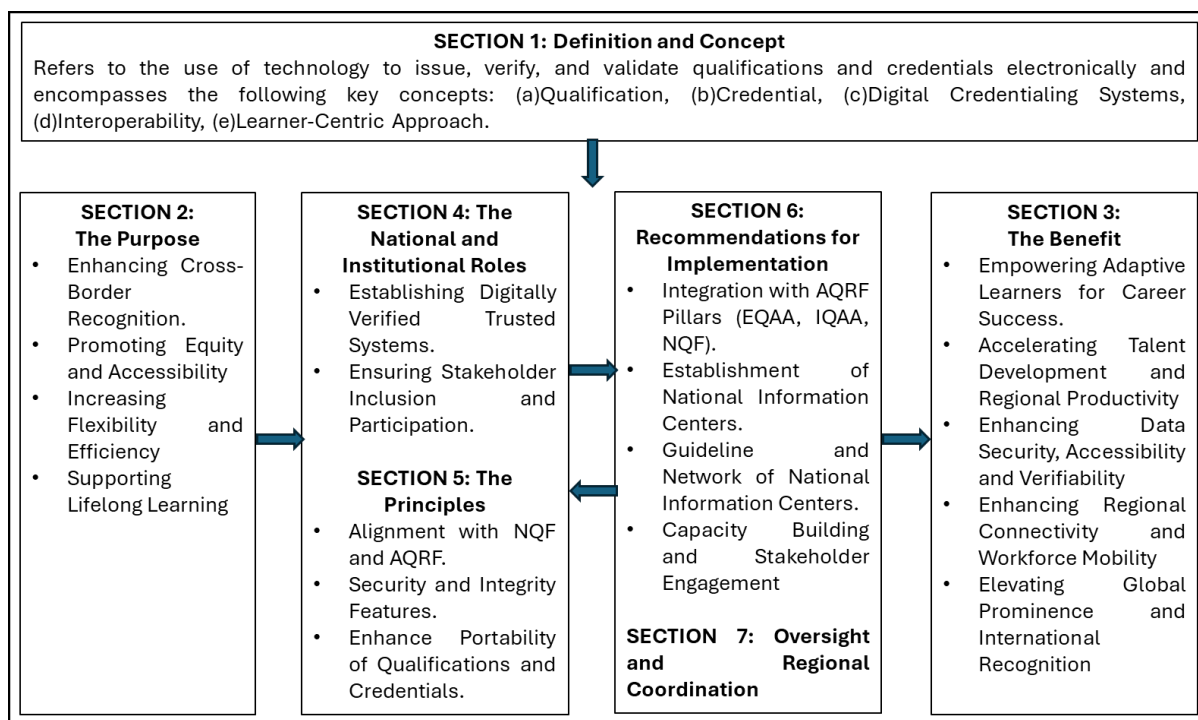


Figure 1: Framework for ASEAN Digital Recognition of Qualifications

By solidifying a trusted digital infrastructure, these Guidelines ensure that educational data is secure and verifiable at any time. This framework does more than just modernize administrative tasks; it fosters deeper human connectivity and workforce mobility. Ultimately, these efforts support a more cohesive, competitive, and resilient ASEAN community, ensuring that every learner—regardless of their location or background—has the opportunity to have their achievements recognized worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed global education and workforce systems, with digital recognition of qualifications emerging as a pivotal innovation. Digital recognition systems provide a secure and interoperable framework for validating and verifying qualifications and credentials, ensuring their credibility and accessibility across borders. Within the ASEAN region, the adoption of such systems is critical to achieving the strategic aspirations of the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025 and the objectives of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), which aim to promote inclusivity, mobility, and lifelong learning.

The 12th ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework Committee (AQRFC) Meeting has agreed to the AQRF Committee Work Plan 2020–2025, which has set the Action Plan 4.3 on 'empowering the AQRF as the regional framework by establishing Policy, Regulations, SOP in operating the AQRF as a regional framework'. One of the focuses for this action plan, as specified in 4.3.1, is 'Introducing digital recognition of qualifications between AMSs'.

