

Dissimilarities between NQFs of SAARC Countries

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Abstract: The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises the eight countries of South Asia, i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, The Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is an Association based on the consciousness that in an increasingly independent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighborly relations and meaningful cooperation among the Member States which are bound by ties of history and culture. But there are great dissimilarities in National Qualification Framework (NQF) of SAARC countries. An NQF is a modern measuring instrument for the Employer to measure the quality and performance of the Employee. In all of the SAARC countries, the NQF is represented by differences of numbers of level in NQFs, Distinction between highest level of TVET in NQFs, inequality of numbers of level in NQFs for Tertiary education and unevenness of entry qualification in NQFs etc. makes it difficult for the regional and international Employers to judge the Employee's quality and performance depending on the NQF levels. This problem could be minimized if a common NQF is followed by all countries of a continent or subcontinent which is now essential for SAARC countries. For instance, European Qualification Framework (EQF) is a popular NQF in Europe which is followed by the different member of EU countries. Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) is another popular qualification framework which is executed in Australia. Similarly, ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework (AQR) is a recently established NQF reference framework for ASEAN countries which is same as the EQF and Scottish reference model. This allows regional or international Employers to measure or understand the quality & performance of Employee depending on the NQF levels and facilitate worldwide mobility of workers. However, unlike Europe, Australia and ASEAN countries, SAARC does not follow a common NQF standard for all SAARC countries. As a consequence, the people of SAARC countries have considerable limitations for world-wide jobs. Therefore, it is necessary to create a common NQF for SAARC countries in order to judge appropriately the quality and performance of the Employee by the Employers and facilitate worldwide mobility of SAARC nation. This paper represents the dissimilarities between NQFs of SAARC countries along with a proposal of an idea to establish a common NQF for SAARC countries, named SAARC Qualification Reference Framework (SQRF).

Keywords: *NQF, EQF, AQF, AQR, SQRF.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

SAARC is an important part of Asia considering the geographical aspect. Each SAARC country is using the National Qualification Framework (NQF) according to their own design which is not consistent with one another. Frameworks provide an efficient method to evaluate and compare according to the qualification. They can also encourage countries to rethink and reform national policy and practice on education, training and lifelong learning [1]. A Qualifications Framework is a formalized structure in which learning level descriptors and qualifications are used in order to understand learning outcomes [2]. This allows for the ability to develop, assess and improve quality education in a number of contexts. Qualifications Frameworks are typically found at the

National, Regional, and International level. So, an NQF is one type of Qualifications framework which fulfills the national and international demand of Job market that is also related to the Academic education system. Therefore, NQF is a modern measuring instrument for the Employer to measure the quality and performance of the Employee. But when each country of a region is using their own NQF, the regional / international Employers face difficulties to select their Employee depending on NQF levels. This type of problem is encountered by SAARC countries. There are considerable dissimilarities between the fields of NQF, particularly in SAARC countries. In this study, the NQF of SAARC countries are being analyzed to represent the contrast between their NQFs as well as a proposal of a common qualification

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reference framework for SAARC countries, as they come under an umbrella and can work with a common NQF reference model.

2. METHODOLOGY:

Through a qualitative research, this paper clarified the differences between NQFs of SAARC countries. The NQFs of SAARC countries have been analyzed based on the literature review of the NQFs of the mentioned countries and some others NQFs related papers. Author emphasis the dissimilarities between NQFs of SAARC countries such as “Dissimilarity of numbers of level in NQFs”, “Distinction between highest level of TVET in NQFs”, “Inequality of numbers of level in NQFs for Tertiary Education” and “Unevenness of entry qualification in NQFs” etc. have been analyzed in the paper which confuses the regional and international employer to understand there qualification and skill from the NQF certification levels. This paper has analyzed two popular NQFs; one of them is EQF which is practiced in EU countries and another is AQRF which has been recently setup in ASEAN countries. Finally, it is proposed to initiate a common NQF reference model for SAARC countries.

