National Qualifications Frameworks as a Global Phenomenon: A comparative perspective

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Introduction

The idea of *qualifications* defined in terms of outcomes that is discussed in the
articles in this Special Issue has its origins in early developments in occupational
psychology in the United States and the attempts to measure teacher competence
that followed. However, the more recent development of the idea of a *national
qualifications framework* owes much of its inspiration to the 16 + Action Plan
launched in 1984 in Scotland (see Raffe’s article in this issue) and the NVQ
framework for vocational qualifications that was introduced across the whole of the
UK in 1986 [1]. Although both English and Scottish developments were limited to
vocational qualifications and shared a common outcomes-based definition of
qualifications (Young, 2002), there were important differences between the two
initiatives (Raffe, 1997) [2].

In his article in this issue David Raffe comments on the relatively limited influence
of the 16 + Action Plan on the provision of post-16 education in Scotland. At the
same time, it was sufficiently widely accepted to be a significant basis for the
succession of reforms that led to the launch of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications
Framework in 2001 (see also Raffe in this issue). In stark contrast, the NVQ
framework, launched with much fanfare, as a revolution in education and training
across the UK in 1987, became the subject of increasingly sharp criticism (Raggatt
& Williams, 2000) and has staggered to a position of ever increasing marginality [3].

Since the mid-1980s, national qualifications frameworks have been developed by
a growing number of countries [4], which suggests that they are responses to global
rather than just country-specific pressures (Young, 2002). However, apart from a
number of country-specific analyses, there has been relatively little debate about
qualification frameworks as a global phenomenon in either the policy or the research
literature. There are a number of possible reasons for this. One is that at the level
of rhetoric or broad goals, it is a development with which it is difficult to disagree—
who could not want qualifications to be more linked to each other and to exhibit
greater transparency? The introduction of an NQF has been seen by many involved,
like a change of currency, as something almost inevitable. A second possible reason
is that, as in most of the cases discussed in the papers in this Special Issue, national frameworks have been introduced initially for low-level vocational qualifications. Despite its importance, this is not a topic that has the highest profile for either academic researchers or policymakers, whose major concerns have tended to be with the more politically sensitive (and high status) issues of schools and universities. In the one case where a vocational framework has been the subject of serious debate—the British NVQs—the critiques have focused on the particular form of NVQs, not the idea of a single framework. As a result the broader idea of a national qualifications framework, which was first proposed by UK policymakers in the mid-1990s, has created little interest. A third possibility is hinted at by Paula Ensor in her article on the South African NQF in this issue. The NQF was not developed in South Africa from existing qualifications ‘in use’. As in the case of New Zealand (see the article by Philips in this issue) and in the case of NVQs in the UK, the South African NQF involved the development of a completely new terminology that included such terms as level descriptors and range statements which had no simple relationship with any previous qualifications. This terminology, common to New Zealand and South Africa, does not refer to any specific learning or qualifications; as a result it remains a mystery to many people. It is not surprising that those who are not familiar with the new language do not feel able to engage in debate, let alone try to theorise the phenomenon of NQFs.

In deciding that National Qualifications Frameworks were an important topic for a Special Issue, the Journal Editor and I felt that it was an opportunity to get beyond this impasse and explore some of the deeper social, political and economic issues. It also seemed that the best way of encouraging a wider debate was to draw on the growing international experience of NQFs. As I have discussed elsewhere (in Kraak & Young, 2001), and is evident from the articles in this issue by Ensor and Allais, it is the rhetoric and not the reality of the international experience that South Africa has drawn on in deciding to base its whole education and training reform strategy on a national qualifications framework [5]. In analysing NQFs as a global phenomenon, it is useful, therefore, to distinguish what Raffe (Raffe 1992) has referred to as the intrinsic logic or the broad educational goals of a national qualifications framework from the operational means or strategies by which it has been assumed that an NQF will achieve these goals. These goals, which appear to be widely shared across different countries and are found in almost every national and international policy document on qualifications framework, are that qualifications should:

- be transparent to all users in terms of what they signify and what learners have to achieve;
- minimise barriers to progression, both vertical and horizontal;
- maximise access, flexibility and portability between different sectors of education and work and different sites of learning.

