



International
Labour
Office
Geneva

**Employment Sector
Employment Working Paper No. 44**

2009

**Researching NQFs:
Some conceptual issues**

Stephanie Allais, David Raffe, Michael Young

Skills and
Employability
Department

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First published 2009

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ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

Allais, Stephanie; Raffé, David; Young, Michael

Researching NQFs : some conceptual issues / Stephanie Allais, David Raffé, Michael Young ; International Labour Office, Employment Sector, Skills and Employability Department. - Geneva: ILO, 2009
50 p. (Employment working paper ; no.44)

ISBN: 9789221230663;9789221230670 (web pdf)
ISSN 1999-2939 (print); ISSN 1999-2947 (web pdf)

International Labour Office; Skills and Employability Dept

occupational qualification / skill certification / developed countries / developing countries

13.02.2

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Printed in Switzerland

Preface

The primary goal of the ILO is to contribute, with member States, to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people, a goal embedded in the ILO Declaration 2008 on *Social Justice for a Fair Globalization*,¹ and which has now been widely adopted by the international community.

In order to support member States and the social partners to reach the goal, the ILO pursues a Decent Work Agenda which comprises four interrelated areas: Respect for fundamental worker's rights and international labour standards, employment promotion, social protection and social dialogue. Explanations of this integrated approach and related challenges are contained in a number of key documents: in those explaining and elaborating the concept of decent work,² in the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), and in the Global Employment Agenda.

The Global Employment Agenda was developed by the ILO through tripartite consensus of its Governing Body's Employment and Social Policy Committee. Since its adoption in 2003 it has been further articulated and made more operational and today it constitutes the basic framework through which the ILO pursues the objective of placing employment at the centre of economic and social policies.³

The Employment Sector is fully engaged in the implementation of the Global Employment Agenda, and is doing so through a large range of technical support and capacity building activities, advisory services and policy research. As part of its research and publications programme, the Employment Sector promotes knowledge-generation around key policy issues and topics conforming to the core elements of the Global Employment Agenda and the Decent Work Agenda. The Sector's publications consist of books, monographs, working papers, employment reports and policy briefs.⁴

The *Employment Working Papers* series is designed to disseminate the main findings of research initiatives undertaken by the various departments and programmes of the Sector. The working papers are intended to encourage exchange of ideas and to stimulate debate. The views expressed are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the ILO.

José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs
Executive Director
Employment Sector

¹ See http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/dgo/download/dg_announce_en.pdf

² See the successive Reports of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference: *Decent work* (1999); *Reducing the decent work deficit: A global challenge* (2001); *Working out of poverty* (2003).

³ See <http://www.ilo.org/gea>. And in particular: *Implementing the Global Employment Agenda: Employment strategies in support of decent work*, "Vision" document, ILO, 2006.

⁴ See <http://www.ilo.org/employment>.

Foreword

According to an ILO survey, some 70 countries are in the process of developing or implementing some kind of qualifications framework. A framework is intended to improve understanding of qualifications (degrees, certificates, or recognition of experiential-based learning) in terms of the information they convey to an employer about prospective workers' competencies. Frameworks are also intended to explain how qualifications relate to each other and thus can be combined to build pathways within and across occupations and education and training sectors. Many countries are trying to improve the relevance, quality and flexibility of their education and training systems, and many of them are looking to qualification frameworks as a tool for bringing about this reform. Development of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) are also motivated by the emergence of regional frameworks, such as in Europe or in the Caribbean, which aim to help employers and institutions of higher education recognize the equivalency of qualifications earned in different countries. With these goals in mind, the development of NQFs has been widely supported by multilateral and bilateral agencies.

However, very little has been documented about the effectiveness of NQFs in bringing about change in skills development systems or about their actual use by employers, workers, and training providers. In 2009, the ILO's Skills and Employability Department launched its Qualifications Framework Research Project to study the impact and implementation of NQFs in developing countries to help fill this knowledge gap and to be able to provide more evidence-based advice to member States.

The research programme, comprising some 17 country case studies and a review of academic literature on the NQFs, provides an international comparison of the design and purpose of NQFs in developing countries and an empirical analysis of their use and impact based on the experience of those involved in their design and use. The study aims to understand to what extent establishing an NQF is an effective strategy for achieving a country's desired policy objectives, what approaches to qualifications frameworks and their implementation are most appropriate in which contexts and for which purposes, what level of resources (human and other) and what complimentary policies might be required to achieve the policy objectives associated with them, and what might be a realistic assessment of the likely outcomes.

This working paper comprises two discussion documents that were prepared to guide the development of the research. The first chapter was written by Michael Young and Stephanie Allais, and the second by David Raffe. Together, the two papers address some of the fundamental conceptual issues involved in research on NQFs and broaden the debate about their role in skills systems. The aim is to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework for the rigorous analysis of this increasingly important policy area. A companion working paper, ILO Employment Working Paper No. 45, *Learning from the first qualifications frameworks* (Allais et al. 2009), compares the experience of five early pioneers of qualifications frameworks (Australia; England, Northern Ireland and Wales; New Zealand; Scotland; and South Africa). A full analysis of the new case studies and the policy lessons derived from them is forthcoming in 2010.

As a Research Associate in the Skills and Employability Department, Dr. Stephanie Allais (now postdoctoral fellow at the University of Edinburgh) has led the development of the research and overseen the country studies. Professor Michael Young (Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London) has served as senior research advisor with assistance from Professor David Raffe (Professor of Sociology of Education, University of Edinburgh). The research programme has been carried out in cooperation with the European Training Foundation. I would also like to thank Jo-Ann Bakker for preparing the manuscript for publication.

Christine Evans-Klock
Director
Skills and Employability Department

Abbreviations

APEL	accreditation of experiential learning
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ET	Education and training
ETF	European Training Foundation
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HE	higher education
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
NFQ	Irish National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	National Qualifications Frameworks
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SCOTCAT	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer scheme
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
VET	vocational education and training

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Preface.....	iii
Foreword.....	v
Abbreviations.....	vii
Contents.....	ix
Introduction - Michael Young, Stephanie Allais and David Raffe.....	1
Chapter 1: Qualifications and the ‘shift to outcomes’.....	1
Chapter 2: Understanding NQFs as dynamic entities.....	3
<i>Policy borrowing and policy learning</i>	3
<i>A typology of NQFs</i>	4
<i>A normative model for implementing an NQF</i>	4
Common goals, different perspectives.....	4
Chapter 1: Conceptualizing the role of qualifications in education reform - Michael Young and Stephanie Allais.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Qualifications reform in context.....	6
Conceptualizing the shift from traditional qualification systems to outcomes-based frameworks.....	8
Implications of the shift to outcomes-based qualifications frameworks.....	11
<i>Qualifications and trust</i>	11
<i>Qualifications as drivers of reform and as mediators</i>	12
<i>From knowledge domain-based to criteria-based qualifications</i>	15
<i>Tensions in the goals of qualification reform</i>	16
Conclusions.....	18
Final comments.....	19
Acknowledgements.....	20
References.....	21
Chapter 2: Towards a dynamic model of National Qualifications Frameworks - David Raffe.....	23
Introduction.....	23
A typology of NQFs.....	24
Three case studies – Scotland, South Africa and Ireland.....	27
The process of introducing an NQF.....	32
A normative model of change.....	34
Discussion.....	36
Acknowledgements.....	38

References.....	39
General references.....	43

Introduction - Michael Young, Stephanie Allais and David Raffe

Many countries—over 70 at the last count—are involved in qualifications frameworks in some ways. What is involved in changing a qualification system which is closely linked to institution-based teaching and learning programmes to a qualification framework which typically expresses qualifications in terms of learning outcomes that are not tied to any specific learning processes or programmes? Can qualifications frameworks drive reform? Can learning outcomes or competency statements ensure that education systems meet the requirements of the economy? What is at stake in introducing an outcomes-based or competency-based qualifications framework? What might the losses and gains be? Can qualifications frameworks support changes in economies and education systems, and improve the linkages between the two?

There is little conceptual analysis of what this kind of reform means for education and training, and little empirical research about how successful it has been. The two chapters of this working paper make a contribution to filling the first gap. A partner working paper (No. 45), “*Learning from the first qualifications frameworks*” (Allais et al. 2009), makes a contribution to filling the second gap. It examines the evidence from the ‘early starter’ countries (Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa), as much of what is known about national qualification frameworks (NQFs) derives from these experiences. Other publications of the ILO’s international NQF research will make a contribution to addressing both sets of issues.

Both chapters of this working paper - albeit in somewhat different ways - emphasize that qualifications are not separate factors alterable independently of the other ways in which education systems and economies are linked. It is not surprising therefore, that introducing NQFs has had unintended (and often unwelcome) consequences as well as leading to some of the changes that were intended.

Research on NQFs has proved a far from easy task. Indeed we have not always been clear about the questions that need to be asked. This working paper, therefore, was distributed by the ILO as a contribution to helping researchers think about such questions. The Project as a whole aims to provide an improved and more reliable empirical and conceptual basis for future research and policy. The two chapters of this working paper take somewhat different perspectives on the conceptual issues raised by research on NQFs. However, they can be seen as complementary. We will return to their differences and similarities at the end of this introduction.

Chapter 1: Qualifications and the ‘shift to outcomes’

The first chapter takes a step back from qualifications frameworks, and looks at qualifications — how they operate in society, how they are seen by policy reformers, and how they are currently being reformed or rethought in many countries. It focuses on a key issue in the current reforms of qualifications, and one central to the introduction of NQFs. This issue is the shift from qualifications that are primarily identified with the institutions which provide the programmes that lead to them, to qualifications that are expressed as written statements of learning outcomes. (It is, of course, the balance between ‘inputs’ and ‘outcomes’ that is at stake - not whether one is replacing the other. As ‘proxies’ for what someone knows and/or ‘can do’, all qualifications involve outcomes, at least implicitly.)

The ‘shift to outcomes’ (CEDEFOP 2008) is widely acknowledged and represents a real change in how qualifications are thought about. It is nowhere more clearly expressed than in many of the new NQFs. The idea of a framework of qualification ‘outcomes’ that is

not tied to any specific learning and teaching programmes is new. It can be traced back about 25 years, as ILO Employment Working Paper No. 45 (Allais et al., 2009) indicates. Chapter 1 suggests that one useful way of thinking about this change is in terms of two models or 'ideal types' of qualification systems; we refer to the two ideal types as 'institution-based' and 'outcome-based'. It is very important to stress that these models are **not** descriptions of actual qualification systems; **nor** are they 'ideals' of what all qualification systems should aim to be like. They identify *tendencias* developing over time and to a different extent in different parts of the world. They are tools which enable us to examine the possible implications of current changes and to compare and contrast different systems. The chapter goes on to locate the emergence and support for the 'outcomes-based' model in certain broad economic and political changes that have taken place over the same period. In particular, it links the emphasis on 'outcomes' with the increasing concern of governments to gain more control over public expenditure and, more specifically, the direction of education and training policy, at the same time as increasing 'efficiency' and the role of the market in educational provision.

The rest of the chapter considers the possible consequences of this 'shift to outcomes' by focusing on several of the issues that this change gives rise to. These are:

- (i) the extent to which qualifications can be drivers of educational reform;
- (ii) the role of institutions in acquiring the skills and knowledge which lead to qualifications, and the relationship of institutions to qualifications;
- (iii) the interpretation of learning outcomes; and
- (iv) the basis on which qualifications are trusted, both by key stakeholders such as employers and learners, and in society generally.

In terms of the first issue, Chapter 1 explores the fact that qualifications, expressed in the form of outcomes-based frameworks, are increasingly used by governments as drivers of reform. The chapter argues that this can lead learners (and providing institutions) to focus on qualifications themselves rather than the skills and knowledge which they represent and that, in contradiction to the expectations of policy-makers, this is likely to weaken the role of qualifications in promoting employability. Qualifications, the chapter argues, and necessarily NQFs as well, are proxies for what people 'know and can do' and therefore are better seen as mediators of different parts of the education system and between education and employment than as drivers of educational reform.