3. COMPARATIVE STUDY ON NQF IN SAARC COUNTRIES:

3.1 NQF in Afghanistan:

The ANQF (Afghanistan National Qualification Framework) is implemented in Afghanistan. The ANQF has 8 levels in order to allow for the full range of qualification types in the education, training and skills development system [3]. 8 qualification levels based on learning outcomes have been developed in Afghanistan which has been highlighted through the

table-1 [4]. According to the table-1, after completing primary education (1st cycle), an Afghan can achieve the NQF Level-1 without any skill training but to achieve level-2 the primary education (2nd cycle) with a basic vocational training must be completed. The ANQF up to level-5 is for TVET graduates and level 6 to 8 for Bachelor, Master and Doctoral graduates.

Table-1: Qualification structure of Afghan NQF.

Level	Qualification levels
1	Basic level
2	Literacy and Basic Vocational Training Certificate
3	Inter. Education certificate/Grade nine
4	Ad. Certificate High School/Grade twelve
5	Tertiary Edu. Grade fourteen Diploma
6	Higher Education Bachelor Degree
7	Higher Education Master Degree
8	Higher Education Ph.D. Degree

3.2 NQF in Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, there is no NQF at all. Instead, there is NTVQF (*National Technical & Vocational Qualification Framework*) which is only for technically and vocationally qualified people and has not yet addressed the Higher Secondary, Bachelor, Masters and PhD holder graduate under the NTVQF which is demonstrated in Table-2 [5]. It started from 2012 in Bangladesh. As per the mentioned table-2, the NTVQF also includes two pre-Vocational, five vocational as well as one for diploma qualification which has no similarity with the NQF levels of other SAARC countries. At present, ILO Bangladesh has been working to create an NQF for Bangladesh by 2020 [6].

Table-2: Levels of NTVQF in Bangladesh.

NQF	Knowledge	Skill	Education
6	Comprehensive actual and theoretical knowledge	Specialized range of cognitive & pract. skills	Diploma in Engg. or equiv. (Polytech. Edu.)
5	Very broad knowledge in a specific study area.	Broad range of cognitive and pract. skills	NSCL-5 (Vocational Edu.)
4	Broad knowledge in a specific area.	Range of cognitive and pract. skills	NSCL-4 (Vocational Edu)
3	Moderately knowledge in a specific area.	Basic cognitive and pract. skills	NSCL-3 (Vocational Edu)
2	Basic underpinning knowledge in a specific area.	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks.	NSCL-2 (Vocational Edu)
1	Elementary understanding in a specific study area.	Limited range of skills for carry out simple tasks.	NSCL-1 (Vocational Edu)
Pre-Voc-2	Limited general knowledge.	Very limited range of skills.	NSCL (Pre-Voc)-2 Pre-Voc Edu
Pre-Voc-1	Extremely limited general knowledge.	Minimal range of skills.	NSCL (Pre-Voc)-1 Pre-Voc Edu

3.3 NQF in Bhutan:

The Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF) serves as a point of reference for all qualifications and contains information on qualifications for various local and international stakeholders [7]. The Tertiary Education Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2010 mandates the development of Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF) that classifies all types of qualifications. The BQF has eight levels as illustrated in the table-3 below. The qualification levels indicate the levels of capabilities. The criteria for each level of qualifications are described and differentiated in the table-3 below [8]. In Bhutan qualification framework, level 1 to 4 is for primary and secondary education, 3 to 5 for vocational and 6 to 8 for university education.

Table-3: Levels of Bhutan Qualifications Framework.

NQF Level	Qualification Level	Academic Institution
8	Doctoral	University Edu.
7	Masters	University Edu.
6	Bachelors	University Edu.
5	Diploma	University Edu.
	National Diploma-2	Voc. Edu.
	National Diploma-1	Voc. Edu.
4	National Certificate-3	Voc. Edu.
	National Certificate-2	Voc. Edu.
	Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate	School Education
3	National Certificate-1	Voc. Edu.
	Bhutan Certificate for Secondary Education	School Education
2	Lower Secondary Edu.	School Edu.
1	Primary Education	School Edu.

3.4 NQF in India:

In 2009, the government of India adopted the National Skills Development Policy (NSDP), which aims to guide the skills development strategies and initiatives of all stakeholders. The NSDP is central to the creation of the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) [9]. The NSQF is organized as a series of levels of competency/skills arranged in ascending order from Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) 1 and 2 through to levels 1 to 10 (Table 4) [10]. NSQF levels are defined in terms of learning outcomes. These are the competences which the learners must possess regardless of whether they were acquired through formal, informal or non-formal education and training.