Not surprisingly the idea of an NQF is also invariably linked to that of a learning society which is contrasted with societies of the past in which learning, at least recognised and accredited learning, was largely restricted to initial education and training.
A number of assumptions can be identified that have been central to how a national qualifications framework is envisaged as achieving its goals. The first is that it is possible to describe all qualifications in terms of a single set of criteria. This means that such a set of criteria would apply equally to school examinations, university diplomas and degrees, vocational and professional qualifications, and all other forms of accredited learning whether achieved formally through the provision of adult education or informally in the workplace or the community. The second assumption is that all qualifications can be ranked on a single hierarchy and that it is possible to develop a single set of levels—each with its distinct level descriptor—which apply equally to all of the types of accredited learning and all qualifications. The third assumption is that all qualifications can be described and assessed in terms of learning outcomes that are independent of the site, the form of provision and the type of pedagogy and curriculum [6] through which they are achieved. The fourth assumption is that all qualifications can, at least in principle, be divided into elements (sometimes referred to as units or unit standards) which can be (a) located on levels using the same level descriptors and (b) ascribed a volume in terms of notional learning hours (or the equivalent) and therefore assigned a ‘credit rating’. The fifth assumption is that when it is fully developed, such a framework would provide a set of benchmarks against which any learning could be assessed and accredited. The sixth assumption is that such a framework would be the basis of a learner-centred system of qualifications in which only the learner’s own performance would inhibit her or him from progressing—in other words a national qualifications framework lays claim to being the ultimate instrument for achieving meritocracy [7].

When contrasted with the ideas about qualifications which were prevalent in virtually all systems of education and training until the early 1980s and still are widely shared, these assumptions about qualifications frameworks are extremely radical and have far-reaching implications. Until the 1980s, and even to this day for many people, it was largely accepted that school and university qualifications and general and vocational qualifications were different and in essence non-comparable, and that it was the professional judgements of teachers and examiners rather than any formal criteria that were the basis of standards and the guarantors of progression. Similarly, while it was always accepted that much informal and unaccredited learning did take place and indeed was sometimes recognised (for example for promotion at work), learning that led to a qualification, whether general, vocational or professional, was assumed to be something quite different and requiring systematic study of some kind, usually although not always by attendance at an educational institution.

The articles in this issue describe and discuss the different attempts in Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa to introduce a national qualifications framework, and the various difficulties that each country has faced. As is obvious, not only are the countries referred to of very different size, history and economic development, but they are at different stages in the reform of their system of qualifications. Furthermore, not only have governments in each country had different priorities and have begun from very different starting points, but policymakers in each country have faced different sources of resistance to introducing an NQF. It is not surprising, therefore, that although there is a considerable degree of
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consensus on the intrinsic logics or overall goals of a national qualifications framework, countries vary considerably in the extent to which they have based their reforms on the six assumptions that I have outlined.

It is useful to make two distinctions between types of frameworks discussed in the articles that follow. One is between the ‘strong’ frameworks such as those found in New Zealand and South Africa and the ‘weak’ frameworks found in Scotland, Ireland and Australia. The weak/strong distinction is not a judgement of value; it refers to different degrees of prescription or the extent to which a particular NQF is based on the six assumptions listed earlier and is discussed in more detail in the articles by Raffe and Keating. The second distinction, also discussed in the article by Raffe, refers to the scope of a framework; whereas comprehensive frameworks cover all qualifications, partial frameworks apply to only some types of qualifications—for example, vocational qualifications. Two trends can be identified across the different countries. One is towards an NQF that is strong and comprehensive, and the other is forms of resistance against this trend, usually from the upper secondary schools and the universities. Most countries discussed here exemplify different compromises between these two sets of forces. Despite the differences, it is clear that in their reasons for implementing an NQF, all the countries share the same set of broad ideas about its structure and purposes.

The idea of a national qualifications framework has not just been a series of internal debates within countries; similar ideas have been at the heart of debates and developments in a range of international agencies—for example, the ILO, OECD, the EU and more recently, the Commonwealth. In this sense the ‘framework idea’, if not universal, can be seen as an increasingly global phenomenon which needs a global explanation. The last article in this Special Issue, by Annie Bouder, is concerned with the reform of qualifications in France; it highlights both the common global problems that all countries are facing in reforming their qualifications as well as the extent to which the NQF idea still remains largely restricted to Anglophone countries [8].