In this context, the proposed policy recommendation on “introducing digital recognition of qualification between AMS” seeks to harmonize regional efforts in creating transparent, learner-centric systems that align with international best practices. These Guidelines address the core principles, purposes, and benefits of digital recognition for qualifications and credentials in ASEAN, emphasizing equity, efficiency, and alignment with national and regional quality assurance frameworks. While the system provides a secure mechanism to validate a broad range of credentials—including micro-credentials, badges, and certificates from non-formal learning—qualifications carry a distinct and specific weight as formal awards recognized under the AQRF.

By fostering a seamless, digitally enabled recognition framework, ASEAN member states can strengthen educational and workforce connectivity, enhance regional competitiveness, and support the broader agenda of sustainable development and economic integration.

SECTION 1: DEFINITION AND CONCEPT OF DIGITAL RECOGNITION FOR QUALIFICATION AND CREDENTIALS

Principal Statement 1: Definition and Concept

Digital recognition for qualification or credential refers to the use of technology to issue, verify, and validate qualifications and credentials electronically. This includes both digitally conferred and paper-based qualifications issued by recognized providers, which can be authenticated through trusted digital systems provided by ASEAN Member States (AMS).

Policy Description

Digital recognition for qualification or credential encompasses the following key concepts:

- a. Qualification:** As adopted by the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), a qualification is a formal certificate issued by an official agency, in recognition that an individual has been assessed as achieving learning outcomes or competencies to the standard specified for the qualification title, usually a type of certificate, diploma or degree. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place through workplace experience and/or a program of study. A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labor market and further education and training. Qualifications can be conferred both digitally and through traditional paper-based means.
- b. Credential:** A credential is any documented evidence, whether digital or paper-based, that attests to an individual's educational or professional achievements, skills, and competencies. Credentials can take various forms, including degrees, diplomas, certificates, badges, and other forms of recognition of learning and competencies acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning. They can be issued by a wide range of entities, such as academic institutions, professional organizations, industry associations, government bodies, and other recognized authorities.
- c. Digital Credentialing Systems:** Digital recognition involves the utilization of secure, interoperable, and transparent digital systems for issuing, verifying, and validating qualifications and credentials. These systems, which may be provided by public bodies or private entities, ensure the authenticity and integrity of the credentials, making it easier for stakeholders to trust and accept them across borders. All organizations offering a credentialing system must be guided by specific policies recognized by the relevant authorities and guidelines to maintain consistent standards and reliability mandated by the national authority.

- d. Interoperability:** Effective digital recognition requires adherence to international best practices and interoperability mechanisms. This includes the use of cross-platform protocols and the linkage of different systems to ensure that digital credentials issued in one country can be easily verified and accepted in another, promoting seamless academic and professional mobility.
- e. Learner-Centric Approach:** Digital recognition should be designed with the learner in mind, ensuring that individuals have secured and easy access to their credentials and can share them readily with employers and other institutions. Additionally, the system should allow users to have control over their credentials, empowering them to manage and distribute their achievements as needed.

SECTION 2: PURPOSE OF DIGITAL RECOGNITION FOR QUALIFICATIONS AND CREDENTIALS

Principal Statement 2: Enhancing Cross-Border Recognition

Digital recognition facilitates the seamless recognition of qualifications and credentials among ASEAN member states (AMS) and other regions, promoting academic and professional mobility.

Policy Description

Digital recognition serves as a critical tool in connecting qualifications meaningfully across borders. By harmonizing the digital credentialing mechanism, it ensures that qualifications issued by recognized providers in one country can be readily accepted and validated in another. This promotes greater student and workforce mobility within ASEAN and beyond.

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Principal Statement 3: Promoting Equity and Accessibility

Digital recognition ensures equitable access to educational and professional opportunities by providing a transparent method for validating qualifications and credentials.