On the second issue, Chapter 1 argues that the distinction made between institution-based and outcomes-based qualifications raises questions about the nature of learning, the relationship between inputs to learning and outcomes, and how knowledge and skills are acquired. In emphasizing outcomes and loosening the link between qualifications and institutions, policy-makers claim to be 'giving qualifications back to users', whether employers or learners. The chapter suggests that, pushed too far, this policy can weaken the role of institutions and work against the stated goals of qualification frameworks by reducing the kinds of knowledge and skills to which the majority of learners have access. The chapter argues for a re-assertion of the educational role of institutions (not only schools, colleges, and universities, but workplaces as institutions where teaching and learning take place), especially in countries where institutions are historically weak or available to only a few.

A further theme of the chapter is the role of written 'learning outcomes' (or competency statements) in defining qualifications and the extent to which they provide a basis on which qualifications can be trusted. The chapter points to two problems with the concept of 'learning outcomes'. One is that the term itself is interpreted in widely different ways and therefore gives rise to problems of guaranteeing quality (this is particularly true in

the case of regional frameworks that include countries with very different educational histories). The second is that when the attempt is made to achieve precision in the specification of learning outcomes (or competences), as in the case of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in England, definitions of outcomes become narrow and ultimately trivial.

This leads to the fourth and final theme of the chapter—trust. Trust is a crucial issue for any qualification system. Trust in traditional qualifications was located in institutions—initially in craft guilds and professional associations and later in schools and colleges (sometimes supported by separate Qualification Awarding Bodies), and universities. Outcomes-based approaches to qualifications seek to displace this trust in ‘institutions’ and to assume that either it is no longer necessary (if outcomes can be defined precisely enough to be self evident) or that people will come to trust ‘outcomes’. The chapter argues that as outcomes themselves are a form of ‘proxy’ for what people know or can do, the institutional basis of trust is inescapable and that at least implicitly people will continue to rely on institutions.

Chapter 2: Understanding NQFs as dynamic entities

One of the hazards of a ‘pure’ learning-outcomes approach is that it may lead policy-makers to see the introduction of an NQF as a purely technical exercise. The critique in Chapter 1 draws attention to the social and political dimensions of the process and its epistemological assumptions. The second chapter of this working paper develops this theme by focusing on the issue of implementation. Introducing an NQF is not a simple matter of designing and installing a piece of policy machinery; it is a much more organic process of continuing interaction between the framework, the education and training system in which it is introduced, and their economic and social context. The chapter asks how we can make sense of this essentially dynamic character of NQFs. It draws more explicitly on the experience of the ‘early starter’ countries (discussed in more detail in ILO Employment Working Paper No. 45 (Allais et al. 2009) and suggests some of the lessons that can be learned from their experience.

Policy borrowing and policy learning

It starts by making a crucial point often neglected by policy-makers who design NQFs: NQFs vary and change over time and there is no one ‘best’ model for all countries and for all circumstances. All countries have to begin with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their existing systems of educational and training and the role of existing qualifications, and make a realistic assessment of what they hope different types of NQFs might achieve. In suggesting how ‘new starter’ countries could take advantage of the experience of early starters, the chapter draws a distinction between ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy learning’. ‘Policy borrowing’ refers to the tendency to take other countries’ NQFs as ‘off-the-peg models’ and apply them. It is the typical approach of most countries lacking their own expertise and is all too frequently adopted by consultants from the ‘early starter’ countries. The problems that ‘policy borrowing’ has led to in the ‘early starter’ frameworks are explored in more detail in several of the chapters of ILO Employment Working Paper No. 45 (Allais et al. 2009), and is also considered in the final project report.

‘Policy learning’ refers to an approach to implementation that begins not with an ‘ideal’ model of an NQF, but with an analysis of the situation facing the country in question, prior to deciding what type of NQF and what approach to implementation might be appropriate. It is important to stress how much more difficult a ‘policy learning’ approach is likely to be, both politically (it takes far longer and is unlikely to produce immediate results) and intellectually, it requires much more thought and research. On the other hand as the experience of a country like South Africa illustrates (see the chapter on

South Africa in Allais et al. 2009, ‘new starter’ countries which start with ‘policy borrowing’ tend to be forced back to some form of ‘policy learning’ in the end, only after many delays and reviews and much wasted effort and money.

A typology of NQFs

The second theme of the chapter is to develop a typology of different forms of NQF in terms of their purposes, structures and implementation strategies. The idea of a typology of NQFs is important conceptually as it enables researchers to explore the links between a general model of NQF structure and development and the case of their particular country. The typology is also important because it enables policy-makers to move beyond what the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, described as “**personal troubles**” (“why is my country having so many difficulties in implementing its NQF?”) and see such problems as ‘public issues’ that are common to all NQFs, and therefore explicable even if not immediately soluble. A good example is how politicians often expect policy-makers to introduce an NQF as an immediate change when all the international experience suggests that the reform of qualifications can only be done incrementally and when many other policies are also in place.

A normative model for implementing an NQF

The last sections of the chapter shift from a comparative analysis of different NQFs’ orientations to change to an exploration of their common features. Drawing on the experience of Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, and other early frameworks, it proposes a general model of change. It tentatively calls this a ‘normative model’ because it appears to describe conditions for the successful implementation and impact of an NQF. However its value is not so much that it claims to be a general theory of NQF development, but that it is ‘testable’ in countries in quite different situations than those from which it originated. We hope to later produce an improved version of this model (or, if necessary, a range of alternative models).

Common goals, different perspectives

The two chapters share the aims of the Project to produce reliable evidence and analysis as a basis for advising countries involved at some stage of introducing an NQF and supporting them in realizing their wider educational and economic goals. However, they approach this goal differently. It may therefore be useful to readers of this working paper if we conclude this introduction by summarizing the differences between the perspectives adopted in the two chapters.

Both chapters are critical of ‘technicist’ approaches exemplified by a pure learning-outcomes approach. Both argue strongly that the introduction of an NQF has to be seen as a political and social process which is inseparable from education and training institutions and from the wider social and economic context. They differ in how they see this process. Chapter 1 emphasizes the epistemological assumptions made by an emphasis on the role of learning outcomes; Chapter 2 emphasizes interest resolution and the institutional and social processes of change. These are differences of emphasis, but they both are important.

Thus, Chapter 1 argues that the shift from a qualification system embedded in educational institutions to a framework in which qualifications are expressed in terms of written outcomes raises issues concerning educational purposes and how they are achieved. It suggests that the current shift to outcomes-based frameworks indicates a change in the **primary** purpose or emphasis of qualifications—from providing guarantees of educational standards to facilitating the comparability of qualifications and stimulating a market for

learning. It thus raises a question of priorities: in what contexts do comparability and flexibility need greater emphasis than guaranteeing (and improving) standards?

In contrast, Chapter 2 sees the role of learning outcomes in NQFs as less constraining (or at least potentially so if countries adopt a pragmatic approach which recognizes their limitations). Like Chapter 1, it acknowledges the institutional, social and political preconditions for the trust, shared understandings and other features of a successful qualifications system. It asks what kinds of change process are likely to maintain or develop such preconditions, and suggests that (up to a point) an incremental, organic, iterative and reasonably consensual approach to change is necessary.

We shall continue to debate these different approaches to qualification frameworks. We offer them and the analyses that follow as a contribution not only to the ILO Project but to the wider global debate about NQFs and their role in education and training reform.

Chapter 1: Conceptualizing the role of qualifications in education reform

- Michael Young and Stephanie Allais

Introduction

This paper tries to take a step back from the discussions and debates about qualifications frameworks *per se*, and to think more broadly about the role of “*qualifications*” in educational reform. It was written to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for analyzing the reform of qualifications internationally. This is important if researchers want to go beyond much that has been written about qualification frameworks up to now, which consists largely of descriptions and rhetorical claims about what qualification frameworks can achieve. We aim to develop insights into qualifications frameworks as policy mechanisms—the different types that have been designed and implemented in different countries, the likelihood of their achieving their goals, and the experiences of those involved in their design and implementation. This paper tries to provide a starting point for developing an analysis and interpretation of the case studies which will be conducted as part of the ILO research.

A growing number of countries are introducing qualifications frameworks⁵ with:

- a common definition of qualifications in terms of outcomes that are treated as independent of the ways of achieving them;
- a set of common level descriptors (usually 8-12 for frameworks which include all levels of qualification) which apply across occupational and knowledge fields; and
- an inclusive set of (usually 12-15) occupational and/or knowledge fields.

A number of educational and wider social and political goals are associated with the introduction of qualifications frameworks. However, the possible consequences of moving from the qualification systems that have emerged historically and often in largely *ad hoc*

⁵ The term “qualifications framework” here includes “partial” qualification frameworks designed to include only vocational or higher education qualifications, as well as international and “meta” frameworks such as the EQF.

ways, to qualification frameworks and the outcomes-based (or competency-based) approaches that usually are part of qualifications frameworks, have been assumed rather than proven or made explicit. Furthermore, in all the growing literature on qualification frameworks and their implementation, little attention has been given to the underlying nature of the change for the different groups involved—the state, employers, educational providers, and learners. Since the 1970s and the influential studies by Dore (1976) and Collins (1979) there has been little systematic research into the role of qualifications in education systems, and how it may be changing. Furthermore, little is known about the possible consequences of basing the design of qualifications on ‘written outcome statements’ that are independent of the learning pathways leading to them.

The aims of this paper therefore are to:

- locate the reform of *qualifications* in its broader social and institutional context;
- propose a way of conceptualizing the change from qualification systems as they have emerged historically to qualifications frameworks and outcomes-based qualifications; and
- explore the tensions involved in the different goals that the introduction of an (N)QF will achieve.

Qualifications reform in context

The global spread of qualification frameworks is not an isolated phenomenon. It is closely linked to changes associated with globalization in which national economies are becoming more interdependent than ever before and the migration of labour is increasing, at the same time as national governments are increasingly attempting to control and regulate migration of labour. ‘Globalization’ is a term used to describe economic and political trends over the past thirty years, the period during which qualifications frameworks have emerged. The term refers to the tendency for national economies to be increasingly interconnected, and for national governments to have less control over them. It has been associated with another concept much used by social scientists: ‘neo-liberalism’. Neo-liberalism is the idea that the market is the best possible way of distributing goods and services internationally, and that the market should therefore be intensified and expanded for the distribution of all goods and services (Fine 2002).

Over the past 30 years, governments have increasingly promoted policies that increase the role of the market (Harvey 2000; Bond 2005; Duménil and Lévy 2005). The role of the state has been seen as best confined to regulation and improving information flows, as well as to contracting the private sector to provide essential services where markets fail to do so (Palley 2005). An emphasis in public sector reform has been the disaggregation of government agencies into smaller units that are constituted as cost centres and expected to compete with one another or with private institutions contracted by the state in similar arrangements (Phillips 1998). Performance statements are posited as a mechanism that will stimulate the growth of new service providers, as well as enabling the state to evaluate the quality of provision (Phillips 1998; Pollitt 1998).

These global trends have given rise to a whole new approach to educational policy. Specific policy initiatives range from Quality Assurance systems and the use of targets and League Tables (as in England), to the growing popularity of competency-based training (CBT) among policy-makers reforming vocational education and training systems, to what

CEDEFOP⁶ has referred to in a recent report as ‘the shift to learning outcomes’ (CEDEFOP 2008) that is expressed in, among other ways, the emergence of NQFs. These developments had different origins and purposes in different countries. Sometimes, as in England under Margaret Thatcher’s Government, they were explicit attempts to open up public sector institutions ‘to the market’ as well as making them more accountable to the government. In other cases, they were more concerned with coordination and coherence or in trying to force institutions to widen participation. Despite a diversity of original motivations, it is important to bear in mind what these reforms have in common. A common thread through all of them, which will be explored later, is that they all seek to limit the autonomy of providing institutions such as colleges and universities and make them more efficient and effective by having to compete with each other. Learning outcomes or competency statements have come to prominence as a policy tool in this context. They have been seen by policy formulators as a way of driving the required change by playing the role of performance statements in contractual arrangements for educational provision. It is claimed by advocates that once qualification outcomes are ‘freed’ from the institutions through which the outcomes are achieved, education systems will become more flexible, qualifications will become more portable and transparent, and recognition and accreditation can be given to informal- and work-based learning. As a consequence, institution-based learning comes to be seen as merely one of many ways of becoming qualified.

Thus, governments have increasingly attempted to use qualifications as instruments for the reform of education and training, believing that a qualification framework will raise the number and quality of qualifying learners, through, among other things, encouraging and facilitating ‘lifelong learning’, recognizing learning gained through experience, and improving linkages between education institutions and labour markets. The introduction of qualifications frameworks can be seen as a response to a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ of existing qualification systems. It is a reform strategy concerned to increase the flexibility and portability of qualifications and, indirectly, to promote economic competitiveness, social inclusion, and educational opportunities.