Levels are described by level descriptors which delineate the knowledge, skills and competences required at the level in question.

Table-4: Qualifications by levels across the NSQF

NSQL Level	Certificate	Equivalence
10	NCC 8	Doctorate
9	NCC 7	Master's Degree
8	NCC 6	
7	NCC 5	
6	NCC 4	Bachelor's Degree
5	NCC 3	
4	NCC 2	Grade XII
3	NCC 1	Grade XI
2	NCWP 2	Grade X
1	NCWP 1	Grade IX
RPL	RPL 2	Grade VIII
	RPL 1	Grade V

NCC=National Competency Certificate; NCWP=National Certificate for work preparation; RPL=Recognition of Prior Learning.

3.5 NQF in the Maldives:

The Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) published on 1 September 2009, will be fully implemented on 1 September 2011. The framework is internationally benchmarked, flexible, and responsive to the national, economic and social development of the Maldives. As a key step to promote international benchmarking of the qualifications, the Maldives Accreditation Board aligned qualifications to its 10 level framework using the level descriptors of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) which is shown in Table-5 in this paper. As per Table-5, the Maldives Accreditation Board assigns qualifications to its 10 level framework using the descriptors for levels 3-12 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. The Maldives Accreditations Board has acquired the agreement to use the SCQF level descriptors [11].

Table-5: Levels & Minimum credit of MNQF.

Level	Qualifications	Min. Credits
10	Doctoral Degree	360 credits (3-5 years)
	Higher Professional Diploma	120 credits (1 year (30 weeks))
	Higher Professional Certificate	60 credits (20 weeks)
9	Master's Degree	240 credits (2 years)
		120 credits (1 year (30 weeks))
	Advanced Professional Diploma	120 credits (1 year (30 weeks))

	Advanced Professional Certificate	60 credits (20 weeks)
8	Graduate Certificate	60 credits (20 weeks)
	Graduate Diploma	120 credits(1 year(30 weeks))
	Bachelor's Degree	480 credits (4 years)
7	Bachelor's Degree	360 credits (3 years)
	Professional Diploma	120 credits, 90 credits at level 7 (1 year (30 weeks))
	Professional Certificate	40 credits (20 weeks)
6	Advanced Diploma/ Associate Degree/ Foundation Degree	120 Credits 90 credit at Level 6, (1 year (30 weeks)) – diploma route. 240 credits 90 at level 5 & 90 credits at level 6 (2 years(60 weeks)) – Higher Secondary route.
	Professional Certificate	(40 credits 15 weeks)
	Diploma	120 credits, 90 credits at level 5 (1 year (30 weeks))
4	Certificate IV	120 credits (1 year (30 weeks) full-time)
3	Certificate III	40 credits (15 weeks full-time)
2	Certificate II	40 credits (15 weeks full-time)
1	Certificate I	10 credits (3 weeks full-time)

3.6 NQF in Nepal:

The Nepalese National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) is in the process of being developed by the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CTVET) on the basis of the existing National Skills Testing Board (NSTB) certification system. There are many challenges and issues both at the policy level and at the implementation stage. The experts' understanding and experiences revealed that not only NVQF but also NQF are in dire need to streamline the education system of Nepal [12]. Nepal has not yet created NQF but National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) has already been established which is presented in Table-6. According to the table-6, the Nepal NVQF has a total of five levels, where level 1 to 3 are for TVET education and level 4 is shown for

tertiary education. Besides, primary education has been shown at the basic level.

Table-6: Levels of NVQF

NSTB Level	Educational Level	Training
4	Tertiary Education	Skills Training; Livelihood training
3	Higher Secondary	Skill Training
2	Secondary	Skill Training
1	Lower Secondary	Skill Training
Basic Level	Primary	Non-formal education, Adult Literacy

3.7 NQF in Pakistan:

Pakistan Qualification Framework has eight levels. Levels are based on the Generic nomenclature used for the qualification in the country. The table-7 below shows the different qualification types which are classified and are used as quality assured qualification in the country. The Level 0 to 5 of PQF are for TVET Education which was implemented in the first phase in Pakistan [13].

Table-7: Qualification Framework of Pakistan.

