

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK – PALESTINE*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Palestine plans an eight-level qualifications framework (NQF) based on learning outcomes and encompassing qualifications from all education and training sectors. Palestine's current draft NQF relaunches the framework, following a first proposal for an NQF made in 2013 but whose development remained in abeyance for several years.

An official NQF working group developed a draft NQF during 2023, for eventual submission to the country's national government, the Palestinian Authority, for their review and potential approval.

No law has been adopted yet and no roles or functions allocated to actors and stakeholders, therefore Palestine is in the design stage.

2. NATIONAL CONTEXT

2.1 Policy context

Even before the current war in Gaza, which began in October 2023 and continues at the time of writing, socio-economic conditions had not been conducive to education and training system reform, to which the NQF is intended to contribute. Palestine is geographically divided among East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank, the latter in turn sub-divided and crossed by Israeli settlements. Communications of any kind, commerce, and, in education and training, policy and programme implementation, have all been hindered by this “archipelago economy” and the ongoing volatile relationship with Israel. Likewise, educational attainment is affected by the ongoing conflict, a handicap further exacerbated by the current situation¹.

This latest round of the decades-long conflict has thrown into drastic reverse the preceding period of growth. Gross domestic product for all Palestine (GDP) had increased by 3.9% in 2022². Gaza saw an 80% collapse in GDP for Q4 2023, while the West Bank experienced a 22% contraction for the same period³. While no definitive figures on impacts of the war on the labour market, across Palestine, can be given here due to the difficulties inherent in collecting data in such circumstances, the effects, especially on private sector employment, are obviously detrimental⁴.

Palestine's population is young, 34% being in the 15-24 bracket, while population growth is high at 2.5% in 2021⁵. These forces pressure the education and training capacities and provision and the jobs market. Between 2000 and 2016, the working-age population in Palestine increased by 83%.

Jobs are hard to come by, especially for younger people. Data gathered in 2022 by the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) shows an activity level of 44% among the population aged 15 and upwards⁶. Longer term, the rate has been hovering around 40% since the 1993 Oslo Accords. Underemployment – people employed at levels below their qualifications and skills – is also common.

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/jeea/article/17/5/1502/5292664>

² [Key policy developments in education, training and employment – Palestine 2023 | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

³ “Note on the Impacts of the Conflict in the Middle East on the Palestinian Economy”, World Bank February 2024: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/db985000fa4b7237616dbca501d674dc-0280012024/original/PalestinianEconomicNote-Feb2024-Final.pdf>

⁴ [Conflict exposure and labour market outcomes: Evidence from longitudinal data for the Gaza Strip - ScienceDirect](#)

⁵ [Key policy developments in education, training and employment – Palestine 2023 | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ [Key policy developments in education, training and employment – Palestine 2023 | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

Unemployment is high – the overall unemployment rate in 2022 was 23.8%⁷, higher among females than males and among both sexes in Gaza than in the West Bank. The number of youths (15-24 age group) not in employment, education, or training (NEET) is comparatively high, standing at 31.5% in 2021⁸.

Where people are in work, the country is over-reliant on the public sector, which employs 20.7% of the workforce. About 13.2% of workers are employed in Israel and the settlements, while the remaining 66.1% are employed in the private sector⁹. The Palestinian economy is dominated by small firms. It has a high level of self-employment, namely 24.4% (PBCS, 2022), which is more prevalent in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip. As many of the micro to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are family-based and often operate in the informal economy, there is limited room for job creation.

2.2 Education and Training reform

Unsurprisingly in the current circumstances, governmental and societal energies, in all the Palestinian territories, have been directed into matters of basic survival such as food supply, managing aid deliveries, and establishing emergency shelter, rather than education. In Gaza, the war has brought formal education to a halt. School and college buildings have been destroyed, including all the universities and nearly 400 schools¹⁰.

Palestine's general programme of government is called the National Policy Agenda 2017–2022, which comprises sectoral strategies. There are two in education, one for general education, spanning kindergarten to upper secondary school, and one for higher education.

A key recent reform has been the establishment of the National TVET Commission (NTC). This new body, whose governing board is chaired by the Prime Minister, and which includes the TVET departments from the main ministries, social partners, and other actors, seeks to coordinate institutional and stakeholder engagement in the vocational and technical education and training system, overcoming the fragmentation experienced in previous policies.