Policy Description

Digital recognition systems provide a more inclusive platform for all learners, regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status. By leveraging digital technologies, these systems can reach a broader audience, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to have their qualifications or credentials recognized. This aligns with the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education.

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Principal Statement 4: Increasing Flexibility and Efficiency

The digital approach to the recognition of qualifications and credentials offers a more flexible and efficient means of recognizing various learning achievements, reducing administrative burdens and expediting verification processes.

Policy Description

The use of digital credentials streamlines the recognition process, making it more efficient and less time-consuming. Digital systems can automate verification processes, reducing the need for manual checks and minimizing errors. This efficiency is crucial in meeting the demands of an increasingly mobile and globalized workforce.

This is in line with the AQR principles, which aim for transparency and consistency in the recognition of qualifications.

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Principal Statement 5: Supporting Lifelong Learning

By enabling the continuous and cumulative recognition of learning achievements, digital recognition supports lifelong learning and career development.

Policy Description

Digital recognition supports lifelong learning by enabling the stacking of credentials and validation of learning achievements. Learners can accumulate digital credentials over time, creating a comprehensive portfolio of their skills and competencies. This approach is endorsed by the UNESCO study on digital credentialing, which underscores the importance of supporting lifelong learning through flexible and cumulative recognition systems. This is in line with the AQR principles, which call for flexible learning pathways and equivalencies between different qualification systems in ASEAN countries.

SECTION 3: BENEFIT OF DIGITAL RECOGNITION TO ASEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Principal Statement 6: Empowering Adaptive Learners for Career Success

Digital recognition empowers adaptive learners by providing a formal and transparent record of diverse learning achievements. By validating formal, non-formal, and informal learning, these systems ensure that individuals can build on their existing skills without the need for repetitive learning, directly supporting career advancement within the region.

Policy Description

Digital recognition supports ASEAN's goal of promoting lifelong learning by providing learners with opportunities to continue their education and professional development across borders. It fosters greater connectivity within ASEAN's higher education space by enabling seamless verification and transferability of qualifications and credentials, expanding mobility opportunities for learners and the workforce.

This reduces barriers to career advancement and supports workforce mobility in line with the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025, as well as contributes to a more cohesive ASEAN community as envisioned in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint.

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Principal Statement 7: Accelerating Talent Development and Regional Productivity

By recognizing and validating skills and competencies digitally, ASEAN member states (AMS) can foster talent development initiatives and enhance national and regional productivity. This optimizes workforce utilization by ensuring that high-level skills are matched with the evolving needs of the regional economy.

Policy Description

By digitally recognizing qualifications and credentials, AMS can effectively develop and utilize talent pools more strategically. This aligns with ASEAN's agenda of enhancing human resource development and economic competitiveness as outlined in the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint and the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025, which emphasizes developing a skilled workforce that aligns with industry needs to contribute to regional growth.

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Principal Statement 8: Enhancing Data Security, Accessibility and Verifiability

Digital recognition systems ensure that educational data, including qualifications and credentials, can be securely stored, accessed, and verified at any time and place. This provides a reliable foundation for regional trust and enhances the transparency of qualifications across the ASEAN Higher Education Space.

Policy Description

Digital recognition systems ensure the security, accessibility, and verifiability of educational data, enhancing transparency and trust in qualifications and credentials across ASEAN. This supports the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025, which aims to solidify digital infrastructure and facilitate smoother transitions between the education and employment sectors to meet regional industry requirements.

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Principal Statement 9: Enhancing Regional Connectivity and Workforce Mobility

Digital recognition will play a pivotal role in expanding mobility opportunities and facilitating the exchange of students, learners, and experts. It is a key factor in increasing international community recognition of national education and training results, empowering the ASEAN workforce to reach a wider audience.

Policy Description

Digital recognition fosters greater connectivity within ASEAN's higher education space by enabling seamless verification and transferability of qualifications and credentials. This supports regional integration goals and enhances workforce mobility in line with the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025, contributing to a more cohesive ASEAN community as envisioned in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint.