PQF Level	Qualifications	Sector
8	Doctoral	Higher Education Sector
7	Master's Degree	
6	Bachelor's	
5	Diploma	1st phase of PQF National Vocation Qualification Framework (NVQF)
4	National Vocational Certificate 4	
3	National Vocational Certificate 3	
2	National Vocational Certificate 2	
1	National Vocational Certificate 1	
0	National Vocational Certificate 0	

3.8 NQF in Sri Lanka:

The SLQF (Sri Lanka Qualification Framework) integrates the National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) developed by the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission and the pathways of lateral mobility between the vocational education sector and the higher education sector have also been identified according to updated version of Sep 2015. The SLQF helps in the recognition of accredited prior learning in order to facilitate the vertical mobility within the higher education system. The SLQF has

total 12 NQF levels which is more difficult for the international Employers to understand. The SLQF consists of twelve levels. The first two levels (levels 1-2) are senior secondary level education qualifications and the next four levels (levels 3-6) are undergraduate qualifications. The other six levels (levels 7-12) are postgraduate qualifications which has described in Table-8 [14].

Table-8: Levels, Qualifications and Minimum volume of Learning for the award of SLQF.

Level	Qualifications	Min. Vol. of Learning
12	Doctor of Philosophy / Letter / Science / MD with Board Certification	Minimum 3 years of fulltime or equivalent time of original research after SLQL 6 or above
11	Master of Philosophy	Minimum 2 years of fulltime or equivalent time of original research after SLQL 6 or above
10	Masters with course work and a research component	60 credits after SLQL 5 or SLQL 6 including a research component of minimum 15 credits
9	Masters by course work	30 credits after SLQL 5 or SLQL 6
8	Postgraduate Diploma	25 credits after SLQL 5 or SLQL 6
7	Postgraduate Certificate	20 credits after SLQL 5 or SLQL 6
6	Bachelors Honors	120 credits after SLQL 2 of which 90 credits after SLQL 3, 60 credits after SLQL 4, 30 credits after SLQL 5
5	Bachelors	90 credits after SLQL 2 /60 credits after SLQL 3, /30 credits after SLQL 4
4	Higher Diploma	60 credits after SLQL 2 /30 credits after SLQL 3
3	Diploma	30 credits after SLQL 2
2	Advanced Certificate (GCE / A Level or equivalent)	
1	Certificate (GCE / O Level or equivalent)	

4. OUTCOME OF THE COMPARETIVE STUDY:

In this study paper, there are 8 SAARC countries of National Qualification Framework which are discussed in section-3. As per comparison in section 3 of this paper, numerous of dissimilarities are observed in the NQF of SAARC countries such as the “Dissimilarity of numbers of level in NQFs”,

“Distinction between highest levels of TVET in NQFs”, “Inequality of numbers of level in NQF for Tertiary Education” and the “Unevenness of entry qualification in NQF” as shown below:

4.1 Dissimilarity of numbers of level in NQFs: There are great dissimilarities in total numbers of level in NQF of SAARC countries. The total numbers of NQF level has been shown in Table-9 and Fig-1. As per Table-9 & Fig-1, there are not same numbers of NQF level in all SAARC countries like EQF where all European countries follow the same number of levels and same standard under this EQF system. The number of levels in EQF is 8. For instance, Afghanistan has created their NQF in total 8 levels, Bangladesh in 6, Bhutan in 8, India in 10, The Maldives in 10, Nepal in 4, Pakistan in 9 and Sri Lanka in 12 which confuses the regional and international Employer due to the dissimilarities of numbers of levels in NQFs.

Table-9: Country wise total number of levels in NQF.

Sl. no.	Name of the Countries	Total no. of levels in NQF
1	Afghanistan	8
2	Bangladesh	6
3	Bhutan	8
4	India	10
5	The Maldives	10
6	Nepal	4
7	Pakistan	9
8	Sri Lanka	12

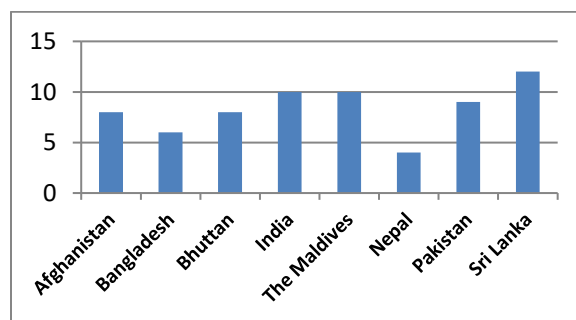


Fig-1: Country wise total numbers of level in NQF.