I shall not attempt in the remainder of this introduction to summarise the contributions to this Special Issue, or even to draw out all the important points that they make. I aim to consider a number of questions that arise from the articles that follow. First, I want to consider the political as opposed to the educational rationale for introducing a National Qualifications Framework; why has the NQF idea seemed so attractive, often to policymakers and practitioners who on other issues might find little to agree about, and why it has appeared to provide an answer to deep-seated problems in the systems of education and training in a growing number of countries? Second, I am concerned with the evidence from some of the articles that contradictory sets of purposes lie at the heart of attempts to introduce a national qualifications framework and how this tension impacts on the implementation problems that have been faced in different countries. I shall pick up a point that relates to the wider political and economic context within which NQFs have been introduced that is raised by Stephanie Allais in her article. Her argument is that the decision to introduce an NQF in South Africa arose from two pressures; one is the political pressure for a more equitable and more democratic education system and
the other is the economic pressure to extend the market principle to a wider range of activities and services. It is the contradiction between these two sets of pressures that has shaped the implementation problems that have been faced in South Africa. Third, I refer specifically to the articles by Glanville, Raffe and Philips and consider the possible conditions for the successful implementation of a national qualifications framework. Fourth, I note the points made in the article by Keating on the Australian qualifications framework and consider the relation between a national qualification framework as a regulatory intervention and the form of government in a country. The issue is highlighted in the Australian case where a national qualifications framework has been introduced in a country with a strongly federal constitution. Fifth, I want to explore the specific problems involved in introducing a comprehensive qualification framework that includes higher education as well as the deeper epistemological issues that this raises which are discussed in the article by Ensor. Unlike the other countries introducing a national qualifications framework which have backed away from incorporating university degrees, South Africa has attempted to include all higher education qualifications within the NQF from the beginning. Sixth, I want to speculate on the significance of two other patterns that these articles suggest. The first is the extent to which different countries have responded to common global problems as is indicated by the article on French reforms by Annie Bouder. This will also provide an opportunity to cast some doubts on the increasingly significant role given to qualification frameworks in recent education reforms in Anglophone countries, especially those concerning the post-compulsory sector. The second pattern I shall consider is the extent to which different researchers have responded in different ways to the phenomenon of national qualifications frameworks. In the limited case of the articles in this Special Issue, this may reflect the choice of the authors. However, it is significant that not only has the idea of an NQF been taken up most energetically in South Africa, but it is in in South Africa that there is the most significant debate about the role of an NQF among researchers and between researchers and policymakers (Muller, 2000; Kraak & Young, 2001). Finally, I shall consider the articles as a whole and comment on some of the issues they point to in relation to the future of NQFs.

Qualifications as a Driver of Education and Training Reforms

Most government documents proposing the reform of qualifications refer to the need to (a) improve the flexibility of education and training systems, (b) widen participation, and (c) enhance the mobility of learners and potential learners. These are relatively uncontroversial aims, if difficult to realise in practice. However, a number of questions about the link between such aims and the kind of qualification reforms that have emerged, especially in Anglophone countries, need to be asked. First, why have governments focused on qualifications as the main instrument to reform their systems of education and training? Second, given that as yet there is only limited experience of what national qualification frameworks defined in terms of outcomes can achieve, why have they been adopted so readily by a growing number of countries and international agencies? Third, given the enormous diversity
of learning demands in a modern society, is it realistic to envisage common criteria that could be the basis of a single framework for the whole range of qualifications?

One answer to these questions is that qualification reforms have less to do with improving the quality of education and more that a NQF provides a government with:

- an instrument for making educational institutions more accountable;
- quantitative measures for comparing different national systems.

The increased emphasis on qualifications as measures of performance by UK governments since the mid-1980s has been closely linked to the freeing of schools and colleges from local government control and forcing them to compete in a ‘quasi-market’ for students (and therefore for funds). There are parallels with the creation of regulatory bodies for other examples of privatised monopolies such as water, gas and electricity. Qualifications offer an ideal instrument to a reforming government, as they appear to serve a dual purpose. They not only provide incentives for individual learners [9] but can be used as a mechanism for making educational institutions accountable. The educational problem, however, is that these purposes can act against each other. More emphasis on accountability leads to tighter specification of outcomes—a trend in all qualification-led reforms. Promoting learning, however, whether among high achievers or among those with previous experience of school failure, requires teachers (and learners) to have the confidence to take risks and learn from them; in other words it requires qualifications that are less specified in advance. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on qualifications defined in terms of outcomes puts pressure on institutions and workplaces to give more time to assessment and less to the teaching and learning activities that might in the longer term lead to more people gaining qualifications.

