

Implementing the PNG National Qualifications Framework (PNGNQF) at Divine Word University

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Abstract

This paper explores the quality assurance processes associated with implementation of the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework (PNGNQF) for programs of Divine Word University (DWU). The paper explains the background to the PNGNQF and explores policies and practices for quality assurance. Consideration is given to a range of programs provided by faculties of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, Health Sciences and Business and Informatics at diploma, advanced diploma, bachelor degree, postgraduate certificate, master degree and doctoral degree levels. The paper discusses challenges for the mix of competency-based (vocational) and higher education programs offered in a variety of delivery modes (face-to-face, blended and online). It examines the challenges in meeting the demand for accrediting programs of affiliated higher education institutions and providing programs for public sector middle-level and senior-level managers and benchmarking them to the PNGNQF. A new Higher Education Act (2014) for PNG has come into effect and a Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology has been established to replace the Commission of Higher Education which previously set and monitored standards. While DWU can, under its own DWU Act (1999), self-accredit its programs, it prides itself on upholding the standards set by the national government and seeks to maintain qualifications and nomenclature which are consistent with national, regional and international standards and conventions.

Key words: qualifications frameworks, Papua New Guinea, descriptors, quality assurance, Pacific Region

Introduction

Diplomas and degrees of different types and at different levels are issued by institutions of higher education throughout the world. As an issue of accountability, employers need assurance that a qualification from one institution is equivalent to a similar qualification from another institution. This paper explores processes governing the implementation of the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework (PNGNQF) (Commission of Higher Education, 2010) at Divine Word University (DWU) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Compliance with the framework is required for the accreditation of higher education programs and institutions. The PNGNQF aims to assure the public that all providers of education and training for formal qualifications operating in PNG will offer quality education and training.

Quality assurance may be defined as ‘the ways in which organizations make sure that the quality they desire to achieve is actually achieved’ (Baird, 2013), or, as stated by the European Commission (2014), ‘an all-embracing term referring to an on-going, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institution or program’. The PNGNQF is a tool to enable consistency in making judgments about programs at different levels across the higher education sector in PNG.

Like the frameworks throughout the Pacific Region, the PNGNQF is a taxonomic structure of levels and qualification types, each of which is defined by a taxonomy of learning outcomes or descriptors. ‘The taxonomic approach is designed to enable consistency in the way in which qualifications are described as well as clarity about the differences and relationships between qualification types’ (Australian Qualifications Council, 2013, p. 11). While the focus of this paper is on higher education levels, some attention is given to programs designed for public service senior and middle level managers which are considered to fall under upper levels of Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) qualifications.

Responsibility for accrediting higher education programs and institutions in PNG rests with the Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (DHERST) which was recently established under the *Higher Education (General Provisions) Act 2014* (Government of PNG, 2014) to replace the Commission of Higher Education. A committee of the Department is the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Committee (PNGNQAC). This Committee developed the PNGNQF and it was endorsed by the PNG Government in 2012. The PNGNQF is not yet part of the Pacific Qualifications Framework (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2011) but this is expected to happen in the near future. The intention is for the Pacific Qualifications Framework to embrace all forms of learning and to benchmark them against international standards, thus allowing Pacific Islanders to benefit from the opportunities of globalization, portability of learning and labour mobility.

Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework (PNGNQF)

The Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework has ten levels as illustrated in Figure 1, with levels four to ten being relevant for higher education. Progression from one level to the next higher level is dependent on satisfying the nationally prescribed criteria in the preceding level and the admission criteria of the admitting institution. This is similar to other Pacific qualifications frameworks. In PNG, grade 12 is the standard set for entry to institutions of higher education.