4.2 Distinction between highest levels of TVET in NQFs: In SAARC countries there are significant distinction between numbers of highest level of TVET in NQF. The highest level of TVET are not the same, it varies from level 3 to 6 which has been shown on Table-10 and Fig-2. According to the Table-10 and

Figure-2, the highest level of TVET is 3 in Nepal, 4 in Sri Lanka, 5 in Afghanistan, Bhutan, India and Pakistan and 6 in Bangladesh and The Maldives. So, this is another dissimilarity of NQF in SAARC countries that confuses the regional and international Employer to select their employee from SAARC countries according to the NQF levels.

Table-10: Highest level of TVET in NQF.

Sl	Name of the Countries	Highest Level of TVET
1	Afghanistan	5
2	Bangladesh	6
3	Bhutan	5
4	India	5
5	The Maldives	6
6	Nepal	3
7	Pakistan	5
8	Sri Lanka	4

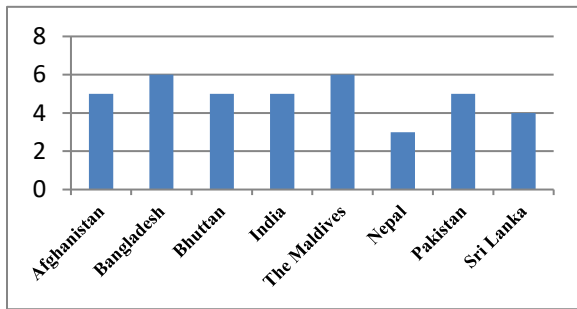


Fig.-2: Highest level of TVET in NQF.

4.3 Inequality of numbers of level in NQF for Tertiary Education: Most of the countries in the world have their university education divided into three levels of NQF: one level is for Bachelor’s degree, another one is for Master’s and last one is for PhD degree holders. However, the NQF of SAARC countries are not same. For instance, only Bhutan and Pakistan have establish there Tertiary education between 3 different levels in NQF, but Afghanistan, India and Maldives in 4, Sri Lanka in 8, Nepal in 1 and Bangladesh is not yet implemented their NQF in Tertiary level. So, these types of inequality have created another dissimilarity in NQF of SAARC countries which has been represented by Table-11 & Fig-3.

Fig.-3: Dissimilarities of numbers of level in Tertiary Education.

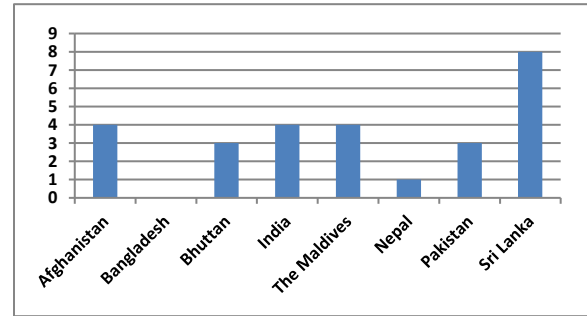


Table-11: Inequality of numbers of level in Tertiary Education.

Sl.	Name of the Countries	Numbers of Level in Tertiary Education
1	Afghanistan	4
2	Bangladesh	0
3	Bhutan	3
4	India	4
5	The Maldives	4
6	Nepal	1
7	Pakistan	3
8	Sri Lanka	8

4.4 Unevenness of entry qualification in NQFs:

There are several discrepancies in the field of entry level qualification of NQF. For example, India started the academic qualification from grade-5 for level 1, where Sri Link from GCE / O-level, Bangladesh from Pre Vocational level, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal & Pakistan from Primary level which has been shown in Table-12.

Table12: Entry Qualification of NQF in SAARC countries.

Sl.	Name of the Countries	Entry Qualification
1	Afghanistan	3 years Primary Education
2	Bangladesh	Pre Vocational Education
3	Bhutan	Primary Education
4	India	Grade V
5	The Maldives	With Basic Literacy
6	Nepal	Primary Education
7	Pakistan	With Basic Literacy
8	Sri Lanka	GCE/O Level

5. RESULT OF THE STUDY:

According to the section 3 & 4 of the study paper a huge dissimilarity is found in the NQF of the SAARC countries, which confuses the regional and

international Employers to detect or select their proper Employee from SAARC countries and reducing the scope of worldwide mobility of SAARC people. For this reason, a common standard of NQF is essential for SAARC countries. So, the Author has proposed a model of NQF for SAARC countries in section 7 with the reference of two popular international NQF which has been discussed in section 6 of this paper.