To further enhance collaboration, the Palestinian government has established a Sector Working Group (SWG) for the TVET sector. This SWG serves as a platform for the National TVET Commission (NTC) to engage with donors, development agencies, private-sector representatives, and private training institutions.

In addition, the NTC included in its strategic plan provision to establish national sector skills councils, the NSSCs. Their function will be to connect the labour market and the education and training systems, to foster demand orientation, and facilitate better use and development of people's skills. A pilot council, the Renewable Energy Sector Skill Council (RESSC) has been set up. The NTC Board of Directors will need to approve bylaws to formalise the NSSCs. The bylaws will delegate responsibility for establishing each council to the NTC President. In the case of the Renewable Energy Council, the process to formally establish it in law is underway at the time of writing.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is responsible for general education from kindergarten to upper secondary school, and higher education in universities, community colleges and university colleges (called technical colleges when they offer technical programmes).

In VET, the range of actors is wide. VET provision divides into formal VET and non-formal VET.

⁷ [Key Policy Developments in Education, Training and Employment – Palestine 2023](#), ETF, [Key policy developments in education, training and employment – Palestine 2023 | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁸ [Key Policy Developments in Education, Training and Employment – Palestine 2023](#), ETF, [Key policy developments in education, training and employment – Palestine 2023 | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁹ Palestinian (PCBS), 2019, quoted in the ETF Torino Process Assessment, conducted 2020 and published 2021.

¹⁰ <https://theconversation.com/the-war-in-gaza-is-wiping-out-palestines-education-and-knowledge-systems-222055>

In formal VET, there are the:

- technical education programmes offered by the community colleges and university colleges (as indicated above, these are called technical colleges when they offer technical programmes). Students successfully completing these programmes are awarded qualifications at the planned NQF Level 5, after which they may enter employment or access higher technical education. Additionally, community colleges only (though not the university colleges) offer one-year technical programmes leading to award of a vocational specialised diploma at Level 4.
- vocational secondary education programmes, provided both by the vocational schools, and vocational units within general education schools. Both these school types are affiliated to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Such programmes may lead to qualifications considered equivalent to the planned NQF Level 4.

Meanwhile, the non-formal VET sector is quite heterogenous. It comprises:

- vocational training programmes offered by the Vocational Training Centres (VTCs), which are affiliated to the Ministry of Labour (MoL). These train people for the labour market, awarding qualifications considered equivalent to NQF Levels 1 to 4 in the vocational path. The Vocational Training Centres (VTCs) offer flexible provision, day, and evening courses. The state-run centres number circa 15-29, while the private sector runs almost 200. The VTCs overall are popular, often having to turn down requests for places.
- the apprenticeship programmes offered by several vocational schools affiliated to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. These are considered non-formal training, despite being provided by schools. These programmes align with Level 3 in the planned NQF.
- training programmes offered by the Ministry of Social Development VTCs, which target marginalised groups.
- the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which offers training in a variety of vocational fields. UNRWA programmes support refugees or their children.
- programmes provided by non-governmental organizations.
- private for-profit training providers e.g. the Electricity Company.

Access to initial VET programmes for young people in Palestine is relatively smooth, but adult participation in continuous learning is weaker. Transitioning between parallel tracks in VET and general education is feasible, but moving between VET to and higher education remains challenging.

The VET system in Palestine performs well in imparting basic skills and competences to youths and adults, and in aligning with the transition towards green and digital societies. As indicated above at Section 2.2, in its ongoing establishment of the National Sector Skills Councils, Government ministries and other VET actors are seeking to better connect the VET system and the labour market. Accordingly, the then Ministry of Education adopted in 2018 the apprenticeship track for its vocational schools (see above), which is now being implemented in six schools in various specialisations.

Due to the complexities of the VET system, it is difficult to say with certainty what its enrolment rates are. ETF estimates¹¹ that about 15% of students in the upper secondary education age cohort (16–18 years), pursue VET paths.

The two education strategic plans incorporate development of the National Qualifications Framework.

A first working group, funded and coordinated by the German development agency, GIZ¹², had developed a draft NQF in 2013. There followed a period of inactivity. However, since 2022 the government has given both qualification system and VET system reform renewed impetus. To better

¹¹ [03_trp_etf_assessment_2020_palestine_executive_summary.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹² Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

integrate the VET system, and to link it better to the labour market, the PM's Office established the NTC, unifying VET governance.