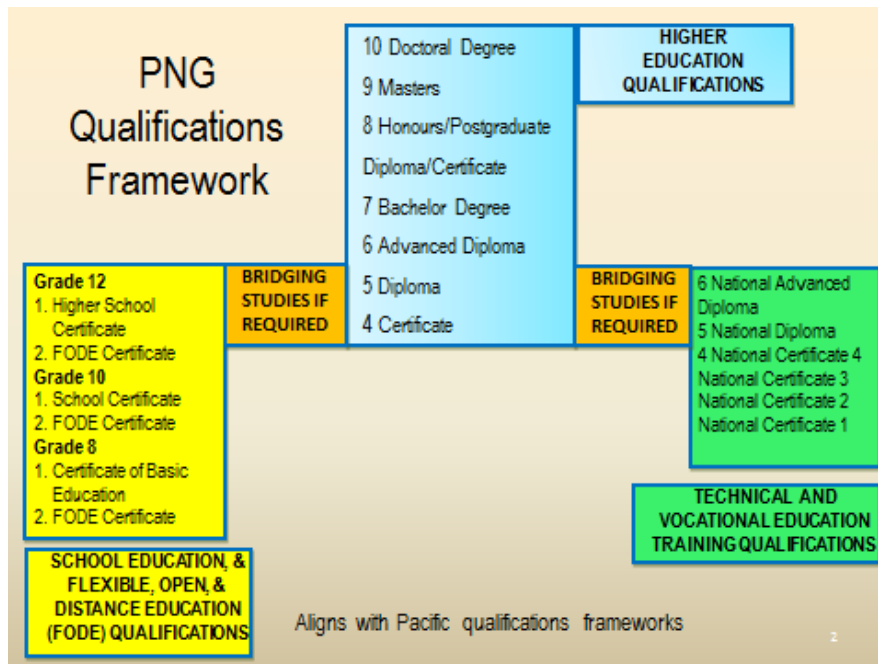


Figure 1: Overview of the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework

The PNGNQF provides standards for all PNG qualifications which are categorised by levels, based on learning outcomes and the volume of learning (length of study) for each program. Learning outcomes are addressed through broad level descriptors. The duration of full-time study for PNGNQF levels for higher education is as follows. Part-time studies typically take twice as long.

Level 4 Certificate (1 year)

Level 5 Diploma (1-2 years)

Level 6 Advanced Diploma (1 year)

Level 7 Bachelor Degree (General Degree) (4-5 years)

Level 8 Graduate Diploma or Bachelor Degree with Honours (1 year)

Level 9 Masters Degree (1-2 years)

Level 10 Doctoral Degree (3-4 years)

The level of a qualification is determined by a set of nationally agreed criteria called *descriptors*. These criteria determine the levels of competencies, skills and outcomes that must be achieved before an appropriate award can be made. Sponsors of programs must ensure there is a match between level descriptors of the PNGNQF and the academic program. As an example, Table 1 shows the PNGNQF descriptors for a doctoral degree. DWU has candidates enrolled in its Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program on both full-time and part-time basis for study. The entry requirement for a doctoral degree program is a master's degree and the duration of the program is 3-4 years full-time or 6-8 years part-time.

Table 1: PNGNQF descriptors for a doctoral degree program

Level	Higher education level descriptors
Level 10 Doctoral degree (3-4 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A substantial original contribution to knowledge in the form of new knowledge or significant and original adaptation, application, and interpretation of existing knowledge. • A comprehensive and searching review of the literature, experimentation, and creative work, with exegesis or another systematic approach, or an advanced, searching, and expansive critical reflection on professional theory and practice. • Undertake an original research project, or a project(s) addressing a matter of substance concerning practice in a profession at a high level of originality and quality. Presentation of a substantial and well-ordered dissertation, non-print thesis, or portfolio, for submission to external examination against international standards.

Commission for Higher Education, 2010, p. 16

Divine Word University

DWU is one of six universities in PNG. DWU a national university, open to all, serving society through its quality of research, teaching, learning and community engagement in a Christian environment. DWU was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1980 amended in 1996 and 1999. DWU was recognized as a partner university in the development of higher education in PNG by the National Executive Council on the 21st August 1996 (National Executive Council Decision No: 134/96). DWU was recognized as an agency of higher education in PNG by the National Executive Council on the 15th of October 2003 (National Executive Council Decision No: 187/03). These legal frameworks provide the mandate for DWU to approve its own programs as well as those of affiliated institutions which satisfy the national criteria for accreditation.

DWU's programs are also accredited under the Higher Education Act through the Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology. With support, partnership and collaboration from both public and private organizations, DWU is committed to offering special training programs in response to current and emerging needs of PNG and the South Pacific. DWU's services are offered with a high level of ethics and respect of individual rights. Core values underpin development and implementation of programs. These core values are: integrity, academic excellence, community engagement/service, respect, diversity, hospitality, learning for life and social responsibility.