6. TWO POPULAR QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK IN THE WORLD:

6.1 European Qualification Framework (EQF):

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a European-wide qualifications framework which joins the qualifications of different EU members together. In a way, it is a translation of different national qualifications which makes qualifications in different EU countries easier to understand. The EQF aims to facilitate mobility of students and workers within the EU and also the outside of Europe and another important aim of EQF to encourage the development of mobile and flexible workforce to help develop lifelong learning. The EQF has been briefly describe in Table-13 below [15]:

Table-13: Simplified form of EQF.

EQF Levels	Knowledge
8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier
7	Highly specialized Knowledge
6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work
5	Comprehensive, specialized knowledge
4	Factual and theoretical knowledge
3	Knowledge of facts and general concepts
2	Basic factual knowledge
1	Basic general knowledge

6.2 **ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework:** The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) is a common reference framework that enables comparisons of education qualifications across participating ASEAN Member States (AMS). The AQRF developed is based on agreed

understanding between AMS. By design, it aims to have a neutral influence on national qualifications frameworks (NQF) of participating AMS. AMS are invited to participate in AQRF on voluntary engagement and implementation. More importantly, engagement in AQRF does not require changes to national qualifications systems (NQS). AQRF respects the specific structures and processes of participating AMS to maintain their responsiveness to national priorities. The AQRF has been briefly describe below in Table-14 below [16]:

Table-14: Simplified form of AQRF.

Level	Knowledge
8	is at the most advanced and specialized level
7	is at the forefront of a field
6	is specialized technical and theoretical within a specific field
5	is detailed technical and theoretical knowledge of a general field
4	is technical and theoretical with general coverage of a field
3	includes general principles and some conceptual aspects
2	is general and factual
1	is basic and general

7. A PROPOSED MODEL OF SAARC QUALIFICATION REFERENCE FRAMEWORK (SQRF):

According to the analysis of this paper a common NQF is very much essential for SAARC countries. A model of common NQF is proposed for SAARC countries which has been prepared on table-14 in the form of two popular NQF (EQF & AQRF). A suggested name of this model could be “SAARC Qualification Reference Framework” (SQRF). This reference framework is a system which functions as a device to enable comparison between qualifications across SAARC Member countries and an advantage that never affected the national framework.

vel	SQRF Knowledge	SQRF Skills	Qualification
8	most advanced and specialized level	involve independent and original thinking and research	PhD degree / or equivalent
7	Show mastery of a body of Knowledge	Involve critical and independent thinking as the basis for research	Master's Degree/ M Phil or equivalent
6	Specialized in a specific field theoretically & Practically	Involve critical and analytical thinking	Bachelor's Degree or equivalent
5	Comprehensive actual and theoretical knowledge within a specific study area	Specialized and restricted range of cognitive and practical skills required	Diploma/Advanced Diploma or equivalent
4	Very broad knowledge of the underlying, concepts, principles, and processes in a specific study area.	Very broad range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems	Grade XII or equivalent
3	broad knowledge in a specific study area	Range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems	Grade X or equivalent
2	Moderately broad knowledge in a specific study area	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems	Grade VIII or equivalent
1	Basic & general knowledge in a specific area	Limited range of skill for carry out a simple task	Grade V or equivalent
Pre-Level	Limited General Knowledge	Limited range of skill for carry out a very simple task	Elementary Level, Less than Grade V education

Table-14: Proposed model of SQRF.

8. CONCLUSION:

According to the above analysis and the outcome of the study, there are a plethora of dissimilarities in NQF of SAARC countries which does not allow regional and international Employer to utilize NQF certificate as an appropriate measuring tool to estimate the quality and performance of Employee. In order to the Employers difficulties, it is required to create a common standard of NQF, which is proposed in section 7 of this paper. It will be easier to branding and accessing the SQRF certificate holders in the regional and international Job market. SQRF is merely a proposed model for SAARC countries which requires an extensive research by the SAARC authority or any research body for more modification of this model.

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