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Principal Statement 10: Elevating Global Prominence and International Recognition

Alignment is crucial for enhancing trust and reputation in ASEAN's qualifications and credentials, providing a solid foundation for the region's strategic plan towards enhancing global recognition, prominence, and confidence in the region's higher education ecosystem.

Policy Description

Digital recognition initiatives in ASEAN should align with regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), other regional qualification frameworks, and relevant international best practices to ensure compatibility and mutual recognition of qualifications. This alignment supports ASEAN's commitment to enhancing educational cooperation and integration across the region, directly contributing to the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education 2025 mandate to elevate the region's global prominence and academic diplomacy.

SECTION 4: NATIONAL POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

Principal Statement 11: Establishing Digitally Verified Trusted Systems

ASEAN Member States (AMS) are implementing appropriate measures and allocating necessary resources to establish digitally verified trusted systems. These systems encompass quality assurance, privacy and security mechanisms, national information centers, and other infrastructure to ensure the integrity and reliability of digital credentials.

Policy Description

AMS are integrating quality assurance frameworks into digital recognition systems to uphold the standards and credibility of qualifications and credentials. This includes aligning digital credentials with national accreditation requirements and ensuring compliance with quality assurance processes outlined in the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF) and other similar regional quality benchmarks.

AMS are establishing national information centers and credit banks to centrally manage and verify digital credentials. These centers serve as repositories of quality assured qualifications and credentials, ensuring their recognition across AMS and facilitating smooth mobility for education, employment and other purposes.

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Principal Statement 12: Ensuring Stakeholder Inclusion and Participation

AMS are committed to fostering effective inclusion and participation of all stakeholders, particularly higher education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers and quality assurance bodies. This involves engaging stakeholders in the design, implementation, and governance of digital recognition frameworks to promote transparency and accountability.

Policy Description

AMS are taking proper measures to involve higher education institutions, TVET providers and employers in the development and implementation of digital recognition frameworks. This collaborative approach ensures that the needs and perspectives of stakeholders are considered, promoting widespread adoption and acceptance of digital credentials in both academic admissions and employment-related processes.

AMS are investing in capacity building and training programs to equip stakeholders, including higher education institutions and quality assurance bodies, with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively implement and utilize digital recognition systems. This includes training on digital credentialing technologies, data security, and compliance with regulatory frameworks.

Institutions within ASEAN are encouraged to invest in capacity building programs to equip educators, administrators, and credential evaluators with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively use digital recognition systems. Training initiatives should focus on data security, interoperability mechanisms, and compliance with national and regional qualifications frameworks.

SECTION 5: PRINCIPLES OF AQRF DIGITAL RECOGNITION FOR QUALIFICATIONS AND CREDENTIALS

Principal Statement 13: Alignment with NQF and AQRF

Digital recognition systems must be designed based on national qualifications frameworks (NQF) and aligned with the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF). This ensures consistency in defining qualification levels, learning outcomes, and quality assurance standards across ASEAN Member States (AMS).

Policy Description

AMS are encouraged to develop digital recognition frameworks that align with their respective NQF. This alignment ensures comparability and consistency in credentialing across ASEAN. AMS are mapping digital credentials to NQF levels and descriptors to enhance transparency and facilitate recognition within the region and internationally.

At the national level, AMS are responsible for implementing policies and, as necessary, harmonizing national regulations, that support the adoption and integration of digital recognition frameworks within their education and employment sectors. This includes establishing national information centers, credit banks, and quality assurance mechanisms to support the verification and validation of digital credentials.

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Principal Statement 14: Security and Integrity Features

ASEAN digital recognition systems must incorporate robust security, integrity, and legal features to safeguard the authenticity and confidentiality of digital credentials.