DWU seeks to maintain qualifications and nomenclature which are consistent with national, regional and international standards and conventions. Evidence of this goal lay behind their request for an external academic audit in 2011 by a panel from Australia and an external post-audit review in 2013. DWU has campuses in Madang, Port Moresby, Wewak, Rabaul and Tabubil and affiliated institutions in Mount Hagen (Holy Trinity Teachers College), Banz (Good Shepherd Seminary), Madang (Lutheran School of Nursing), and Port Moresby (Don Bosco Technological Institute) (Figure 2).

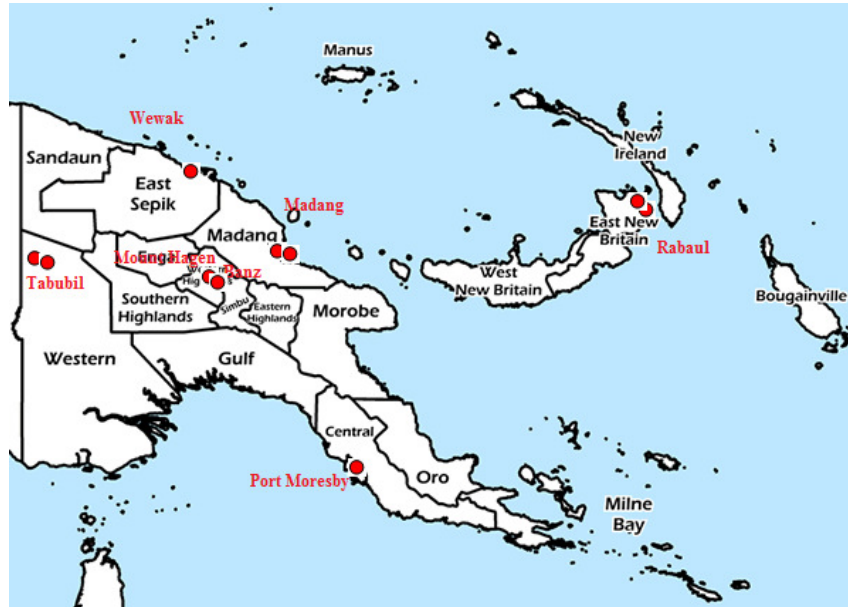


Figure 2: Locations of DWU campuses and affiliated institutions

All DWU programs belong to faculties. DWU has five faculties:

- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
- Faculty of Business and Informatics
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Health Sciences
- Faculty of Theology.

Development of programs is a dynamic process as the University constantly reviews its processes and how well it responds to market needs and global trends. In full-time (f/t) or part-time (p/t) study modes, DWU offers the following programs from diploma levels to the doctoral level.

- Level 10, f/t & p/t Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
- Level 9, f/t Master of Research Methodology, f/t & p/t Master of Educational Leadership, p/t Master of Leadership in Development, Master of Public Administration, Master of Business Administration and Master of Leadership in Business Administration

- Level 8, p/t Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning, Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Postgraduate Certificate in Online Studies
- Level 7, f/t Bachelor of Papua New Guinea Studies and International Relations, Bachelor of Communication Arts (Journalism), Bachelor of Arts (Social and Religious Studies), Bachelor of Education (Primary), Bachelor of Business Studies (Accountancy), Bachelor of Business Studies (Management), Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Bachelor of Information Systems, Bachelor of Mathematics and Computing Science, Bachelor of Health Sciences (Rural Health), Bachelor of Health Management, Bachelor of Environmental Health, Bachelor of Physiotherapy, Bachelor of Midwifery, and p/t, Bachelor of Public Administration, Bachelor of Management and Bachelor of Education (Primary, In-service)
- Level 6, f/t Advanced Diploma in Eye Care, p/t Advanced Diploma in Emergency Medicine and National Advanced Diploma in Government
- Level 5, f/t Diploma in Teaching (Primary), Diploma in General Nursing, p/t: Diploma in Human Resource Management, Diploma in Management, Diploma in Business Studies, Diploma in Project Management, Diploma in Health Services Management, Diploma in Educational Management Training, Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development, Diploma in Customs Services, and Diploma in Justice Administration.