The Emergence of Outcomes-based NQFs

It has been increasingly recognised, at least since the 1980s, that there are features of qualification arrangements in the UK as in most other countries that have long been in need of reform. For example:

- General and vocational qualifications are organised according to separate criteria and systems of assessment and provide limited possibilities for progression between them.
- Vocational and professional qualifications are often organised by sectoral organizations independently from each other and there are few opportunities for movement or transfer of credit across sectors.
- Most qualifications are only obtained through specific programmes and periods of study in educational institutions; this can provide barriers for those who have skills but who cannot get access to specific programmes or opportunities to be assessed.
- The worth and status of qualifications has traditionally been underpinned by the ‘shared practices’ of trade, craft and professional communities in the case of vocational and professional qualifications and by subject and disciplinary com-
munities in the case of general qualifications. Historically these specialist communities have been (and in some cases continue to be) exclusive in relation to disadvantaged groups and offer limited forms of access to adult learners who are usually expected to retrace the steps of young learners rather than build on their experience and knowledge as adults.

- In the UK, in particular, where qualifications have until recently been developed in a largely ad hoc manner by a whole variety of commercial, professional, educational and charitable bodies, with minimum state intervention, many occupational sectors offer no opportunities for gaining qualifications.

All these features were seen by reformers associated with the UK Employment Department in the 1980s as barriers and rigidities which limited opportunities to expand learning and were at odds with the blurring of occupational boundaries, and the flexible and fast-changing skill and knowledge demands of the global economy. A single framework in which all qualifications were located according to a clear set of levels and progression criteria appeared in principle to be a logical way of overcoming these rigidities. The shift that was being argued for, and exemplified by NVQs, was from a qualification system based on 'shared practices' to one based on formally explicit 'criteria' that were capable of being defined independently of any specific experience or practice.

In the UK (excluding Scotland) support for a change from a qualification system based on shared practices to one based on criteria was, as has already been suggested, as much for political as for educational reasons. Among civil servants and national employer organisations at the time the old 'provider culture' of FE colleges, local employers and the Awarding Bodies was widely discredited. This anti-provider culture fitted well with the marketising zeal of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s which shared a general scepticism towards professional interests and wanted a more 'user-led' education and training system. In the case of vocational qualifications, this interest in a national qualifications framework was closely tied to the government's determination to break the power of trade unions that they saw as using vocational qualifications to perpetuate restrictive practices (Raggatt & Williams, 2000). Lastly, it was claimed (Jessup, 1990) that a qualification framework was not only an instrument for freeing qualifications from their traditional link with educational institutions and formal learning but that it would provide access to learning for groups which had in the past been excluded by schools and colleges. In principle, at least, a qualifications framework defined in terms of a clear set of outcomes allows anyone who thinks they have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to be assessed and gain a qualification. It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea of a qualification framework has been closely linked to the increasing interest of informal learning in international organisations such as the OECD and the ILO.

The Forces Shaping National Qualifications Frameworks

A number of commentators have seen NQFs as the outcome of the neo-liberal economic reforms of the last two decades and as arising out of the specific need to
coordinate and control the expansion of post-compulsory education and training. It is significant that all the Anglophone countries discussed in these articles have a history of education and training systems which until recently were characterised by sharp inequalities, deep divisions and low rates of participation in post-compulsory education and training. An NQF with its emphasis on access and transparency and its focus on the individual learner seemed an obvious reform that appeared to offer a basis for improving educational opportunities but did not threaten existing privileged routes to university. At the same time, an NQF offered opportunities to employers to have a bigger say in the kind of skills and knowledge that 16 to 19-year-olds were expected to acquire. The tension between these two goals, one concerned with democracy and greater equality and the other with employer needs, is highlighted in Stephanie Allais’s article in this Special Issue on the South African reforms where the inequalities are far more pronounced than in the other countries discussed and the tensions are much sharper. Allais argues that in South Africa it is the global economic imperatives with their origins in the drive for market competitiveness and the power of international organisations that are winning out. She also demonstrates the extent to which the implementation of an NQF based on unit standards has inevitably got bogged down in jargon and bureaucracy. The democratic goals of wider participation with which it was associated in the early 1990s have all too easily been transformed into a defence of stakeholder interests and a distrust of any kind of expertise. There are a number of further questions that her analysis points to. The first is the extent to which the ‘pathologies’ of the implementation process which she describes arise from the global forces of neo-liberalism or from elements of the internal logic of an outcomes-driven approach to qualifications. Are neo-liberal economic reforms really about improving economic prosperity by increasing people’s skills and knowledge or are they about the emergence of a new kind of marketised state? In whose interests is the combination of a qualifications bureaucracy and low rates of economic growth? Second, can an outcomes-based framework, differently conceived, be one element in a political strategy that combines economic growth and greater democracy? It is only by analyses of the kind begun in her article that we are likely to find answers to such questions.