We argue that what is at stake is the role of educational institutions in the education and training of the next generation, the balance between education institution-based and informal (in some cases work-based) learning, and the ways in which trust in qualifications is established and maintained. In developing countries with limited resources and few and often weak education institutions, the idea of an outcomes-based framework for accrediting all learning appears especially attractive and the choices are particularly acute. Under pressure from donors and international organizations, these countries are easily persuaded to develop outcomes-based frameworks, and by implication to focus less on developing educational institutions and providing professional development for educators. However, in so far as there is any evidence to support the claims made for such frameworks, they rest on the experience of countries with well-developed institution-based pathways. It is this dilemma that the ILO NQF research project seeks to help developing countries to face. This paper has a more limited focus. It seeks not to describe the emerging pattern of NQFs across the world but to get behind the debate about different types of NQF and ask questions about: (i) what role qualifications play in educational reform; and (ii) how far qualification outcomes, at least if they are to promote learning, are inescapably tied to the educational institution-based processes through which people acquire skills and knowledge and become qualified. In questioning the ‘shift to outcomes’ described by CEDEFOP and the benefits it is claimed to offer to developing countries, it seeks to re-instate the crucial and legitimate role of educational institutions - schools (and the government departments which run them), colleges, and universities. Equally important are the professional

⁶ European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

associations, trade unions and Chambers of Commerce, and industry—in the process of qualification or ‘formation’ as the French express it.

Conceptualizing the shift from traditional qualification systems to outcomes-based frameworks

We can identify two models (or *ideal types*⁷) of how qualifications operate at the user/provider interface. One is the traditional or ‘institutional’ (Young 2007, Ch. 8) model in which the professions and educational providers have considerable autonomy and control over qualifications. This was not the result of any explicit government intervention, but rather, it was a consequence of changing economies and the need for employees with new skills and knowledge emerging over time.⁸ As qualifications expanded in Western Europe in the 19th century, they tended to be rooted in the institutions which provided them, and trust in them was very much linked to the confidence that was placed in those educational institutions. (At a secondary level, educational ‘institutions’ refers here not only to individual institutions but also national departments of education which organize or set curricula and examinations.)

Dissatisfaction with the ‘institutional’ model in the new economic circumstances of the 1980s led to what we identify as the new ‘outcomes’ model. From the perspective of governments at the time, institution-based qualifications appeared to limit:

- the opportunity for employers to make qualifications relate more closely to their needs;
- the opportunities for governments to intervene and bring qualifications more in line with their priorities;
- the range of occupational fields for which qualifications were available; and
- the range of choices open to learners in relation to the pathways they had to follow to become qualified, and what qualifications are available to them.

These criticisms of institution-based qualifications can be summarized in the term ‘provider capture’ which became popular in the 1980s (Raggatt and Williams 1999). The idea was that because educational providers rather than users controlled qualifications and the routes to achieving them, providers had ‘captured’ the market, thereby, it was argued, creating inefficiencies, and preventing the entrance of new players.

The ‘outcomes’ (and ‘competency’) model refers to a specific set of policy interventions designed to take these criticisms into account which first appeared in the 1980s in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. By defining qualifications in terms of written outcomes alone, an attempt was made to shift the balance of power away from provider-defined qualifications and curricula (which in many instances incorporated professional associations in various ways) towards a broader group of users—government, employers, and learners. It is this shift that is embodied in the introduction of outcome-based qualification frameworks. Although qualifications frameworks differ considerably in

⁷ We use the term “model” or “ideal type” in the sense introduced by the German sociologist Max Weber to capture the distinctiveness of recent changes in the approach to qualifications. Ideal types identify tendencies; they are not descriptions of specific systems or prescriptions stating how qualifications should be.

⁸ In some cases, as in Germany, the State took on an increasingly powerful role from the beginning in coordinating qualifications.

the ways in which outcomes or competency statements are used (discussed further below), most commentators suggest that it is almost impossible to have a qualifications framework that is not based on outcomes (although there are counter examples, such as the Australian Framework as it was initially introduced). The impact of this change can be particularly acute for the educational providers, as was the intention of the reformers.⁹ Instead of being the dominant definers of qualifications, educational providers are required to see themselves as ‘sellers’ of programmes leading to qualifications. They are expected to respond to, on the one hand, new government policies, and on the other hand, the expressed needs of employers and learners. The logic of this trend is the emergence of a ‘qualifications market’ in which qualifications increasingly take the form of commodities, divorced from any direct relationship with either the learning programmes which lead to them or the skills and knowledge for which they act as ‘proxies’. It should be noted that a reform approach which is designed to challenge educational institutions and providers is likely to have a dramatically different effect in countries where these institutions are weak or non-existent.

The shift from an ‘institutional’ to an ‘outcomes’ model of qualifications represents a change in the way in which qualifications make claims for a society’s trust. In the ‘institutional’ model, qualifications are knowledge domain-based and embedded in institutions. Trust is located in those with specialist knowledge, the professional associations, in the links between teachers and the producers of specialist knowledge in different domains, and in the institutions in which the programmes of study leading to qualifications are located. The model emerged in the 19th century in what are now the developed countries when occupations and knowledge fields were either relatively static or changing in only incremental ways. Qualifications in an ‘institutional’ model set limits on the range of decisions open to learners once they decide which qualifications they want to obtain. Furthermore, they assume that it is the existing organization of knowledge as expressed in the curricula of institutions and in the examinations set by professional associations that define the distribution of access, the requirements for entering a programme, and the criteria for being recognized as qualified. In a relatively static society, these constraints were taken as given and hardly noticed. Trust in qualifications was able to rely on tradition and experience - both made easier by virtue of the fact that qualifications were only obtained by a minority and hence were a distinctly elitist phenomenon. Challenges to this model arose in different countries in different ways and for different reasons. For example, in South Africa change was associated with the end of apartheid; in the United Kingdom, with responding to the rise of youth unemployment; and in New Zealand, with the loss of markets for their farm produce and the crisis in the economic competitiveness of their industries. More recently these challenges have spread to developing countries with relatively limited provision of education and training, but facing the common demands of global economic competition. A global consensus among policy-makers, which Grubb and Lazerson (2006) refer to as the ‘Vocational Gospel’, has not only stressed perceived failures of schools and universities, and emphasized the need for reforming them with economic goals in mind, but has emphasized the economic importance of non-formal, informal, and experiential learning, and accreditation of these with outcomes-based qualifications as the key policy instrument.

⁹ The rationales behind this shift vary widely. For example, in the United Kingdom, it arose from the neo-liberal policies of the Thatcher (and later New Labour) Governments who hoped to promote economic competitiveness by shifting power over qualifications towards employers (Wolf 2002). In contrast, in South Africa, the primary concern was to shift power to users (learners, trade unions, and so forth) from institutions seen as locked in apartheid-based exclusion (Allais 2007).

This has led to a challenge to the traditional right of the professions based in educational institutions and other specialists to define what it is to be ‘qualified’. It also arose in response to the inherent conservatism¹⁰ of educational institutions and their tendency to limit access to new learners and to resist the development of qualifications across domain boundaries. The alternative which has emerged is the ‘outcomes-based’ model in which qualifications are specified in terms of ‘outcomes’ or ‘competencies’ that impose no constraints on how or where learners become qualified and lay down no rules for appropriate content, and only the criteria specified through the outcomes must be met. The outcomes-model approach is designed to shift power away from educational institutions and domain specialists by relying on generic outcome statements or criteria to define what a qualification is (usually in terms of various types of competence or capability) and the levels at which a qualification may be achieved. The latter criteria, known in qualifications framework documentation as ‘level descriptors’, rank cognitive and social abilities across knowledge disciplines and occupational fields. Thus, the outcomes-based (or competency-based) approach subordinates specialized knowledge content and the differences between domains to generic criteria. It ‘dis-embeds’ qualifications from institutions, which are then expected to ‘market’ their learning programmes to learners as competing routes to achieving qualifications. It also claims to provide opportunities for learners to obtain qualifications by submitting their experience for assessment (APEL) without having participated in any formal course of study.

However, as mentioned above, although many countries are shifting towards outcomes-based qualifications frameworks (CEDEFOP 2008), the concept of a ‘learning outcome’ is extremely general¹¹ and can be interpreted in many different ways. These differences in the use of the idea of outcomes are well illustrated by the contrast between Germany and the United Kingdom. In the former, outcomes are defined in relation to ‘occupational competence’ and qualifications necessarily involve ‘inputs’. In contrast, in the United Kingdom (in the case of NVQs) and in the countries influenced by the United Kingdom, outcomes or competencies are understood much more narrowly in terms of work tasks. This difference not only raises problems of international comparability but has very different implications for the organization of educational programmes and the role of off-the-job learning. The broader notion of occupational competence that is found in countries following the German tradition retains the importance of trust in specialist occupational communities, and because progression is integral to the idea of an occupation, gives an explicit role to educational institutions in the design of off-the-job learning (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2008a).

It is not surprising, therefore, that not all NQFs use the concept of ‘outcomes’ in the same way. In some countries, a ‘pure’ outcomes model may be adopted and qualifications are defined quite independently of their links to any specific inputs or institutions. The South African NQF was originally designed in this way (Allais 2007). Others, such as the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) may use the idea of outcomes but adopt an approach to qualifications that has more in common with the ‘institutional’ model, albeit with more flexibility of choice available to learners. In other words, the fact that a

¹⁰ It is important to be clear that conservatism can have two very different meanings with reference to educational institutions. It can refer to an almost inherent feature of all educational institutions that ‘transmit knowledge’ from one generation to another. It can also refer to the tendency for institutions like schools and colleges to preserve the advantages and privileges of particular social groups. (Young 2009)

¹¹ CEDEFOP (2008) define learning outcomes as “...statements of what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do after completion of learning”.

country states that it is using learning outcomes does not necessarily mean it is completely dis-embedding qualifications from institutions, or completely subordinating differences between knowledge domains to generic outcome statements. A qualifications framework may use outcomes as one feature of its design, but not as the driving mechanism.

So, on the one hand, there seems to be a global shift towards learning outcomes as an approach for changing the ways in which qualifications operate, and on the other, there are important differences in the ways in which outcomes and competencies are understood and used in different countries. What seems to be common (beyond the use of the same term) is attempts to shift power away from educational institutions. What differs is the extent and nature of this shift, the strength and nature of institutions in different countries, and how far outcomes are treated as literally not dependent on any specific learning programme, or as merely a way of expressing the goals of such programmes.

Implications of the shift to outcomes-based qualifications frameworks

The introduction of qualifications frameworks can be conceptualized in terms of the shift from a model relying on domain-specific knowledge and programmes offered by specific institutions to a criterion- or outcome-based model. This raises a number of issues that countries introducing qualifications frameworks are likely to face. Here we will discuss the following:

- establishing the necessary trust in qualifications by different users;
- resolving the tensions between governments seeking to use qualifications as ‘drivers of reform’; employers wanting to use them as ‘proxies’ in recruitment; learners using them to progress in employment and education; and providers using them as guides to developing their course programmes;
- the implications of the shift from basing qualifications on domain-specific to generic criteria;
- the extent to which outcomes-based qualifications can be used to promote both skill development and equity and access; and
- the possibility that, for countries with weak educational institutions, a policy designed in wealthier countries to shift power away from their institutions which are perceived as too dominant may in fact further weaken education systems.

All these issues will be expressed differently in different national contexts, and in different models of qualifications frameworks. It is one of the aims of this Project to explore the extent to which countries adopt qualifications frameworks with different combinations of the two approaches to qualifications, and the implications of the differences.

Qualifications and trust

Qualifications emerged in most countries with at least a tacit consensus concerning what they were for. Defining qualifications through learning outcomes and creating qualifications frameworks are explicit attempts to challenge this consensus and in particular to challenge the powerful role of established institutions—especially the educational providers and professional associations. However, the process of shifting trust to qualifications and away from institutions may remove the *basis* for the trust placed by users in qualifications.