Many programs are offered in blended or flexible learning mode for students who cannot commit to full-time studies. These typically include a two-week residential component during which face-to-face learning takes place for two units, with additional work done in participants' workplaces for the remainder of a semester. DWU is just starting to enter the online scene with its first *Basic Tok Pisin for Foreigners* program launched in May 2015.

In addition to programs offered on DWU campuses are those programs offered by affiliated institutions for which DWU has accredited their programs at diploma, advanced diploma and bachelor degree levels. Examples of these are the Diploma in General Nursing at an affiliated nursing school, Advanced Diploma in Religious Studies at an affiliated seminary, and Bachelor of Education (Technical) at an affiliated technological institute.

Guidelines for accreditation are governed by the 13 standards of the Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology. Requirements are for institutions to produce a self-study report indicating how they address the 13 standards, a program specification document for each program they seek to have accredited, and to submit to an audit by an external group to assess their claims and performance.

The standards are as follows.

1. The institution demonstrates honesty and integrity in all its operations, academic and financial, including its relations with students, employees and the public.
2. The institution is guided by a clearly stated purpose and defines its distinctive character and nature.
3. The institution appropriately plans and manages its finances to achieve the educational objectives to which it is committed.
4. The institution demonstrates sound corporate and academic governance of its academic operations.
5. The institution's operations are well managed and make use of relevant data and evidence to improve educational outcomes for students.
6. The institution's teaching and administrative personnel are appropriate in number, qualifications, experience and skills.
7. The institution's expected student learning outcomes for all programs are at the appropriate level for the PNG National Qualifications Framework, professional body requirements, employee needs and/or international benchmarks.
8. The institution's teaching and assessment practices are adequate to achieve the expected student learning outcomes.
9. The institution demonstrates effective student cohort management to ensure good graduate outcomes.
10. The institution ensures that students have access to appropriate levels of social, welfare and academic support services.
11. The institution has effective processes to provide, maintain and modernize learning resources including ICT and other physical resources.
12. The university demonstrates a commitment to equity goals and strong engagement with stakeholders.
13. The institution demonstrates that it engages with advanced knowledge, conducts research ethically and objectively, and that its research and scholarship lead to the discovery and/or application of knowledge for the benefit of society.

Office of Higher Education, pp. 30-38

PNGNQF implementation processes at DWU

For accountability of standards, DWU requires all programs to indicate alignment with the PNGNQF. DWU has policies and processes in place for monitoring program quality and implementation of the PNGNQF. All sponsors and implementers of programs are expected to familiarize themselves with academic policies.

Academic policies are located in a policy library on the DWU intranet. All academic and administrative staff are issued with laptop computers and have 24/7 access to internet and intranet sites. It should be mentioned that all full-time students are also issued with laptop computers and have email addresses and access to internet and student intranet sites. DWU has world-class ICT facilities. While all the academic policies are important, of particular relevance to aligning programs to the PNGNQF is the *Program development and approval policy* (Divine Word University, 2015). All programs are required to have a program specification document presented on a template provided by the Office of Higher Education (2012), now Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology. It is mandatory to state the PNGNQF level of a program and the intended learning outcomes of the program. The template includes the statement, 'The intended learning outcomes should align with the PNGNQF descriptors for the level of the award'.

Programs are typically initiated by Departments within faculties, taking into account an appropriate analysis of a situation, needs determination, market research, and receipt of stakeholder views. A program specification document is prepared with information covering the program name, duration of program, proposed implementation date, entry requirements, total credit points required to complete the program, PNGNQF level of the program, location where offered, mode of delivery, program overview, rationale for the program, market analysis, stakeholder input, intended learning outcomes aligned with PNGNQF descriptors, structure of the program, unit outlines, internal approval process, projected student numbers, teaching staff, resources and infrastructure.

Documents are examined iteratively by various committees before they are finally approved by the University Council for implementation. The quality of the work of these committees is critical in monitoring the maintenance of standards. At any stage, the document can be referred back for further work or clarification. The key committees are the:

- Faculty Curriculum and Assessment Committees
- Faculty Boards or, in the case of doctoral programs, the Research and Higher Degrees Board
- Academic Quality Assurance Committee
- Academic Board
- University Council.