Policy Description

Digital recognition systems should prioritize the integration of advanced security measures, such as cryptographic protocols and decentralized storage solutions (e.g. Blockchain technology), while ensuring compliance with national data privacy laws and legal frameworks. These features enhance trust in the authenticity and reliability of digital credentials, mitigating risks associated with fraud and data breaches while ensuring the legal standing of digital awards across the region.

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Principal Statement 15: Enhance Portability of Qualifications and Credentials

Digital recognition initiatives should enhance the portability of qualifications and credentials as well as facilitate easy access to pertinent information about qualifications and credentials.

Policy Description

ASEAN digital recognition frameworks should leverage existing interoperability mechanisms while ensuring efficiency, inclusivity, and consideration of diverse interests for an effective system. This includes interoperable data formats, standardized metadata, and user-friendly interfaces that allow stakeholders to verify and exchange qualifications and credentials seamlessly.

SECTION 6: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

ASEAN Member States (AMS) are expected to adopt the following recommendations through appropriate national measures. These actions can be executed independently by each AMS or organized as a regional effort under the guidance and oversight of the AQRFC.

Principal Statement 16: Integration with AQRF Pillars (EQAA, IQAA, NQF)

AMS should embed digital recognition of qualifications and credentials within the pillars of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), specifically enhancing External Quality Assurance (EQAA), Internal Quality Assurance (IQAA), and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF).

Policy Description

AMS should align digital recognition frameworks with AQRF standards, integrate quality assurance mechanisms (EQAA, IQAA), and ensure compatibility with NQF. This alignment ensures that digital recognition systems uphold quality standards and enhances the credibility and comparability of digital credentials across ASEAN, supporting educational inclusivity, lifelong learning and workforce mobility.

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Principal Statement 17: Establishment of National Information Centers

AMS are encouraged to establish National Information Centers or central registries/credit banks dedicated to storing and sharing comprehensive data on training and certification within the country.

Policy Description

AMS are encouraged to establish National Information Centers or enhance existing structures to serve as central registries or credit banks for digital credentials. These centers should adopt standardized data formats, secure storage protocols, and interoperable systems. These centers promote transparency, facilitate verification processes, and support lifelong learning initiatives by providing accessible information on qualifications and credentials. To maximize efficiency, the verification provided by a National Information Center should be accepted as a valid confirmation, thereby expediting the recognition process and reducing redundancy and unnecessary manual verification.

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Principal Statement 18: Guidelines and Network of National Information Centers

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) holds a strategic role in overseeing the establishment of a network of National Information Centers and the development of guidelines to ensure consistency, interoperability, and effective coordination in qualifications and credentials recognition across ASEAN.

Policy Description

The AQRF could develop comprehensive and standardized guidelines for National Information Centers to ensure consistent practices, transparent processes, and interoperability across AMS, clarifying the distinct roles, shared purposes, and operational principles for Member States within the network. These guidelines would serve as a framework for harmonizing recognition of qualifications and credentials, enhancing trust, and fostering greater alignment within the region's education and training systems.

The AQRF could establish a coordinated network of National Information Centers under its supervision to promote effective communication and collaboration among AMS. This network would facilitate the exchange of information, ensure efficient qualification verification processes, and support the seamless integration of national frameworks into the broader ASEAN qualifications and credentials recognition system.

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Principal Statement 19: Capacity Building and Stakeholder Engagement

AMS, in collaboration with the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework Committee (AQRFC), should prioritize capacity building initiatives and stakeholder engagement activities. This includes training policymakers, education providers, and users on the benefits and implementation of digital recognition systems. Stakeholder engagement efforts should ensure inclusivity and foster a shared understanding of digital credentialing processes.

Policy Description

AMS, supported by AQRFC, should organize capacity building workshops, seminars, and training sessions to empower stakeholders with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement and utilize digital recognition systems effectively. AMS are encouraged to initiate national pilot projects at selected higher education institutions to test system interoperability and efficacy prior to full-scale deployment. Stakeholder engagement activities should promote collaboration, address concerns, and ensure continuous improvement of digital credentialing practices.