A qualification is always, in some sense, a proxy for what a learner knows and can do. By virtue of being a ‘currency’ which the holders can take beyond the educational institution where they acquired it and where teachers and trainers have a good sense of what it is that learners know and can do, a qualification is a token which mediates between educational institutions, and between educational institutions and the labour market. One of the reasons why governments want to introduce outcome-based qualifications frameworks is to overcome the lack of trust that they (and they assume, employers and some learners) have in the institutions providing the programmes leading to qualifications. This lack of trust is likely to be a particular problem in the case of those moving between countries, when the institution in which the qualification is obtained may not be known outside the country. Another possibility is that trust in institutions providing qualifications has broken down within the country, as was the case in apartheid South Africa.

In general, the more mobile people become both within and between nation states and the more complex the society, the less people can rely on face-to-face contacts and on their familiarity with particular institutions as a basis for trust. It follows that establishing an alternative basis for trust becomes a crucial factor in the credibility of new qualifications; there is no substitute. Qualifications that are not trusted by key users will not be used or will be bypassed, as we see from examples such as the United Kingdom’s NVQs. Qualification frameworks present precisely-expressed statements of outcomes as an alternative basis for trust—the claim is that because the qualification is outcomes-based, it will provide a good description of what it is that the bearer is qualified to do. This raises two questions. The first is the extent to which outcome statements that do not relate to learning programmes can be trusted (or actually mean anything on their own). The second question is what will be the new basis of trust, if the traditional sources of trust are seen by governments as too powerful and distorting qualifications away from the real needs of modern economies. The literature refers, somewhat unspecifically, to ‘communities of trust’ (Coles 2007) and ‘communities of practice’ (CEDEFOP 2008). However, with the weakening of content requirements relating to specific knowledge fields and occupations that is a consequence of the emphasis given to written outcomes, it is difficult to see on what the new ‘communities of trust’ will be based. Furthermore, outcomes, in order to be specific, are often become narrow and therefore can trivialize the learning that is assessed. The experience of higher education systems that have adopted outcome-based frameworks, such as Scotland (Gallagher 2006) suggests that older forms of institution-based trust associated with leading universities persist. It may be, therefore, that introducing a qualification framework, while opening access to some who were previously excluded, could lead to a more divided system. Where qualifications have an established basis of trust—usually in the universities and selective schools, this is sustained and little attention is given to outcomes. On the other hand, outcomes-based qualifications that have no established basis of trust will not be valued and that this could lead to new inequalities. And, because outcome specifications are always open to interpretation and do not provide the transparency that is hoped for, new institutions, usually government institutions, become the new definers of what learners know, can do, and so on, after obtaining a qualification, and new bureaucracies of quality assurance emerge.

Qualifications as drivers of reform and as mediators

Qualifications emerged in society as mediators; that is why they exist, as proxies or short hands for what someone knows and can do. However, in introducing outcome-based qualification frameworks, governments invariably set out to use them to achieve a wider set of social and political goals, such as improve the quality (and relevance) as well as quantity of education supplied in their country, to offer possibilities for certification based on non-formal learning, and so on. Separating ‘outcomes’ (captured in qualifications) from ‘inputs’, such as content, teaching, and various other aspects of education institutions, is supposed to be a mechanism for this. But, once qualifications have been separated from educational institutions, the question must arise—are they then still able to mediate

between educational institutions and the labour market? How can they do so, if they are neither embedded in institutions nor originate from them? If qualifications are to mediate between educational institutions and the labour market, they must have a relationship with educational institutions. Most policy documents about outcomes-based qualifications frameworks claim that they will improve the ways in which qualifications are understood in the labour market, especially by employers. It is also claimed that if employers are directly involved in defining outcomes and therefore, what is learnt in the process of obtaining a qualification, the qualifications will be more useful to them and more people will become qualified. It is for these reasons that introducing an outcomes-based framework, especially for vocational qualifications, is seen by many governments as an opportunity to increase the role of employers and reduce the role of providers of education and training. But, once the role of providers of education and training has been reduced, it is questionable whether qualifications will then in fact mediate between them and the labour market effectively. In other words, trying to use outcomes-based qualifications as drivers of other educational and economic goals may reduce the effectiveness of qualifications in playing their necessary role of mediating between education and the labour market—even though improving the communication between education and employment is one of the stated goals of qualifications frameworks.

Because outcomes-based qualifications do not refer to the activities of educational institutions, it is more difficult for qualifications to be mediators between institutions and the world of work. In an outcomes-based framework, the trust in qualifications is assumed to reside in the specificity of the outcomes which claim to define what learners know and can do. But if outcomes are not linked to the activities the holders have engaged in during a course of study, they need to be extremely precise in defining what they know and can do. However, the pressure for greater specificity inevitably leads to a narrowing of outcomes and a trivialization of assessment—this is sometimes referred to as ‘ticking boxes’. Furthermore, however explicitly learning outcomes or competencies are specified, a qualification can only ever be a proxy; it can never summarize all that the holder knows, all that is required to undertake a task or to be accepted as a ‘qualified’ member of an occupation; the issue of trust discussed earlier in the paper and its basis remains. If a qualification refers to the learning that has taken place *in an institution*, the qualification is more likely to act as a proxy for that learning and hence to mediate between the learning that has taken place in that institution and the knowledge and skills needed in the world of work. If the qualification is not embedded in the institution, then the only evidence available to employers or other users is the written learning outcomes in the qualification document, which leads again to the problem of over-specification, and hence narrowing.

If outcomes or competencies are assumed to be linked to the activities the holder has engaged in during a course of study, what is the added gain by providing descriptions of outcomes independent of the learning programmes? Although much documentation about qualifications frameworks claims that learning outcomes can provide a language of ‘translation’, across national borders, or between the workplace and educational institutions, what this means in practice is not clear. Universities in many countries are now expected to state the outcomes that those awarded their degrees have achieved. It is likely, however, that it is not the outcome statements that guarantee the quality of the degree, but the trust placed by the user in the university that is linked to its wider status and reputation.

When qualifications are associated with institutions, students and trainees on vocational and professional programmes are assessed by the institution and make their own links between what they are learning and what they have to do at work. This may be supplemented or strengthened by trade test systems in which professionals are more involved, or compulsory work experience followed by an examination set by professional bodies. Employers judge the holders of qualifications on the basis of their past experience of students, and teachers draw on their professional expertise and their knowledge of employer needs in designing, teaching, and assessing programmes, as well as the strength of their relationships with professional bodies. It is these sets of processes to which we

refer, with the idea that qualifications have a mediating role. In the case of outcome-based qualifications, it is far from clear how the outcomes do in practice mediate the activities of employers, teachers and students and what actual role the outcomes themselves play. We hope that in the course of the Project we will get some evidence about these processes.

In institution-based approaches, qualifications mediate access to knowledge in specialist domains via specialist teachers. Countries and levels of education systems vary according to which body (the providing institutions or separate awarding bodies) has responsibility for setting and marking the examinations which lead to the qualifications. In an outcomes-based framework where there are no explicit links between qualifications and educational institutions, outcomes are supposed to be assessed by an assessor in terms of 'performance tasks'. However, such an approach assumes that knowledge in specialist domains can be inferred from the evidence of performance. Much of the criticism of outcomes or competence-based models both by academics and employers has focused on just this assumption. One possible consequence of such approaches is that the 'powerful knowledge'¹² that takes learners beyond their experience and beyond specific workplaces and which therefore provides them with a basis for progression, will become less and less important in obtaining a qualification. Unless the issue of 'powerful knowledge' and access to it is addressed, it is likely that qualification frameworks will follow the path of the United Kingdom NVQs and will not escape the critique that they do little more than provide low-level qualifications for those in jobs with minimum demands and at the same time provide minimum opportunities for progression. This Project will attempt to understand the extent to which this is happening, or looks likely to happen, in the various countries introducing qualifications frameworks.

As discussed above, in using qualifications as instruments of educational reform, governments aim to improve their role as mediators by making more explicit what the holder of a qualification knows and can do, and at the same time to give more emphasis to users rather than providers in defining what is included in a qualification. In the particular case of vocational qualifications, governments hope that by specifying qualifications in terms of outcomes that express work tasks, employers will find it easier to influence these qualifications, develop a sense of ownership of them as contributing to profitability, and therefore raise the qualification levels of their employees.

The idea of using learning outcomes or competencies is that instead of employers choosing from people who have qualifications from a range of different educational institutions and programmes, employers are expected to specify to educational institutions what outcomes their programmes should achieve. However, it is one thing to make sure that learning programmes take into account employers needs. It is quite another to imagine that these demands can be adequately expressed by learning outcomes. Firstly, employers in any industrial or service sector vary widely, in terms of size, of how their services or production are organized, and in their demands for knowledge and skills. There is no one 'employer view' of qualifications, even in a specific sector. Secondly, while employers may be clear about their immediate needs, it is unlikely that they will have the knowledge to predict their future needs, as the ILO 2008 has pointed out. Designing and developing qualifications and curricula cannot be based solely on the evidence of current employer needs; the latter will inevitably be based on today's workplaces. Qualification design will involve specialists making judgements that take account of a range of factors including the likely development of industries and services and the current needs of employers as well as how the

¹² 'Powerful knowledge' (Young 2009) refers to knowledge that is the basis for reliable explanations and exploring alternatives. It is expressed in conceptual rather than practical form and is frequently, but not necessarily, associated with science and technology.

qualification provides the basis for learner progression. Thirdly, when employers are asked to express needs, they will necessarily have long wish-lists, which in many instances are beyond the capacity of educational institutions to deliver, and which take no consideration of (and have no knowledge of) what it actually takes to get people to master the skills and knowledge required in a particular occupation. This does not imply that there should be no engagement between industry and workplaces on the one hand, and educational institutions on the other. It does imply, though, that the former should not be seen as the sole drivers of vocational education systems.

In addition, the strategy of getting employers to lead the reform of education systems through their involvement in setting learning outcomes raises other problems. Not all employers want to be more involved. They either expect the education system to provide them with qualified people or in some cases they are content to employ people without qualifications. To increase employer involvement to the level that is found, for example, in the German dual system, is likely to require a far wider set of changes than merely shifting to qualifications expressed as ‘written outcomes’.

Governments also hope that by expressing qualifications as outcomes or competencies, they will encourage more employees and those seeking employment to obtain qualifications, especially because it is claimed that using learning outcomes opens up possibilities for credit accumulation and transfer and the accreditation of experiential learning. But there is little evidence that these hopes will be realized—particularly in relation to the accreditation of prior learning, but also to transfer of learning credits between qualifications. There are situations when accrediting informal learning for qualifications may be important. It seems extremely unlikely, however, especially in poor countries, that there will be the resources available to create the assessment infrastructure that is necessary if this is to become a reality. It is also questionable whether such resources would not be better spent in assisting people to access quality education. What is more realistic is that institutions are encouraged and assisted to develop ‘access’ courses which enable those without prior accredited attainments to gain entry to higher-level programmes.

Of no less significance is that the more learners identify with the possibility of obtaining qualifications by credit accumulation and transfer, the less they are likely to be convinced of the value of sustained learning in a particular domain. So if credit transfer schemes did in fact work, it is possible that they would lead to unforeseen and undesirable consequences. For example, one possible consequence of placing less emphasis on what are sometimes referred to as ‘linear’ learning pathways is that alternative routes to qualification via ‘credit transfer’ may *seem* easier and fewer learners will opt for the pathways which provide the most likely basis for them to progress to higher levels. This could mean that in the longer term, employers find themselves worse off than before with regard to finding appropriately-qualified job applicants.

From knowledge domain-based to criteria-based qualifications

Qualifications frameworks reflect a shift in the balance from differences—between domains, between vocational and academic qualifications, and between types of learning (at home, in the workplace, or in the school or college) to similarities. This trend towards generic criteria for all qualifications is often presented as fairer and supporting widening participation and lifelong learning. Important though these goals are, it is important to raise questions about how far the quality of learning can be guaranteed without the stipulating content that is specific to different occupational sectors and without recognizing that the learning opportunities in college are different from and cannot be equated with those offered by workplaces and vice versa. A crucial factor may be how, in a particular education and training system, qualifications and curricula are related. The experience of some ‘early starter’ qualification frameworks such as the NVQs in the United Kingdom

(West 2004) suggests that outcomes-based qualifications derived from a functional analysis of workplace performance cannot be the basis for ‘deriving’ or ‘designing down’ curricula. If this is recognized, then qualification outcomes can take on a more appropriate role as broad guides to curricula which draw on specialist bodies of knowledge and how they are best paced, selected and sequenced for students with different prior levels of attainment. If on the other hand qualification outcomes are used as the primary basis for designing curricula, the likelihood is that the qualifications will deny students access to the ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young 2009) that they need to progress in education or employment.