At the heart of each program specification document are the unit outlines. These include title, code, credit points, prerequisites, description, learning outcomes, graduate attributes, content, teaching and learning strategies, assessment tasks and marking criteria which enable cross-checking with PNGNQF descriptors, evaluation and key references. It is a requirement that students have access to a unit outline at the beginning of a unit. Amendments to unit outlines are approved by the relevant Faculty Curriculum and Assessment Committee prior to the start of a semester.

Communication about the PNGNQF is important and this is facilitated by having DWU representation on the National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Committee, uploading information to the DWU Academic Affairs intranet site that all staff can access, providing periodic presentations at general meetings of academic staff, and through workshops to address specific needs.

An issue has been the concept of volume of learning and having common understandings about credit points and learning hours across the PNG higher education sector. At DWU, full-time programs offer four or five units a semester totally 40 credit points. One credit point typically indicates 15 learning hours. The understanding is that students have 40 learning hours a week for each 15 week semester, totalling 600 learning hours a semester or 1200 learning hours a year. With the addition of examination weeks and study breaks, the time increases to fit the 1200-1500 hours annually expected nationally. Learning hours include all types of student learning activities, including lecture weeks; reading; participation in lectures and tutorials;

participation in laboratory sessions; online learning activities; conduct of private research; work on individual and team assignments; writing essays; problem-solving; project work; individual consultation with teachers; practicums, placements and work-integrated learning; preparation for tests and examinations; and taking tests and examinations. A concern has been to ensure that programs offered in online or blended learning modes have an appropriate volume of learning to match the PNGNQF level for the qualification to be awarded and are not soft options to full-time studies.

Another issue faced at DWU was in regard to classifying the PNGNQF level for programs specifically developed for middle and senior level public servants. These typically focus on specific workplace knowledge and skills to upgrade qualifications of staff and achieve improved delivery of services to the public. Examples are programs developed for the PNG Customs Service, Department of Personnel Management, Department of Education and Department of Justice and Attorney General. The solution was to consider them at the upper levels of the TVET qualifications, i.e., Level 5 National Diploma and Level 6 National Advanced Diploma.

Program review, updating or discontinuance

Academic program reviews are undertaken in a consistent manner in line with the quality assurance mechanisms of the University and the PNG National Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (NHEQAAC). Reviews could result in updating or discontinuance. Evaluation is both formative and summative. Throughout a unit, students and the facilitators reflect and provide feedback on strengths and weaknesses, with information used to improve following sessions. On completion of a unit, students evaluate the unit using the DWU template for evaluations of units. The facilitator also evaluates the unit and updates the unit outline where considered necessary. Amendments typically are minor updating of components such as references, content, learning outcomes and assessment tasks. The revised unit outlines are collated by the Head of Department for an updating of the program specification document in November each year and posted on the relevant DWU website. In addition, there is a formal review, with external input and international benchmarking, on a five year cyclic basis. It is during these review processes that attention is given to the match between PNGNQF descriptors, learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

Conclusion

In summary, PNG has a national qualifications framework which is similar to those of other nations in the Pacific Region. The Framework enables consistency in the way in which qualifications are described as well as clarity about the differences and relationships between qualification types. The PNG Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (DHERST) through its National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Committee is responsible for oversight of processes to assure the public that all providers of education operating in PNG offer quality education and training.

Under the Acts of Parliament by which they were established, Universities can accredit their own programs, but are required to submit them to DHERST for accreditation if they seek government scholarships for students. Scholarships are typically sought for full-time programs, but not those offered in flexible learning or online modes. Standards of these programs are assessed during DHERST audits of institutions.

Divine Word University places great importance on quality assurance processes and has policies and processes to ensure alignment between programs and the PNGNQF. Issues have been aligning TVET programs with university programs and setting credit points, learning hours and duration in years. Committees have a significant role in monitoring program development, implementation and review. Of significance is the role of the Director of Academic Quality Assurance who chairs the Academic Quality Assurance Committee. However, it is accepted that quality assurance is everyone's business, and this is evident as one would talk with staff.

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Author

Pamela Norman is the Vice President Academic and Professor of Education at DWU. She chairs the Academic Board of Divine Word University with oversight of academic developments and standards. This includes monitoring the extent to which lecturers understand the requirements of the Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework and implications for program development and delivery. She is author of several textbooks for PNG primary and secondary schools, and an editor of the DWU Research Journal.

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