SECTION 7: OVERSIGHT AND REGIONAL COORDINATION

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework Committee (AQRFC) shall serve as the primary governing body responsible for overseeing the regional implementation of these Guidelines. To ensure regional consistency, the AQRFC is responsible for coordinating the planning, monitoring, and review of implementation progress, including facilitating cross-country assessments through a Joint Review Mechanism. Furthermore, the Committee will provide a platform for knowledge exchange and conduct periodic reviews and updates to adapt these Guidelines to technological advancements and evolving educational practices.

Acknowledgement Statement

The Focus Group on Digital Recognition of Qualifications (FG-DRQ) extends its sincere gratitude to all individuals and organizations whose expertise, dedication, and support made these Guidelines possible. This document reflects the collective effort and shared vision of ASEAN Member States to establish a seamless, equitable, and learner-centric framework for digital recognition of qualifications and credentials.

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Glossary

ASEAN Member States (AMS): Countries that are part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, working collaboratively to achieve shared goals in economic, educational, and social development.

ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF): A common reference framework which functions as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across ASEAN Member States

Credential: A credential is any documented evidence, whether digital or paper-based, that attests to an individual's educational or professional achievements, skills, and competencies. Credentials can take various forms, including degrees, diplomas, certificates, badges, and other forms of recognition of learning and competencies acquired through formal, informal and non-formal learning. They can be issued by a wide range of entities, such as academic institutions, professional organizations, industry associations, government bodies, and other recognized authorities.

Digital Credentialing Systems: Digital recognition involves the utilization of secure, interoperable, and transparent digital systems for issuing, verifying, and validating qualifications and credentials. These systems, which may be provided by public bodies or private entities, ensure the authenticity and integrity of the credentials, making it easier for stakeholders to trust and accept them across borders. All organizations offering a credentialing system must be guided by specific policies recognized by the relevant authorities and guidelines to maintain consistent standards and reliability mandated by the national authority.

Digital Recognition: The use of technology to authenticate, verify, and validate qualifications and credentials digitally, ensuring their integrity and accessibility.

Interoperability: Effective digital recognition requires adherence to international best practices and interoperability mechanisms. This includes the use of cross-platform protocols and the linkage of different systems to ensure that digital credentials issued in one country can be easily verified and accepted in another, promoting seamless academic and professional mobility.

Learner-Centric Approach: Digital recognition should be designed with the learner in mind, ensuring that individuals have secured and easy access to their credentials and can share them readily with employers and other institutions. Additionally, the system should allow users to have control over their credentials, empowering them to manage and distribute their achievements as needed.

Lifelong Learning: All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

National Qualifications Framework (NQF):

Instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria or criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector, e.g., initial education, adult education and training, or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis, whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners.

Portability of Qualifications and Credentials: The ease with which qualifications and credentials can be recognized and accepted across institutions, sectors, or borders without the need for re-assessment or re-verification.

Qualification: As adopted by the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRFC), a qualification is a formal certificate issued by an official agency, in recognition that an individual has been assessed as achieving learning outcomes or competencies to the standard specified for the qualification title, usually a type of certificate, diploma or degree. Learning and assessment for a qualification can take place through workplace experience and/or a program of study. A qualification confers official recognition of value in the labor market and further education and training. Qualifications can be conferred both digitally and through traditional paper-based means.

Quality Assurance:

- A component of quality management which is 'focused on providing confidence that quality requirements will be fulfilled'.
- In relation to education and training services, it refers to planned and systematic processes that provide confidence in the design, delivery and award of qualifications within an education and training system. It ensures that stakeholders' interests and investment in any accredited program are protected.

Verification: The process of ensuring the authenticity and accuracy of a qualification or credential, often through secure digital systems.

Employment/ Workforce Mobility: The ability of workers to move freely across borders or sectors, supported by recognized and validated qualifications and credentials.

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