Progress on the NQF has obviously been impaired by the current war in Gaza. However, National authorities, GIZ, and ETF continue to cooperate remotely on the NQF, albeit on a reduced scale and with an inevitable postponement of the timetable to develop the framework.

2.2 NQF legal basis

No law has been adopted yet.

A mandated official NQF working group, the Inter-Ministerial Committee, developed an updated draft NQF during 2023, constituting a White Paper, for submission to the Council of Ministers i.e., the Cabinet of the country's national government, the Palestinian Authority, for their review and potential approval.

Should the Council approve the paper, the Committee will resume its development, which would include proposals for a legal act on the NQF. That legislation should, for reasons of consistency and to support implementation, be prepared in consideration of existing laws in education and training and the labour market, such as the Palestinian Labour Law of 2000, the Education Law of General Education of 2017, and the Higher Education Law of 2018.

3. NQF OBJECTIVES AND FUNCTIONS

3.1 NQF objectives

Formally, NQF goals are listed in the developing White Paper, "National Qualifications Framework Palestine", brought forward in 2023. As indicated earlier, at the time of writing, the Council of Ministers has yet to review and endorse the paper.

However, as the objectives proposed by the Inter-Ministerial Committee are not contentious, they will likely not change significantly. The White Paper lists the following six goals:

- Organizing the qualifications framework: unifying the processes of planning, designing, and developing qualifications in Palestine, and applying common standards.
- Developing a common language: creating a common language around qualifications, ensuring transparency and facilitating understanding of qualification levels among education and training institution, and employers.
- Linking qualification types: enhancing the consistency and quality of national qualifications by linking qualifications from different education sectors e.g., HE and VET, to increase trust among education and training institutions.
- Facilitating transition opportunities: supporting learners' transitions between education and training sectors, and from education and training into the labour market at both national and international levels, aiming to facilitate their integration into the workplace and to enable them to move between different career paths.
- Achieving consistency in design and relevance of qualifications: ensuring that qualifications consistently adhere to national guidelines, standards and development requirements to meet labour market needs.
- Implementing in practice the principle of lifelong learning: recognizing diverse learning patterns and providing a reference for individuals' progression through education and training pathways and enhancing the principle of lifelong and continuous learning.

3.2 NQF functions

Palestinian authorities conceive the planned NQF as an instrument to contribute to education system and labour market reform, notably raising the relevance of qualifications to the labour market, so contributing to achieving outcomes set in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2017–2022, the Higher Education Plan 2017-22 and the Ministry of Labour Strategy 2017-2022.

4. LEVELS, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND QUALIFICATIONS

4.1 NQF structure and level descriptors

The White Paper provides for an 8-level framework encompassing qualifications from all education and training sectors. The three learning domains are: “knowledge”, “skills”, and “autonomy and responsibility”.

4.2 NQF scope and coverage

The planned framework would include qualifications of the following types: (i) general education qualifications. (ii) vocational qualifications. (iii) higher education qualifications. (iv) vocational qualifications awarded by the VTCs.

Officials from the engaged ministries and GIZ have provisionally mapped general, vocational, and higher education qualification types to the proposed NQF levels - see below and the provisional NQF graphic:

- general education qualifications would correspond to proposed NQF Levels 1 to 4. Students graduate from high school with a diploma, the Tawijih, at Level 4.
- vocational secondary education school students take the vocational general secondary examination, leading to the Secondary Vocational Certificate, which would place at Level 4.
- technical college students take the Technical Diploma at Level 5 and may proceed to the Technical Baccalaureate at Level 6.
- students at the vocational training centres (VTCs, non-formal VET providers, see Section 2.2 above) take practical and theoretical examinations at Levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.
- higher education qualifications, the Intermediate Diploma, Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD, would respectively place at Levels 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Vocational Qualifications

The first NQF working groups also mapped vocational qualifications to the Arab Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO)¹³, as follows:

- Qualifications for ASCO Specialist would map to NQF level 6.
- Qualifications for ASCO Technician would map to NQF level 5.
- Qualifications for ASCO Craftsman would map to NQF level 4.

¹³ https://www.nchrd.gov.jo/ArabOccupation_En.aspx Derived from the ILO-developed International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO): <https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/classification-occupation/>

- Qualifications for ASCO Skilled Worker would map to NQF level 3.
- Qualifications for ASCO Semi-Skilled Worker would map to NQF level 2.