Implementing an NQF

Several things stand out from what are arguably the three NQF ‘success stories’—Scotland, New Zealand and (though it is early days) Ireland. I refer to ‘success stories’ with significant reservations and some caution in referring to New Zealand, which has the oldest NQF but which almost collapsed after the first five years, and to Scotland which has an NQF but one which still remains largely as two separate frameworks for HE and the rest of education and training. In the conclusion to his article, David Raffe indicates that for all the progress in developing the Scottish NQF, its future is by no means guaranteed. That said, however, the three papers on Scotland, New Zealand and Ireland provide extremely valuable and textured insights into the implementation process which no country thinking about introducing an NQF can afford to ignore.
Although the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) post-dates the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), it remains in many ways the ‘parent’ framework which other countries look to—taking features which they like and sometimes neglecting the lessons that can be learned. David Raffe’s article provides a valuable counter to more selective interpretations of Scottish developments. The most significant theme of his article is the importance of continuity. He describes how the SCQF builds on the 16+ Action Plan, the reform of Higher National Qualifications, the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer scheme (SCOTCAT) for higher education and the Higher Still reforms. In other words, in a way that does not apply to any other country, many of the building blocks for a National Qualifications Framework were already in place, not just in the sense of modules, units, or the criteria of partial frameworks, but in the sense of shared sets of practices. He identifies two key features of the development of the Scottish NQF—an incrementalist approach and a recognition of the need for policy breadth, by which he means the range of other changes that are needed if an NQF is to be successfully implemented. An important aspect of Scottish incrementalism has been the long time sequence (at least 15 years) of a series of linked reforms. This has meant that the introduction of the SCQF has not involved any complex standards-setting procedures or the development of new qualifications. Despite appearing a relatively seamless process, Raffe points out that the introduction of the SCQF has not been without its tensions. Not only are there competing views of what implementation means, but there are pressures to overemphasise certification and to use the framework for funding and therefore for greater governmental control; both, he suggests, could undermine the implementation process by generating more overt forms of resistance. Policymakers in Scotland, at least up to now, appear to have recognised that a qualifications framework cannot be too far ahead of existing practice and the trust on which it is based.

As David Philips states in his article, the NZQF undoubtedly remains the most comprehensive NQF and in that sense is the nearest to the ideal type outlined in an earlier section of this article. He locates the roots of the NZQF in behavioural learning theory and in the neo-liberal economics that was at its zenith in New Zealand in the 1980s. His article shows how, despite the close links between New Zealand designers and those who developed the 16+ Action Plan Scotland, it was economic factors that drove the determination to introduce the NZQF. It is not surprising therefore that the NZQF became something very different from the SCQF that emerged in Scotland. The other important lesson from the New Zealand case that is brought out in Phillips’s paper is the political nature of an NQF, especially in cases where a new and powerful national organisation is established (in this case the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)). First, he describes the head-on confrontation between the NZQA and opponents of the NZQF in the schools and universities and how this led to significant compromises based on an explicit recognition that the needs of the education and training sectors had to be recognised as different. Second, he brings out the central role of the secondary schools in any system of education and training as the key providers of routes into higher education. There are parallels with the South African case in which, as Paula
Ensor points out in her article in this issue, tensions also arose between the responsibility of SAQA, the South African Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Education. In New Zealand, by doing away with unit standards for schools, the Ministry and hence Parliament regained control of the curriculum from the NZQA. Phillips ends his article by suggesting that the gains as a result of introducing the NZQF are significant but more modest than the goals with which it began. It may be that the major lesson from the New Zealand experience is that while it is important to hold on to the long-term goals of an NQF, it is also important to recognise that they will not be realised in the short term and whether they become a reality in the future will depend on many other changes.