Even if outcome or competence statements are written independently of any learning programme that might lead to them, employers and other users will still treat them as ‘proxies’ for the activities that they assume the holders will have undertaken in an educational institution; that is the only objective basis they have for their confidence in the qualifications. The logic of this argument is that it is better to make the role of institutions in qualifications explicit rather than leaving it implicit as is done if qualifications are defined independently of institutional inputs. Furthermore, in giving institutions a bigger role, users are accepting that the specialization of teachers is real and that it gives them a basis for making judgements that others are not in a position to make, in the design of curricula and qualifications. Educational institutions are not just sellers of their goods—in their case, qualifications—in a market place.

Tensions in the goals of qualification reform

Most government statements about qualifications frameworks identify two very different types of goals as important—their role in supporting skill development and economic competitiveness on the one hand and their role in promoting equity, social justice, and social inclusion on the other. A largely unexamined assumption is that these two goals are straightforwardly compatible. There seem to be two possible reasons why this assumption has been taken for granted and so little examined. One is that as because both sets of goals are widely supported, they must be attainable by similar means—in this case, introducing a qualification framework. The other is that, while there may be a tension between the two sets of goals, they represent a widely-accepted political compromise between ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ under the banner of an overall modernizing approach to educational reform. To put it another way, while the ‘Left’ are being ‘realistic’ about accepting the importance of economic competitiveness, the ‘Right’ are being ‘compassionate’ about the importance of social justice. Nevertheless, despite this apparent compromise, if this Project is to help countries to make better decisions about their—education and training reforms, it is worth probing the possible tension between these two sets of goals more deeply. Furthermore, even if they represent aspects of a common political agenda that is widely accepted, they represent very different interpretations of this agenda with very different implications for the reform of education and training. Without making these differences explicit, developing countries, in particular, will not have the best basis for avoiding the mistakes made by the ‘early starters’ such as the English NVQs and New Zealand when they introduced qualification frameworks.

The issue, as the sociologist Johan Muller (2000) points out, is that qualifications frameworks represent a kind of hybrid mix of two very different ideas about how human beings learn and how the idea of competence is interpreted. One idea that emerged in the child-centred educational policies of the 1960s but can be traced back to Rousseau, is that all human beings are born with a common, universal species competence that is realized in highly-diverse performances which depend on the family and society into which we are born. This idea is expressed in the learner-centred assumptions on which qualifications frameworks are based and the equalizing of opportunities and widening of participation that some argue they will lead to. By being open to all regardless of previous educational achievements and by including all levels of learning from the lowest to the highest, qualification frameworks assume that, at least in principle, anyone can reach any level

unless constrained otherwise by circumstances. This accounts for the popularity of qualifications frameworks among adult educators and their endorsement of their role in the accreditation of experiential learning (APEL), and the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

However, qualifications frameworks became popular at a specific time in history and for specific reasons and therefore, not surprisingly their origins and the opportunities they claim to offer are less than universal. The goals of portability and flexibility of qualifications, linked to the need for employees and those unemployed to be always open to retraining (the economic aspect of lifelong learning) are best seen not as universal entitlements, but as associated with post-Fordist ideas about the economic changes that have been taking place in industrial societies.

These two sets of goals for qualification frameworks tend to be based on different pedagogic and curricular assumptions. The ‘psychological’ idea of competence implies that all learners can reach their potential if they are freed from the constraints that inhibit their ‘natural’ capacity to learn.¹³ In this scenario, teachers are expected to play a subtle but emancipatory role as ‘facilitators’ and assessors of the progress of learners up and across the levels of the framework. A qualification framework therefore provides support for this ideal of lifelong learners freed from the restrictive constraints of institutions. In contrast, the notion of competence associated with ‘post-Fordist’ economic developments calls for a flexible learner always willing to take up new training opportunities. Whereas the ‘learner-centred’ goals emphasize participation and the breakdown of barriers between teachers and learners, the post-Fordist interpretation of outcomes-based frameworks point to the need for elaborate and sophisticated ‘training packages’ to support learners in acquiring skills and progressing ‘from sweeper to engineer’—a popular slogan in South Africa in the early 1990s. Both sets of assumptions make heavy, but quite different, pedagogic demands on teachers and assume very different models of teacher education. In poor countries where resources are limited, these different demands can only give rise to confusion. Furthermore, in their respective priorities of freeing learners to realize their innate capabilities and in encouraging them to acquire skills via ‘training packages’, both visions of competence play down the extent to which progress to higher levels on the framework presupposes access to knowledge which is not made explicit in the framework itself.

One of the problems with frameworks based on outcomes that cuts across the claims that they can promote social justice and higher-skilled workforces is that they present themselves as ‘ladders of opportunity’ for learners to ‘climb’. However the very idea of an ‘outcome’ is retrospective. It points to the evidence of past achievements, not to whether these achievements provide the basis for learners to progress to a higher level. The conditions for ‘climbing the ladder’ take us beyond outcomes to the knowledge that a learner can acquire in a programme of study. Because outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are presented as ‘ladders of opportunity’, there is a danger that they will lead to neglect of the wider reforms needed to promote opportunities that the levels of a qualifications framework can do no more than point to. Examples are the likelihood that governments will provide funding for learners to access education (a barrier to vocational education in many countries), that employers will grant time-off for employed learners, and that resources will be focused on building or strengthening institutions, to increase the likelihood that they can enable learners to progress.

¹³ There is, of course, a long tradition of research going back to the pioneering work of the Russian cultural psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, which challenges this ‘psychological’ approach to learning which is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

Conclusions

This paper sets out to offer a way of thinking about the reform of qualifications and in particular to provide a basis for analyzing the introduction of outcomes-based qualification frameworks. We have suggested that this change is best seen in terms of the shift from “institution-based” to “outcomes-based” models of qualifications and that this change is likely to be of distinctly different significance in developed and developing countries. In this paper we have not explored this difference in any detail. It is, however, likely that the problem of outcomes-based qualifications establishing the kind of trust that is needed if they are to act as mediators between education and work will be more acute in developing countries without an extensive tradition of institution-based programmes. The first examples of the ‘outcomes’ model arose, initially in Anglophone countries, as an expression of neo-liberal educational policies and a dissatisfaction with traditional ‘institution-based’ approaches to qualifications. The governments concerned felt that qualifications were too closely tied to the interests of provider institutions and not responsive enough to changing economic demands as expressed by employers or to the needs of the wider constituency of learners; many of whom were excluded. Developing countries, however, are adopting outcomes-based or competency-based frameworks less in dissatisfaction with existing systems, which in some cases are not well established, and more in the hope that qualifications can drive the expansion of their government-funded education and training systems and open opportunities to the private sector. This means that in *developing* countries, governments are relying on a reform instrument that the experience of *developed* countries suggests it cannot carry.

Our two models highlight the emphasis in qualification frameworks that is placed on ‘written outcomes’ and that qualifications should not be dependent on any specific institutions or learning pathways that may lead to them. At the same time, we have argued that our two models should be seen as ideal types—that is, as tendencies in the recent development of qualifications—not, as so often in the literature, as ‘one size fits all’ prescriptions for how qualifications should be developed based on the largely unquestioned assumption that they will lead to particular goals. Nor should they be seen as descriptions of existing qualifications systems or frameworks; policies or practices in different countries are likely to emphasize aspects of each model to different degrees.

There are two themes of this paper which it is important to make explicit. The first is the emphasis that we have given to the role of employers (and by implication, although we have not dealt with them here, trade unions which may well have very different interests to employers and governments). This reflects the fact that many NQFs have begun as frameworks for **vocational** qualifications and also that economic rather than social goals have been paramount for most countries introducing NQFs, and furthermore many of the rationales for expressing qualifications in terms of ‘written outcomes’ stem from the assumption that this will facilitate greater employer involvement. Indications from the Project report are not positive in this regard. The second feature of the paper is that we have been more explicitly critical of the ‘outcomes’ model, not because we do not recognize the weaknesses of the ‘institution-based’ model that it seeks to replace. We are critical of it for a number of other reasons. Almost all the literature treats the outcomes model as the almost inevitable next step for all countries and as a policy that will guarantee the goals which so many countries endorse. We think this is unhelpful, to put it mildly, especially to poor countries which have to make difficult decisions about what educational reforms to invest in. It is primarily unhelpful because the evidence from the countries that have already introduced frameworks hardly warrants the considerable claims made for them, let alone that they are any sort of panacea for improving education and training systems. No less important is that the literature almost systematically neglects the very real difficulties that have been faced by the ‘early starter’ countries in introducing their NQFs. The very fact that it is the loosest frameworks (such as that introduced in Scotland (Raffe 2009), in which the least has been expected of written outcomes that have faced the least opposition and in some sense can be called ‘successes’ is indicative of the lessons that new starter countries

need to learn. Furthermore, the experience of the ‘late starters’ in Europe such as France and Germany is also important; they make outcomes explicit in their new frameworks, but they do not follow through the logic of a ‘pure’ outcomes model and assume that outcomes can be wholly separate from institutional ‘inputs’.

This paper has therefore raised questions about the claims that are so often made for the outcomes model. Unless it is possible to identify a space between the claims for qualification frameworks and what they might or might not realistically achieve, starter countries will have no reliable basis for making decisions about implementing an NQF and for realizing not only that there is no ‘one’ NQF model that can be applied in all cases, but that just having written outcomes in a framework offers no panacea. The starting point must always be an analysis of the particular circumstances of a country, and the existing qualifications and what they offer and how new opportunities might be opened by a more explicit reference to outcomes and common levels. Only then will it be possible to see what role the writing of outcomes in a framework might play, together with the no less important complementary policies of strengthening of institutions and the professional development of teachers and trainers, and the building of employer/education partnerships.

Our two-model analysis explores the balance between an emphasis on **institutions** and **outcomes**. The emphasis on **institutions** can, we argue, provide the basis for high quality learning and progression, but builds in a tendency to inflexibility and forms of exclusion. The emphasis on **outcomes** claims to offer the possibility of portability, transparency, and flexibility in how qualifications are achieved, but is essentially about the goals of learning programmes, not the processes involved, and therefore may undermine the ability of qualifications to mediate between education and the world of work, the possibilities for learners to acquire powerful knowledge, and the likelihood of governments expanding access to educational opportunities.

These can only be provisional conclusions, which are intended to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for the analysis of qualifications frameworks.

Final comments

This paper started by recognizing that introducing a qualifications framework is a far more ambitious and radical project than most policy-makers and designers have realized. It is also by no means clear that a fully fledged outcomes-based qualifications framework of the kind envisaged by Jessup (1991) is either realizable or even desirable. In some ways, qualifications frameworks are best seen as utopias, and like all utopias, they are more attractive in theory than in reality. This is not to say that qualification frameworks are not addressing real issues; they are, as we have tried to bring out in the paper. Furthermore, and unlike most utopias, qualification frameworks are taking real forms in an ever growing number of countries, and it is those real forms, not the utopian visions, that make qualification frameworks an important policy development that is shaping people’s lives in significant, but still largely unknown, ways and that implies significant financial commitments on the part of governments.

The ILO has developed this research because it is interested in understanding not only the policy models that are working, but also, under which conditions they work, and what countries facing very different conditions can learn from them. It is equally interested in learning about policy failures, and the explanations for them—whether at the level of design or implementation. This paper represents the first output of the research, and it was written to provoke debate, and help all of us involved in researching qualifications frameworks to think more clearly about the issues. We also hope it will suggest some of the kinds of questions that researchers might ask about qualifications frameworks. Some of the concepts introduced in the paper will turn out to be unhelpful and will no doubt be discarded. Others will be clarified in the course of debate and discussion and hopefully

become analytically more useful. New concepts will doubtless emerge in the process of enquiry and comparison.

The development of qualifications frameworks is not a fixed object to study, but a phenomenon that is changing all the time in unpredictable ways. The assumption here is that we do not start from scratch. There are some patterns that have emerged and are likely to emerge again, and we have some concepts, based on the experience of the 'early starter' qualifications frameworks which allow us to ask questions that do not have just descriptive answers. At the same time, descriptions of new cases will be our main resource in developing a better understanding of the scope and limitations of introducing qualifications frameworks.