Overview of the draft Palestinian National Qualifications Framework

Levels of vocational education and training TVET	Levels according to the Arab Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO)	Qualifications covered by the level	Levels according to the National Qualifications Framework NQF	ISCED levels
		Third university degree (PhD) and equivalent qualifications from previous learning	8	8
Higher technical education (Technical Baccalaureate)	Specialist	Second University Degree (Master's) and Higher Diploma at Master's level, courses and specialized training programs equivalent to the Masters degrees and equivalent qualifications obtained from previous learning	7	7
		First university degree (baccalaureate), specialized courses and training programs of the level of baccalaureate and the equivalent qualifications obtained from previous learning	6	6
		Intermediate and technical diploma certificate, and specialized training programs and courses equivalent to the diploma and the equivalent qualifications obtained from previous learning	5	4
Technical Education (Technical Diploma)	Technician	Academic and vocational high school diplomas and equivalent qualifications from previous learning Vocational diploma certificate	4	3
Vocational secondary education (Secondary Vocational certificate)	Craftsman	Certificate of basic education for the tenth grade and certificate of vocational training level II (long-term training programs) and the equivalent qualifications obtained from previous education.	3	2
Vocational training (Long-term training programs)	Skilled worker	Certificate of basic education for the sixth grade and certificate of vocational training level I (short-term training programs) and the equivalent qualifications obtained from previous education.	2	1
Vocational training (Short Term Training Programs)	Semi- skilled worker	Pre-school certificates and unskilled qualifications obtained by experience	1	0

Source: GIZ/ Inter-Ministerial Committee on the NQF.

4.3 Use and renewal of learning outcomes and standards

Learning outcomes are the conceptual basis of the planned level descriptors and future qualifications. However, they are not yet used systematically in practice in Palestine to develop or describe curricula or qualifications, or for assessment.

An analysis of qualifications was conducted by GIZ during 2023, which showed that there is not always a clear distinction between qualifications and programmes. A validated or approved programme is usually directly associated, one to one, with the qualification it leads to. The template used by qualification providers to seek accreditation for a particular programme typically includes sections specifying the learning outcomes, but these are not standardized.

4.4 Quality assurance of qualifications

The Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC) licenses higher education institutions, which encompasses the colleges, and accredits their programmes.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Ministry of Labour run the systems for accrediting and licensing VET institutions and the adoption of their programmes. However, there is not yet a systematic availability and application of qualification standards, and assessment and certification standards and guidelines, to quality-assure qualifications and their assessment and award.

5. INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

5.1 Governance and institutional arrangements for the NQF

In 2022 the Council of Ministers mandated by decree the establishment of a working group, the Inter-Ministerial Committee, already mentioned at section 2.3, to undertake development of an NQF. It comprises representatives from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Ministry of Labour, plus the new National TVET Commission (NTC). The senior representative from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education acts as the rapporteur of the Inter-Ministerial Committee.

This Committee's primary task is to develop the NQF, including establishing its future relationship with related education strategies, and to submit an agreed proposal to the Council of Ministers for their approval.

5.2 Roles and functions of actors and stakeholders

The NQF Inter-Ministerial Committee set up the dedicated NQF Taskforce, which comprises stakeholders who represent their respective institutions or sectors, channel their membership's views, and provide technical expertise and advice to the Committee. There are eleven member bodies:

- the Ministry of Education and Higher education.
- the Ministry of Labour.
- the NTC.
- the AQAC.

- a representative of the Universities.
- a representative of the Community Colleges.
- the Federation of Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture.
- the Palestinian Federation of Industries.
- the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions.
- the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
- the General Personnel Council.

Following development of the first NQF draft, and the qualifications analysis report, the Taskforce conducted four workshops with many of the above stakeholders to gather their views and comments.

Local Employment and Training (LET) councils, established by the Ministry of Labour with the support of GIZ, and which comprise representatives from the government, the private sector and civil society, are an additional potential stakeholder platform to draw on.

6. RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

6.1 Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

No system of validation of non-formal and informal learning operates in Palestine for now. Establishing a system for validation is one element in the NQF plan, but, so far, no developmental work has been undertaken.

6.2 Credit systems

A credit system operates in higher education.

7. NQF IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

7.1. Stage of implementation

An early draft NQF White Paper has been prepared.