In his article on Ireland, Gary Granville points out in the Irish NQF shares a number of common features with other national frameworks. It is based on outcomes, and qualifications are defined independently of any specific sites of learning. On the other hand, it was not initially based on units and credit and its remit does not include schools or universities. Like other frameworks, its origins lie in the expanding (and in Ireland relatively new) and increasingly differentiated vocational, further and adult education sectors. Similarly, the essentially facilitative and non-directive role of the NQF in Ireland is more like Scotland and less like South Africa or the NVQ framework in the UK. In its policy process it also has similarities with the development of the SCQF in Scotland. It is incrementalist; it builds on previous developments and its introduction has been consultative, not directive. It is clear that there has been an attempt to strike a balance between being too weak and hence generating only ritual compliance and being over-prescriptive and hence undermining local innovation. Like the South African NQF, with its critical cross-field outcomes, the Irish NQF has the clear intention of promoting a broad view of lifelong learning and includes learning to learn and insight in its definition of learning outcomes. However, it aims to facilitate these goals rather than prescribe them. Its strategy for promoting ‘access, transfer and progression through the whole span of education and training’ seems to rely on the same combination of local initiative and governmental support that has characterised the growth of the further education sector in Ireland in recent decades. Like the SCQF in Scotland, the Irish NQF does not represent a dramatic break with the past. It seems to reflect a consensual approach that works in a society with a relatively small population lacking fundamental inequalities or large political cleavages. The extent to which the Irish or Scottish models of implementation are applicable to countries with much larger populations and without past developments to build on remains an important question.

NQFs and Forms of Government

I implied earlier that NQFs represent an almost paradigm case of government intervention in a neo-liberal democracy. They are attempts both to gain greater central control and at the same time to give individuals and institutions a sense that they have more choice. I have also referred to the difference between ‘weak’ and strong’ versions of national qualifications frameworks. These differences are high-
lighted in the case of Australia discussed in the article by Jack Keating. He argues that the federal structure of Australian government together with the autonomy so jealously protected by the individual states through their control of the universities and the secondary schools have been crucial in shaping the fragmented and fundamentally weak character of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). There is a curious parallel between Australia and the UK. Despite the latter not being a federal state, training is UK-wide and education is devolved to Scotland and partially devolved in the cases of Wales and Northern Ireland. This is in contrast to South Africa where schools and technical colleges are provincially controlled and Higher Education, qualifications and work-based training are the responsibility of the national government. Keating argues that the result of federalism in Australia is that although the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has achieved some alignment of VET qualifications, it has a limited legislative basis and is weak in relation to schooling and universities, both of which have been allowed to opt out. This not only limits VET innovation in schools but actually promotes sectoral isolation—the opposite of the goals of the AQF. Where there is innovation it has tended to be outside the AQF at the state and local level. Keating is not arguing against an NQF but pointing out that if it is to be stronger and more effective it has to be supported by local bottom-up innovation where the new learning needs arise and where the drive for real innovation is located.

There are broader lessons from the Australian case when compared with examples of ‘stronger’ frameworks such as South Africa where the NQF is underpinned by Act of Parliament. A weak framework, especially in a federal structure, generates little opposition. On the other hand, a ‘weak’ NQF can achieve little and may even act as a barrier to its own goals if it is not coordinated with local and regional developments.