Qualifications frameworks and their international counterparts like the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) are not going away; they undoubtedly represent real changes in the world. The world is getting smaller, not bigger, in terms of our dependence on each other, and more, not less, mobility of labour is likely as businesses search for new locations for making profits, and as migration patterns constantly change in response to increasingly unstable economies. National and regional frameworks, despite all their problems, are attempts to take account of these changes. We need to know more about how superficially similar frameworks work out differently in practice. In particular, we are interested in one key difference between countries. It is between those countries that are using a qualifications framework primarily to coordinate and rationalize relatively well-developed education and training systems, and those countries who are introducing a qualifications framework as a way of stimulating the development of their education and training system and of compensating for the significant sections of the population who do not have access to institutionally-based provision.¹⁴

Acknowledgements

Thanks to David Raffe, Christine Evans-Klock, Rob Strathdee, Leesa Wheelahan, and Christopher Winch for insightful comments and criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

¹⁴ There many other issues which this paper does not address. Two hardly referred to here are: (a) the role of private providers, something likely to have considerable significance in developing countries; and (b) the role of funding and how, when governments use qualification frameworks as a basis for funding, this influences the role of the qualification framework.

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Chapter 2: Towards a dynamic model of National Qualifications Frameworks

- David Raffe

Introduction

NQFs are inherently dynamic entities. They are dynamic in the way they have spread globally, through various mechanisms of policy influence and diffusion. They are dynamic because they are used as agents or instruments for change in education and training systems. And they are dynamic because the introduction of an NQF is not an event, but a lengthy process which involves complex interactions with the education and training system, with its learners and stakeholders and with its socio-economic and political environment.

Yet the literature too often portrays NQFs in static terms, as matrices of levels and sectors or fields of learning, backed up by organizational charts to show how functions such as standard-setting, qualifications design and quality assurance are delivered. This way of looking at NQFs not only ignores their dynamic features, but also implies that introducing them successfully is largely a technical matter. In this view the task is primarily one of appropriate specification, careful design and construction and correct installation: provided these instructions are followed, the NQF can be plugged in and switched on and it will immediately start to work.

This paper asks how we can conceptualize NQFs in more dynamic terms. It suggests two complementary ways of doing so, which together may contribute to a dynamic conceptual model of NQFs. The first focuses on differences among NQFs and proposes a typology of NQFs based on their ambitions to transform their education and training systems and their strategies for doing so. The second approach focuses on the common features of NQFs and proposes a model of change which a 'successful' framework may need to follow. The paper focuses primarily on comprehensive frameworks, although much of the conceptual model applies also to partial frameworks which cover a single sector of learning such as higher education (HE) or vocational education and training (VET).

However, the insight that NQFs are dynamic entities, whose introduction is a lengthy process and whose impacts will only emerge over time, carries a further implication: that it will take a long time to assemble an adequate evidence base on their implementation and impact. Much of the empirical evidence is still based on the five NQFs identified by Tuck (2007) as first-generation frameworks (Australia, England-Wales-Northern Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa) together with one or two advanced second-generation frameworks such as Ireland and older qualifications structures recently re-defined as NQFs, such as France (Bouder and Kirsch 2007). This paper is no exception: it uses the NQFs of Ireland, Scotland and South Africa to illustrate its typology and as source material for its model of change. Even these older frameworks are far from being fully implemented, let alone realizing their full impacts. And they are unlikely to be representative of later-generation NQFs, which have been introduced in different national contexts and in a different international climate that is itself influenced by the experience and perceived lessons from the early frameworks. On the other hand, the empirical evidence on later-generation frameworks is even more limited; the literature on these frameworks consists mainly of descriptions and advocacy material, and it says more about the objectives of NQFs than about whether they achieve these objectives in practice (for example, OECD 2007).

Consequently the dynamic model outlined in this paper is provisional, to be further developed, re-formulated or abandoned in the light of later experience. The final section of

this paper discusses possible directions in which the model might be taken. The model is proposed as a working tool for the International Labour Office project on *The implementation and impact of NQFs*, which aims to update our understanding and enlarge the evidence base on NQF developments around the world.

The ILO's broader aim - together with that of the European Training Foundation (ETF), a partner organization in the Project - is to move from a model of *policy borrowing* - a feature of NQF development hitherto (Philips 1998, Mukora 2006) - towards *policy learning* (ETF 2008). Policy borrowing assumes that 'best practice' can be identified and transferred between countries. Policy learning is a broader concept which recognizes that cross-national comparison may serve a variety of policy-related purposes including understanding one's own education and training (ET) system better by contrasting it with other systems, identifying common trends and pressures, clarifying alternative policy strategies and identifying practical issues likely to be raised by each strategy (Raffe 2007a). Policy learning is associated with constructivist models of learning by policy-makers and aims to help policy-makers devise their own country-specific solutions rather than import solutions from elsewhere (Grootings 2007). In principle, its broader purposes are implied by such concepts as 'peer learning' and the 'open method of coordination'. Underlying this analysis, therefore, is the question: what kinds of policy learning are likely to be achieved through the comparative analysis of NQFs?

A typology of NQFs

This section introduces a typology of NQFs, based on their ambitions to transform ET systems and their strategies for doing so. Young (2007) notes that the similarity of the written models of NQFs masks their underlying diversity. Nevertheless, the literature on NQFs contains several classifications of NQFs and analyses of their differences (for example, Young 2005, Coles 2006), including guides to policy-makers of the issues to consider and the choices required in the process of introducing an NQF (Grootings 2007, Tuck 2007). Drawing on this literature, we may identify three aspects of the diversity of NQFs. In addition to differences of *purpose* and differences of *design*, well-recognized and discussed in the literature, there are differences in the *processes of implementation* which, while not ignored, have received rather less discussion.

Possible purposes of NQFs include to:

- increase transparency and improve understanding of the education and training system and of its parts;
- promote access, transfer and progression into, within and between programmes of learning;
- provide an instrument of accountability or control of the education and training system;
- enhance the quality of provision, or make it more consistent;
- update, improve or extend standards;
- promote the mobility of labour or of learners;
- make the education and training system more demand-focused, increasing the influence of learners and employers and reducing the influence of providers;
- promote lifelong learning; and
- support wider social and economic transformation.

Most NQFs pursue more than one of these goals, although it may be useful to distinguish those which pursue the more modest purposes at the top of this list and those which pursue the more radical purposes lower down. The above list focuses primarily on

national goals, although ‘promoting the mobility of labour or of learners’ may refer to international mobility. Many countries introduce NQFs to help their citizens to market their skills in other countries, to recognize the qualifications of immigrants, or to help market their own education and training internationally. And many countries are introducing NQFs in order to fulfil international obligations.

The second aspect of the diversity of NQFs is their design. Frameworks may be tight or loose, depending on the stringency of the conditions which a qualification must meet to be included in the framework. Frameworks may be partial and cover a single sector or type of learning, or they may be comprehensive. Many comprehensive frameworks have a nested structure, with sectoral sub-frameworks contained within a (typically looser) national framework. NQFs may be based on whole qualifications, on smaller units or standards or on a combination of these. They may include a credit or ‘volume’ measure, or they may not. They may vary with respect to the number of levels, the domains (such as knowledge, skills and competence) for which level descriptors are defined, and the nature of these descriptors (Hart 2009). They may vary with respect to the types of qualifications or fields of learning, if any, which they formally distinguish. And they may vary with respect to the extent to which they are based on learning outcomes and the concept of learning outcome on which they are based; an issue explored in Chapter 1 of this working paper; in which this variation is partly captured by the contrast between tight and loose frameworks.

NQFs also vary with respect to the process of their implementation. The process may be bottom-up or top-down. It may be driven by national governments or their agencies, by stakeholders external to the education system, by education/training providers themselves, and by combinations of these. An NQF may be compulsory and based in legislation, or voluntary. Some countries have tried to introduce an NQF in a single step; other frameworks have developed incrementally over a series of reforms. And NQFs vary in their policy breadth, that is, in the extent to which they are introduced as part of a coherent suite of measures or are expected to have a ‘stand-alone’ impact.

These differences of purpose, design and process tend to be related. Drawing on her study of the South African NQF, Allais (2007) has proposed a typology of NQFs based on their transformational ambitions and the extent to which they take the existing ET system, or a proposed future system, as the starting point. The typology presented below draws on Allais’ analysis but with differences of labelling and emphasis. It starts by distinguishing three types of framework:

- A **communications framework** takes the existing education and training system as its starting point and aims to make it more transparent and easier to understand, typically in order to rationalize it, to improve its coherence, to encourage access and to highlight opportunities for transfer and progression between programmes.
- A **reforming framework** takes the existing system as its starting point but aims to improve it in specific ways, for example, by enhancing quality, increasing consistency, filling gaps in provision or increasing accountability. It is typically statutory and has a regulatory role.
- A **transformational framework** takes a proposed future system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in a transformed system, without explicit reference to existing provision. It typically uses learning outcomes for this purpose because they allow qualifications to be specified independently of existing standards, institutions and programmes.

The three types can be represented as a continuum, summarized in Figure 1. A communications framework tends to have a loose design, to be voluntary, to be developed from the ‘bottom-up’ and possibly led by ET institutions, and to pursue incremental change for which the NQF provides a tool but other factors (complementary policies or demands

arising from social and economic trends) actually drive the change. A transformational framework, on the other hand, tends to have a tight design, to be statutory, to be imposed through more top-down processes in which ET institutions are one set of stakeholders among many, and to be conceived as the direct driver of transformational change. Reforming frameworks, the intermediate category, combine features of each. Like communications frameworks, they take the existing system and its institutions as their starting point. But whereas a communications framework provides a tool to facilitate change driven from elsewhere, a reforming framework has more specific reform objectives of its own - for example, to fill gaps in provision or to make quality standards more consistent. It therefore tends to be statutory, to have tighter requirements and to try to drive change directly as well as to facilitate other change agents.

Figure 1. A continuum of NQFs		
COMMUNICATIONS	↔	TRANSFORMATIONAL
starts from present system	↔	starts from future system
incremental change	↔	radical transformation
tool for change	↔	driver of change
'bottom-up'	↔	'top-down'
voluntary	↔	statutory
providers have central role	↔	providers included among stakeholders
loose	↔	tight

Allais (2007) argues that communications frameworks tend to be institution-led and to treat knowledge, and boundaries between types of knowledge, as given; transformational frameworks tend to be outcomes-led and to treat knowledge as undifferentiated and knowledge boundaries as socially constructed. The continuum in Figure 1 shifts the emphasis from the epistemological assumptions underlying each type of framework to their social and policy processes, and specifically to their implementation strategy and model of change. The more transformational the ambitions of a framework, the less evolutionary or incremental the process by which it attempts to achieve them.

Of the early comprehensive NQFs, those in Australia, France, Scotland and Wales are examples of communications frameworks; those in New Zealand and South Africa started out as transformational frameworks; and that in Ireland is an intermediate or reforming framework. Brief case studies of the Irish, Scottish and South African frameworks are presented below. Of the various frameworks covering England, Northern Ireland and Wales, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were transformational whereas the Qualifications and Credit Framework currently being developed may have more characteristics of a reforming framework. However, in applying the continuum we should remember that NQFs' purposes and features may change over time and vary across sub-frameworks, as we see in the case studies below.

A model of this kind may serve at least three purposes. First, it can encourage greater national self-awareness among policy analysts and policy-makers by helping them to see their own system in comparative context; it can 'make the familiar strange' (Broadfoot 2000, p. 357) by drawing attention to features of one's own system that would otherwise be taken for granted. Second, it can encourage reflection on how the purposes of NQFs, their design and the strategies for implementing them are connected. Third, the model can be

used to compare the implementation and impact of NQFs and it can provide the starting point for an exploration of why some frameworks appear to be more successful than others.

Attempts to draw policy lessons from the experience of early NQFs suggest that the most transformational frameworks have faced the greatest problems of implementation (Raffe 2005, Young 2005). If we define ‘successful’ frameworks as those which include most of their target qualifications, retain broad-based stakeholder support, avoid major changes in strategy and achieve at least their shorter-term objectives, then none of the three transformational frameworks listed above - New Zealand, South Africa and NVQs - was clearly successful, at least when first introduced (Robinson 1996, Raggatt and Williams 1999, Mikuta 2002, RSA 2002, Allais 2007, French 2009).