7.2 Qualifications databases and registers

AQAC runs a register of all higher education accredited programmes, while the Ministry of Labour runs a register of accredited VET programmes. However, neither yet includes linked qualifications defined by outcomes and allocated a level.

7.3 Career guidance and counselling

In recent years, career guidance in TVET institutions has improved significantly, and several systemic and sustainable changes, for instance the establishment of career guidance units in universities, have been made. Career guidance services for adults are also available.

Once the NQF is established and operationalised, careers services should be trained to advise clients on pathways to qualifications placed in the framework.

8. REFERENCING TO REGIONAL FRAMEWORK / OTHER FRAMEWORKS

8.1 Referencing to regional frameworks

There is a local regional qualifications framework, the Arab Qualifications Framework (AQF), though Palestine is not a member. The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) coordinates the AQF. Its members are Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.

This RQF, begun in 2012, is still in development rather than being fully operational. It is a cooperation platform for the respective QA agencies. It aims to reinforce standards for quality, and act as an international reference to facilitate transparency and comparability of qualifications, so supporting their mutual recognition.

There is also the Gulf Qualifications Framework (GQF), an instrument of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Its members are Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. It seeks to facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications for labour mobility.

Significant numbers of Palestinians live in or migrate to several of these countries, so that Palestine should anticipate this relationship in development of its NQF, with a view to recognition for mobility.

Additionally, the Union of Arab Universities¹⁴ (sometimes called the Association of Arab Universities) has surveyed its 280 member universities from across the Arab lands, with a view to eventual establishment of an Arab National Qualifications Framework, to which the various NQFs in the Arab countries would link their own frameworks.

8.2 International donor support

Palestine has historically relied to some extent on international development support and advice in education and training, including from the UN, EU, and some individual EU countries' assistance. These services have either ceased or been seriously scaled down because of the current Gaza war. Donors have evacuated their own nationals, the EU Representation Office in East Jerusalem is reduced to a skeleton staff, and projects, including ETF's, are either suspended or reduced in scale, operating only remotely.

The EU Representation Office in East Jerusalem coordinates various EU education and training projects.

ETF runs several projects in the country, in areas such as adult education, governance and excellence in VET, but, as indicated earlier, these are mainly suspended for now.

¹⁴ <https://www.aaru.edu.jo/Home.aspx>

GIZ has been a major national donor in the NQF. It facilitated and funded the first proposal for the NQF in 2013. Now, within its multi-year project, DOVET2, it is again the foremost development community partner in the re-launched NQF programme. ETF is cooperating closely with GIZ and national authorities in these efforts. GIZ also supports other aspects of VET system modernisation via DOVET2.

ENABEL, Belgium's development agency, is active in supporting VET in Palestine e.g., in work-based learning methodologies and projects.

UNRWA is the UN agency that supports Palestinian refugees. In VET, it manages eight training centres with semi-professional, trade, and short-term courses in a variety of specialisations that aim to prepare students for local employment. Programmes include construction, nursing, hairdressing, and fashion.

9. REFLECTIONS AND PLANS

Since 2022, the Inter-Ministerial Committee has made progress in conducting an analysis of qualifications and producing a new draft White Paper. While the Committee may modify the Paper before submission to the Cabinet, its priority is to achieve approval of the document's broad vision of the NQF.

Once the Cabinet gives its green light, the Committee needs to turn to the necessary technical work, including developing the level descriptors, defining qualification types, developing and updating standards, building quality assurance systems, including arrangements for award and assessment of qualifications, and certification, consulting and deciding on governance models and institutional arrangements, and so on. The Committee will consult widely on all these developments, including the Taskforce and other parties in its deliberations.

Legislative adoption would come at a later stage.

The Committee plans awareness-raising webinars for 2024, aiming to inform and engage the framework's intended beneficiaries and international partners.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANQAHE	The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in higher education
ASCO	Arab Standard Classification of Occupations
AQF	Arab Qualifications Framework
CVET	Continuous vocational education and training
ENABEL	Belgian development agency
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GE	General Education
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (development agency)
HE	Higher Education
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO)
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations (ILO)
IVET	Initial Vocational Education and Training
MoL	Ministry of Labour
MoSD	Ministry of Social Development
NTC	National TVET Commission
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RQF	Recognition of Prior Learning
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNWRA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East
VET	Vocational education and training
VETA	Vocational Education and Training Association
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
VTCs	Vocational Training Centres

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