The Epistemological Basis of NQFs

Much of the discussion about national qualification frameworks has been concerned with their functions, either as *instruments of regulation* that provide the basis for controlling the growing and increasingly complex post-compulsory sector or as *instruments of communication* that enable learners and employers to be clearer about what different qualifications offer, where they lead and how they are located within the overall system. By focusing on the efforts in South Africa to incorporate higher education (and specifically university degrees) into a single national framework, Paula Ensor is able to make explicit how the assumptions of a ‘strong’ framework based on a single set of criteria for all qualifications raise much wider questions about the nature of the knowledge and pedagogy. As Ensor points out, the South African National Qualifications Framework (SANQF) equates academic and everyday knowledge and draws no boundaries between them. The classification of fields which cuts across academic disciplines and occupational fields and which underpins the standard setting process in South Africa is essentially arbitrary. The result is that standards-based qualifications give priority to procedures and cross-sectoral level descriptors, not knowledge content. Ensor makes the point that contrary to the assumptions of the NQF, both vertical and horizontal differences between types of knowledge are far from arbitrary and rest on fundamental differ-
ences. Furthermore, she argues that within higher education two distinct types of programme can be distinguished—broadly the general or academic and the professional or career-focused. Any attempt to merge them on the basis of a single set of criteria or to deny the boundaries that distinguish them will, she argues, be fraught with problems and certainly not promote access or opportunity. The South African government commissioned a review which attempted to find a compromise which retains the broad structure of the NQF at the same time as recognising the real differences between sectors and types of learning. The importance of Ensor's article is that it makes explicit that although the overcoming of divisions between academic and everyday knowledge, and between different fields and disciplines may be seen as an attempt to create an integrated system and abolish privilege and inequality, it could undermine the very basis on which knowledge is acquired and produced.

**Alternatives to NQFs as Instruments of Educational Reform**

In her article on the reform of qualifications in France, Annie Bouder distinguishes between the roles of qualifications as *instruments of communication* and as *instruments of regulation*. As *instruments of communication*, systems of qualifications are like maps; they provide guides for learners about how to locate a particular qualification and where it leads to. The classification approach to qualifications adopted in France is an example of emphasising this role for qualifications. The assumption of such an approach is that regulation and control take place in other ways (for example via the control of institutions). Bouder identifies two global trends which are leading to qualifications taking on a more regulatory role in France and hence converging towards a framework that may have similarities with those emerging in Anglophone countries. The first is the expansion of further and higher education and the greater need for cross-sector instruments of coordination. The second is the increasing importance of the accreditation of informal (or experiential) learning, which depends on the precise specification of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes.

The French case highlights, by contrast, the historical tendency of the Anglophone countries to bring the two functions of qualifications together and for the continental European (and East Asian) countries to treat them separately and to embed qualifications within *institutional* frameworks. This suggests that we may have two models rather than one for predicting the future of qualifications. Elsewhere (Young, 2002), I have distinguished between outcomes-based approaches associated with Anglophone countries and institution-based approaches as in France and Germany that rely on developing learning pathways located in specific, institutional, occupational and academic communities and not on the detailed specification of outcomes. This distinction raises questions that relate to the future form that qualification systems may take but which are beyond the scope of this introductory article. The first is whether or not economic predictions that posit a global future of ever-increasing mobility and flexibility of labour, and on which the promises of the stronger versions of the outcomes-based approach are based, are correct. If these predictions of greater flexibility do not turn out as expected, it is possible that an
outcomes-based approach could accentuate the bureaucratic tendencies that, as a number of these articles indicate, are never far removed from qualification frameworks. The second question is no less fundamental and goes to the heart of what Raffe refers to as the *institutional logic* of qualifications frameworks—in other words, the context in which they work and gain acceptability and establish their credibility. As I have argued elsewhere, qualifications, like so much in social life, depend on trust, not just rules, laws or criteria. However, it is far from clear what the new communities of trust will be that will underpin the emerging frameworks once subjects, disciplines, crafts and trades have disappeared or become marginalized.

The final question goes back to the issues raised about higher education and NQFs in Ensor’s article. Qualifications frameworks assume the hybrity of knowledge; in other words, that it can be broken up and put together again in a potentially unlimited number of ways. This gives no role for epistemological constraints that might suggest that knowledge of certain kinds and for certain purposes has to be structured in certain ways (Muller, 2000; Young, 2003). There are two reasons for raising this issue. One is to argue for caution in how far the framework idea should be applied. As we can notice in the articles included in this issue, most of the countries involved in the introduction of NQFs have stepped back from including higher education. The second point is to re-open the question of the relationship between markets and qualifications. Despite the association of NQFs with neo-liberalism and market-driven reforms, it is arguable that markets and qualifications are based on fundamentally different principles. Whereas markets may depend on institutions, their core basis is competition; in contrast, qualifications of any kind depend on trust and therefore on cooperation not competition between designers, assessors, learners and users.