However, this conclusion is based on a small number of countries and on a narrow and short-term criterion of success. It is perhaps hardly surprising that the NQFs with the greatest ambitions are the least likely to achieve them all. Moreover, it does not explain *why* transformational frameworks might face greater problems of implementation. To do this, I shift the focus of the paper from a cross-sectional comparison to an analysis of how NQFs develop and evolve over time. I first do this on a single-country basis, taking a single example of each type of NQF in the typology; I then abstract from their experience to develop a general model of change. Like the typology above, this model is intended to apply to all countries, but it is based largely on the experience of early NQFs.

Three case studies – Scotland, South Africa and Ireland

The **Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)** is an example of a communications framework. It is a comprehensive, credit-based framework with 12 levels. Formally launched in 2001, it followed a series of reforms which created what were to become sub-frameworks of the SCQF, such as the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer scheme (SCOTCAT) which subsequently developed as the higher education sub-framework and the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) framework of occupational qualifications. Some of these earlier reforms began the process of bringing sub-frameworks together into an integrated system: for example, SCOTCAT linked university degrees to colleges’ short-cycle HE awards, and another reform (Higher Still) introduced a ‘unified system’ linking school and college qualifications. The earlier reforms also introduced, across much of education and training, what were to become design features of the SCQF: learning outcomes, unitization, credit and a consistent set of levels. Consequently, the SCQF itself could start from the existing system and progress through a series of small, incremental steps (Raffe 2007b).

Its aims, compared with other NQFs, are relatively modest and consistent with a ‘communications’ role: to support access to learning and to make the education and training system more transparent (SCQF 2003). It aspires to be the ‘national language’ of learning in Scotland. It is voluntary, an instrument of change rather than a driver of change. For example, although the SCQF provides a basis for transferring credit from colleges’ short-cycle HE awards to degrees, universities can choose whether or not to recognize this credit and for which programmes. Some college stakeholders expect that credit should transfer more automatically: the management of expectations has been a continuing challenge for the SCQF (Gallacher et al. 2005). The framework provides a tool - in this example, for credit transfer - but does not mandate its use. Other drivers, such as funding incentives and measures to encourage articulation, are needed to maximize use of the framework.

The SCQF is led by a partnership of the main qualifications-awarding bodies (the universities and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), which awards most school qualifications and many college qualifications) together with the government and the colleges (which, with the universities, are the main public providers of vocational and general post-school learning). Other stakeholders such as employers, professional bodies,

the voluntary sector and learners are represented, but in an advisory role. It is a loose framework, designed to build on earlier reforms which had developed an increasingly coherent and unified qualifications system. It therefore accommodated existing SQA and university qualifications relatively easily; many of the modifications needed to fit these into the framework could be made as part of ongoing processes of programme review, qualification re-design or the development of new qualifications. The SCQF provides a natural reference point for such processes. Unlike the Irish and South African frameworks described below, it does not formally distinguish between 'legacy' qualifications and qualifications that have been developed or modified to fit the framework. The task of placing other qualifications in the framework, including employer-based and professional qualifications and community learning, has progressed slowly. An evaluation in 2005 revealed wide concern over slow progress, which it attributed in part to the partnership model (Gallacher et al. 2005), but the pace of change accelerated following changes to the SCQF management in 2006. In 2007, the Scottish Government's skills strategy asked the new management structure to 'move quickly to ensure that the SCQF embraces more learning opportunities by increasing the number of credit rating bodies; facilitating the inclusion of work-based learning programmes and encouraging the recognition of informal learning' (SG 2007, p. 49). 'Credit rating' is the process by which qualifications are approved for inclusion in the framework, and new organizations are now being authorized to credit-rate. Awareness and understanding of the framework are also increasing, if slowly; people tend to become familiar with the SCQF only when they have a practical need to know about it.

The evaluation mentioned above reported generally positive perceptions of the framework and support for its aims (Gallacher et al. 2005). The SCQF has increased transparency and provided a tool for increasing the cohesion of the education and training system, for rationalizing and enhancing provision, and for promoting access, transfer and progression, even if it has relied on other drivers to achieve these ends. The evaluation concluded that the SCQF was a valuable tool for change but doubted its efficacy as an agent of change. And its status as a tool, to be used (or not) by other drivers of change, makes it difficult to determine its independent impact. Nevertheless, by the criteria of short-term 'success' listed earlier, the SCQF has been reasonably successful: it has included - or is in the process of including - most of its target qualifications; it retains broad-based stakeholder support; it has avoided major changes in strategy; and it has achieved most of its shorter-term objectives.

This relative success has been attributed to the SCQF's loose design, its voluntary character, its incremental approach and the involvement and ownership by stakeholders, especially HE (Young 2005, Raffe et al. 2007-08). In contrast to many NQFs elsewhere which have aimed to address a lack of confidence in existing qualifications (Grootings 2007), the SCQF has been led by the bodies which award the qualifications. As such, it exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of a communications framework; its introduction has been relatively smooth and uncontested, but it has modest aims and limited capacity to change education and training except in ways supported by education and training institutions themselves. However, the fact that these weaknesses are seen to be outweighed by the strengths reflects the success of earlier reforms which established a relatively coherent, unified and largely outcomes-based system of education and training in Scotland.

One implication of a dynamic perspective on NQFs is that it becomes harder to distinguish a framework from the sequence of policy changes of which it is a part. The changes which many countries hope to accomplish through a single NQF were achieved in Scotland over three decades through a series of reforms, many of which did not fit the ideal type of a communications framework. Although the SCQF is loose and voluntary it embraces sub-frameworks (such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications and some Scottish Qualifications Authority qualifications) with a tighter specification, which were established in earlier reforms through more 'top-down' processes. Stakeholder ownership of some of these earlier reforms was variable, and often constrained by the goal of creating a unified or

integrated framework, which requires a system-wide perspective on education and training that disenfranchises stakeholders whose interests are restricted to a specific sector (Raffe et al. 2007). In other words, the coherence of the current system presided over by the communications SCQF may partly reflect the success of reforming frameworks introduced earlier.

The **South African NQF**, an example of a transformational framework, was established in 1998 under the terms of a 1995 Act, the first education and training legislation of the post-apartheid democracy. It aims to develop an integrated framework, to facilitate access, transfer and progression, to enhance quality of provision, to redress past discrimination and to promote personal, social and economic development. The existing education and training system was seen as an inadequate starting point because of its association with the apartheid past and the radical nature of the transformation required. The NQF defined the blueprint for a new system to replace it, using learning outcomes as a means of defining the system independently of existing arrangements. It is a comprehensive framework, initially with eight levels covering qualifications across 12 organizing fields and across higher, further and general education and industrial training. To begin with, integration across these sectors was a strong aspiration of the NQF, to be achieved through a single, tight model based on unit standards. The NQF is led by a central agency, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), with extensive input from external stakeholders. Education and training providers shared in this process along with other stakeholders, but they did so as part of a centralized, 'design-down' process that gave them relatively little discretion to interpret or adapt the decisions reached through consultation. A range of standards-setting and quality-assurance bodies was established to implement the framework.

The impact of the South African NQF must be seen in the light of the enormous educational, social and economic challenges that faced the new democracy after the end of apartheid. It must also be seen in the light of the framework's transformational ambitions. The particular circumstances of South Africa at the time, and the lack of alternative policy strategies, put it under a burden of expectations that, in the eyes of some observers, it should never have been given. In 2002, a Study Team appointed by the government to review the implementation of the framework found 'general dissatisfaction with the pace of implementation, especially in respect to access, progression and redress. The architecture of the NQF, embracing policies, regulations, procedures, structures and language, is experienced as unduly complex, confusing, time consuming and unsustainable.' (RSA 2002, p. i). The first wave of SAQA's impact study, based on the perceptions of a sample of stakeholders, reported substantial impact on the nature of learning programmes and building a lifelong learning culture, moderate impacts on other aspects of learning programmes and minimal impact on quality assurance and addressing the learning needs of individuals and society (SAQA 2005). French (2009) describes positive impacts including near-universal buy-in to core principles and values, the institutionalization of many new (and arguably good) practices across the education and training system and an impact on industry. However, he also notes that many unit standards had been generated but remained unused, improvements in assessment were limited, and the level descriptors and the recognition of prior achievement had still to prove themselves.

In terms of the criteria of short-term success discussed earlier, the NQF has had a mixed record. Many qualifications have remained outside the framework, or have been registered only as 'provider' qualifications and not as qualifications designed according to the NQF's own unit-standards-based approach. Conversely, many new unit standards remained unused. The NQF lost the support of a number of stakeholders, particularly in the school and HE sectors, but also some business interests opposed to regulation, complexity and cost. And it underwent a change in strategy in 2008-09, following a period of review and policy indecision which began within a year or two of the framework being established (Allais 2007).

The South African NQF is probably the most intensively studied, debated and contested of any comprehensive framework. There is a singularly rich critical literature on the NQF, much of it devoted to analyses of where it went wrong. This offers a variety of explanations, some of which focus on the NQF's underlying strategy and others on the way it was implemented.

One set of explanations attributes the problems to the NQF's tight design, based on a narrow concept of learning outcomes expressed through unit standards, and the insistence on applying this model universally. One argument claims that this version of a 'pure' outcomes model was unworkable because it made impossible assumptions about the transparency and specificity of learning outcomes; attempts to make this model work merely resulted in increased bureaucracy and complexity (Allais 2007). Another argument suggests that although the NQF curriculum and assessment model might have been appropriate for some qualifications, it was unsuited to many types of learning, and especially to discipline-based learning in upper-secondary and higher education (Ensor 2003); this argument was reflected in the government's proposals, following the Study Team report, for a more differentiated 'interdependent NQF system' (RSA 2003). Another variant focuses on political issues: the tight outcomes-based approach was resisted because it entailed central control over the content and assessment of learning. The perception that the NQF was too tight led to the recent decision to re-design it as three sub-frameworks within a much looser over-arching framework.

Another set of explanations point out that the NQF lacked policy breadth. Too much was expected of the NQF alone. As the Study Team pointed out, successful qualifications reforms elsewhere have been linked to institutional reforms, improved resources and a focus on capacity building, features largely absent in South Africa (RSA 2002). Indeed, far from complementing the NQF, many subsequent policy decisions undermined its implementation, for example, by creating a confused distribution of responsibilities and denying SAQA the powers it needed to enforce its own decisions (Allais 2007). Above all, policy breadth was denied by the division - and frequent opposition - between the two responsible government Departments, Education and Labour. Several commentators have attributed the problems of the NQF primarily to this division, and to the consequent weaknesses of central decision-making (Mukora 2006).

Other explanations refer to problems of implementation, including the proliferation of organizations set up to manage the different functions of the NQF, the lack of skilled staff to run these organizations, the inadequate resources and dependence on donors, the involvement of some stakeholders in the detailed specification of the NQF and the failure to make proper use of expertise, to problems of leadership, and so on.

The NQF was effectively re-launched by an Act of 2008 which established it as a looser, more differentiated, more 'bottom-up' framework, with more input from educational institutions. It is based on three relatively autonomous sub-frameworks covering higher education, general and further education and training and occupations. It retains its transformational aims, at least formally, but in other respects it now more closely resembles a reforming framework.

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is an example of a reforming framework, intermediate between the Scottish and (early) South African NQFs, but closer to the former. Launched in 2003, under the terms of an Act of 1999, it has broad aims which include supporting lifelong learning and cultural change, promoting access, transfer and progression, promoting quality and standards, rationalizing existing provision and extending this provision where necessary (NQAI 2008). It is a comprehensive, outcomes-based, qualifications-based framework, with ten levels, a number of 'award types', but a relatively loose structure which, like the SCQF, embraces tighter sub-frameworks. Its central leadership resembles the South African NQF more than the SCQF. There is wide participation from stakeholders, but the Framework is led by a central

agency, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), together with two Awards Councils (the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council: FETAC and HETAC) which lead developments in their respective sectors. It has wider transformational aims than the SCQF: it has more specific objectives with respect to extending the quality and range of provision, and it is itself expected to drive changes, for example, through enforcing guidelines on access, transfer and progression (NQAI 2003), rather than simply providing a tool whose use depends on other drivers. On the other hand it is less transformational than the South African NQF; it starts from the existing system, it builds on previous reforms (although these cover a shorter time period than the reforms which preceded the SCQF), and education and training providers have been key stakeholders (Granville 2003).