**NQFs and National Education Policy Debates**

The articles in this Special Issue provide an opportunity, not only for international comparisons, but for contrasting different analytical approaches to the emergence of national qualifications frameworks and the debates that they give rise to. At least by implication, the articles by Raffe, Glanville, Keating, Philips and (in a rather different way) Boudier accept the broad *intrinsic logic* of a national qualifications framework. In tracing the origins and pitfalls of the implementation process, they all illustrate how the *institutional logics* in the different countries can become a basis of resistance to attempts to implement ‘stronger’ versions of a framework (as in the case of the schools and universities in New Zealand). Up to now, countries such as South Africa which have looked overseas for models for implementing a national qualifications framework have tended to look only at the *intrinsic logics* of other frameworks (in the South African case, this was the NQF developed in New Zealand). However, this set of articles provides a more contextual picture that emphasises that *intrinsic and institutional logics* may often be at odds in the implementation process. In doing so, the articles provide valuable guides for any country thinking of introducing a National Qualifications Framework.

In contrast, the articles by Allais and Ensor take a more explicitly critical approach
to the intrinsic logic of an NQF. Their analyses reflect the very different circumstances facing policymakers in South Africa and the fact that the SANQF has been closely identified with the post-apartheid goals of redress and social transformation. The consequence of this, as Allais explains, is that the goals of social transformation easily become indistinguishable from the means of achieving it—the NQF; in this way the NQF itself becomes beyond criticism. In questioning the assumptions of an NQF, Ensor and Allais offer critical perspectives on the process of implementation. However, they also remind us that apparently technical operations, such as developing unit-standards, embody both assumptions about knowledge and pedagogy and what we mean by education and also about the kind of society that South Africa is trying to create. In broadening the debate about national qualifications frameworks, it is important to bring together these two kinds of debate—internalist debates about the tensions between the intrinsic and institutional logics of qualifications and externalist debates about the educational and wider political implications of NQFs; that certainly is what this Special Issue aims to do.

Conclusions

This introduction has only been able to touch on the many issues raised by the articles included in this Special Issue. NQFs are a relatively new phenomenon that have yet to touch most of those concerned with education and training. What I have tried to argue and what the articles show is that NQFs are far from being a marginal issue. Not only are they driven by powerful political and economic forces, but they go to the heart of debates about the nature and purposes of education and training. I would like to conclude by expressing my wholehearted thanks to the seven authors for their hard work in preparing an excellent set of articles, for their positive responses to my many requests for changes and for their remarkable punctuality in completing their articles according to the schedule. Even more I owe much to them all for their insights without which this introductory article could not have been written.

Notes

[1] Despite the early introduction of a national framework for vocational qualifications in the UK, progress towards extending this to a full NQF for all qualifications in England has been limited.

[2] The main aim of the Scottish 16+/H11001 Action Plan was the reform of the curriculum of Further Education Colleges; it was developed by the Scottish Inspectorate with the help of staff from the colleges. In contrast, NVQs were developed by Lead Industry (employer) Bodies in association with NCVQ (the National Council for Vocational Qualifications) to provide a framework for assessing work-based learning.

[3] The NVQ framework was once described to me by a DfES official as at least the basis for a ‘niche qualification’, although which niche was not so clear.

[4] These have been primarily Anglophone countries of the Commonwealth. However, the interest recently has extended to a much wider range of countries including Mexico and a number of Middle East and Eastern European countries.
[5] For example, even in the recent report of the team reviewing the South African NQF, there is no mention that there was a point at which the whole NQF experiment almost collapsed in New Zealand (see the article by Philips in this issue).

[6] It also follows that learning outcomes can be applied, as in many cases of workplace learning, where there is no explicit pedagogy or curriculum.

[7] It is important to stress that these six assumptions represent a kind of ideal-type framework. As will be apparent from the articles in this Special Issue, actual national frameworks vary in the number of these assumptions on which they are based.

[8] Annie Bouder, in her article on French reforms, does, however, raise the question as to what extent can the reforms she describes be seen as a movement towards a framework approach along the Anglophone lines. Furthermore, there is some evidence of interest in the idea of a national qualifications framework in countries as different as those in Eastern Europe and Latin America as well as other Commonwealth countries.

[9] On the other hand, as I have heard Further Education lecturers remark, although students may have learned that it is a good thing to get a qualification, they do not always associate this with sustained and disciplined study!

References