This continuity with previous practice meant that existing awards could be placed in the framework on a best-fit basis before they were fully re-designed in terms of framework standards and criteria. As a result, and similar to developments in Scotland, there is an incremental, iterative and sometimes lengthy process whereby existing practice is brought into line with the framework and vice versa. This process takes place at a national level within each sector of education and training (see below), but it also occurred at an institutional or programme level as the framework came to be used as a reference point for periodic processes of programme review, qualifications re-design and the development of new awards. Continuity with past practice, and the need to retain the support of stakeholders, has resulted in some apparently anomalous or arbitrary decisions, for example, the placement of all craft awards at the same framework level despite differences in their level of demand. It has also resulted in inconsistencies in nomenclature, and in a classification of 'award types' which some users of the framework have found difficult to understand. Such decisions reflect political and pragmatic realities, but are seen to threaten confidence in the NFQ; the NQAI is initiating a process to iron them out.

Some of these inconsistencies reflect the different approaches pursued with sectors. Even more than the SCQF, the Irish NFQ varies across its sub-frameworks. It has a stronger transformational role in respect of the two sub-frameworks led respectively by FETAC and HETAC, than in universities and especially schools where its impact has been small. HETAC and FETAC themselves pursue contrasting strategies. HETAC moved quickly to re-cast existing qualifications in line with the framework, and delegated responsibilities to the larger providers in its sector. This enabled awards quickly to become formally compatible with the framework, but at the cost of 'compliance' rather than deeper implementation of the new approach (HETAC 2008). FETAC maintained the existing standards and procedures pending a more root-and-branch reform to be achieved through a new Common Awards System, which sets standards and criteria for all qualifications in its sector, although this is taking longer to introduce. The NFQ has no regulatory role with respect to schools or universities. However the mutually-reinforcing impacts of the NFQ and the Bologna process have stimulated parallel and complementary change in the university sector. This illustrates how a reforming framework also relies upon other 'drivers' of change, in this case international pressures. However, with respect to other framework objectives, such as access, transfer and progression, there is concern to ensure that other measures and national policies, for example, public-sector employment practices, are consistent in their support of the NFQ.

The early emphasis on development within sectors may have been partly at the expense of integration across sectors. Quality assurance arrangements, award titles and communications strategies vary across sectors; the FETAC brand tends to be better known than the framework brand among some users in its sector (FETAC 2008). As in Scotland, the balance between development within sub-frameworks and integration into a national framework may change over successive stages of the reform. The imminent amalgamation of the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC may signal a shift in emphasis towards system-wide integration, in contrast to the change of emphasis in South Africa developments, but parallel to that in Scotland.

The Irish NFQ demonstrates the benefits of stakeholder involvement and a consensual approach. The depth of implementation and impact of the NFQ are variable, consistent with its reforming role and ambitions varying across sub-frameworks. Public awareness and understanding are increasing slowly and (as in Scotland) tend to grow in line with the practical use of the framework. Within education institutions, awareness and understanding of the learning-outcomes approach are also increasing slowly but appear to fall short of total cultural change. There is some frustration with the time taken for impacts to appear, and (again as in Scotland) the management of expectations is a continuous challenge. Nevertheless, despite having somewhat greater ambitions than the SCQF, the Irish NFQ, as a reforming framework, is also widely perceived to be successful. Some European countries see it as a more useful model than the SCQF because it does not assume a quarter-century of preceding reform.

The process of introducing an NQF

These three examples, together with the experience of other early frameworks, show that the process of introducing an NQF has technical, social and political dimensions.

The technical dimension probably receives the most attention in the development process and in 'how-to' guides for policy-makers introducing NQFs. It embraces such aspects of NQF development and implementation as specifying learning outcomes and descriptors based on them, establishing criteria and procedures for placing qualifications in the framework, introducing systems for defining standards and assuring quality, defining principles of credit transfer and progression and procedures for enforcing these principles, and so on. The experience of the first-generation frameworks confirms that technical features are important. If, for example, qualifications are placed at inconsistent or arbitrary levels in the framework, or if there are no mechanisms for ensuring that credit transfer or progression conform to framework principles, then confidence in the framework will be undermined. The first-generation frameworks also demonstrate that frameworks that are too tight may face difficulties. The 'failures' of NQFs in England, New Zealand and South Africa are attributed to the imposition of a tight and uniform model across diverse types of learning and/or to the limitations of a learning-outcomes approach which makes impossible assumptions about transparency and specificity (Wolf 1995, Smithers 1997, Ensor 2003, Allais 2007). Tight frameworks have typically become looser over time, as in the case of South Africa and the Higher Still sub-framework in Scotland, or they have narrowed their scope and become sub-frameworks of a larger framework or register, as in the case of the New Zealand NQF and English NVQs. The tension between the tightness of a framework and its comprehensive coverage is one of the most consistent generalizations from the experience of early NQFs.

The social (cultural and institutional) dimension of introducing an NQF reflects the wide-ranging nature of the changes involved. An NQF provides a new 'national language' of learning, to be spoken by users and stakeholders as well as providers. It takes time for this language to become widely spoken and understood. In all three case-study countries, awareness and understanding of the framework have spread only as people engaged directly with it. There is a similarly long process of cultural change as programme designs, pedagogies and assessment are aligned with framework criteria and with their underpinning principles. Introducing an NQF involves building trust in qualifications and confidence that they match their descriptions in the framework – for example, that qualifications placed at the same level are indeed comparable (Young 2002, Coles and Oates 2004). And it involves bringing the 'institutional logics' of education and training into line with the 'intrinsic logic' expressed in NQF criteria and principles. The intrinsic logic of successive Scottish reforms was to broaden access, provide flexible opportunities for credit transfer and progression, establish parity of esteem for all learning at a given level and provide a progression ladder based on the capacity to learn. However this conflicted with institutional logics which imposed barriers to access and progression, offered whole programmes rather

than transfer credit, sustained informal hierarchies of knowledge, discriminated on ascriptive grounds and used qualifications to ration educational and labour-market opportunities rather than to support progression (Croxford et al. 1991, Raffe et al. 2007). The introduction of an NQF involves aligning institutional logics of this kind with the intrinsic logic of a framework.

Institutional logics have ‘macro’ as well as ‘micro’ aspects (Young 2002). The process of introducing an NQF will depend on how closely it is supported by wider social and economic factors as changes in the workplace and in employers’ demand for qualifications, the changing patterns of social and occupational mobility and the extension of market principles and of neo-liberal ideas (Allais 2003; Philips 2003). ‘Macro’ factors may hamper the introduction of NQFs. For example, the intrinsic logic of NQFs tends to assume that educational selectors use qualifications as indicators of the capacity to learn at higher levels and that employers use them as indicators of human capital (for example, EC 2005). But in practice qualifications may more often be used to ration scarce places in education and employment and to determine a hierarchy of attainment: for social selection and screening rather than to indicate learning potential or human capital. In Ireland this contrast is reflected in the tension between the framework principle that progression should be based on the capacity to succeed, and the use of a ‘points system’ based on school Leaving Certificate grades to allocate higher education places. CEDEFOP (2008, p. 33) attributes the relatively small influence of learning outcomes on European upper-secondary general education to the fact that this sector’s ‘educative function ... can be overshadowed by the selective function’.

Introducing an NQF also has a political dimension: it involves struggle and contestation. This is true of any educational reform, but it is particularly true of NQFs because of their systemic nature, and because they often aim to regulate the system or to redistribute power, for example, in favour of learners or employers. And even when they offer little threat to the established order, as in Scotland, this may reflect the pre-emptive influence of powerful interests such as higher education which assume leadership of the reform and thereby control its direction. In other words, the political character of the introduction of an NQF may be concealed. It may be concealed in other ways: political opposition may be expressed in purely technical terms.

The role of stakeholders is therefore critical. Which stakeholders are engaged, and their respective roles and influence, will vary across countries, but the three case studies suggest two general points. First, the social nature of the process and its dependence on institutional logics means that the engagement and support of education and training providers, especially universities, are critical for the successful introduction of a comprehensive NQF. Higher education interests led the Scottish framework, supported the Irish one but at times felt marginalized from that in South Africa. Universities’ support for the Irish framework, which was led by a strong central agency, partly reflected the consultative style of its introduction, but also reflected their perceived self-interest in engaging with the Bologna process which was closely coordinated with the NQF.

Second, stakeholder engagement is not sufficient. An NQF is a unifying instrument, designed to enhance the transparency and coherence of education and training; it therefore requires mechanisms for coordination and for achieving coherence across a diverse system. This can be in tension with the need for stakeholder engagement. It typically privileges stakeholders with a system-wide frame of reference (such as higher education), and those which are best organized nationally. It also privileges sectoral and institutional leaderships, who tend to be much more actively engaged with the early stages of framework development than, say, teachers and lecturers. But even where (as in Scotland) leadership is shared by well-organized stakeholder groups, co-ordination can become too weak; a new SCQF management structure was needed to retain momentum.

These three dimensions - technical, social and political - are interrelated. In particular, the technical aspects of introducing an NQF cannot be separated from the social and political aspects. Technical instruments such as quality assurance and the 'correct' application of a learning-outcomes approach are blunt instruments of change, whose effective use depends on their social and political context. Quality assurance systems have to be socially and culturally rooted if they are not to become mere exercises in box-ticking and compliance; and they are unlikely to generate public confidence in qualifications if this is not also supported by experience, usage and the standing of providers or awarding bodies. Learning outcomes similarly depend on the context in which they are used (Oates 2004). Their application requires professional judgements and 'external references and benchmarks' (SCQF 2007, Hart 2009), and they are unlikely on their own to challenge deep-rooted public judgements of the standing or level of education. As the Irish and Scottish frameworks showed, the placement of qualifications depends upon pragmatic as well as technical judgements. Far from being a neutral, technical instrument, learning outcomes and level descriptors are built on compromise and pragmatism, as illustrated by the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer 2007) and by the way the Bologna framework evolved from an input-based framework of higher education cycles to one based on learning outcomes. And the problems experienced by tight NQFs similarly have a political aspect: tight frameworks restrict the types of knowledge acquired through education and training, and they curb the freedom of educational institutions to shape curricula, pedagogies and assessment. They therefore meet resistance.

Once we recognize that the introduction of an NQF has social and political as well as technical dimensions, it becomes clear why it needs to be seen as a dynamic process and not as a simple matter of correct specification, design and installation. The social and political issues discussed above involve dynamic processes of institutional and cultural change, the development of trust, of the resolution of tensions, and so on. A 'successful' framework needs to be introduced in a way that respects their social and political dimensions and their dynamic character. In the next section, I propose a normative model of change: a model which NQF implementers need to follow if they are to be successful.

A normative model of change

On the basis of the early frameworks, we can identify at least eight conditions for success in the process of introducing an NQF.

- **Long time scales**
Developing framework standards and procedures may take time, but the social processes involved in their application typically take much longer. The framework will only enter the language of learning and promote cultural change over time, and with use. Similarly, confidence and trust can only develop over time and with experience of using qualifications in the framework. In all three case studies, evaluations or reviews reported dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change. All frameworks face a challenge to manage expectations, to prevent implementation from being rushed and superficial, but also to avoid inertia and obstruction.
- **Stakeholder involvement and partnership**
Stakeholder involvement and partnership, if not ownership, is critical for success. It is necessary in order to populate the framework, to change institutional logics and to ensure that implementation of the framework goes beyond mere compliance. If an NQF aims to apply common principles across an education and training system, its introduction will be helped by achieving relative consensus, which in turn may depend upon engaging the most powerful stakeholders. This in turn means that pragmatic compromises are involved in framework development – for example, in decisions about the level at which qualifications are placed in the framework. The relative power of different stakeholders will vary

according to framework goals, but the support of education and training interests, and especially higher education, is critical for the success of a comprehensive framework; the support of employers is critical for a VET framework. Introducing an NQF will be much harder in countries where stakeholders are not well organized, for example, where there is a weak tradition of civil society or where most employers are small or family enterprises.

- **Effective mechanisms for coordination**

A framework is an instrument for unifying an education and training system, or a sector of one, and therefore needs mechanisms for coordination, for aggregating the interests of stakeholders, for maintaining the momentum for change, for managing the iterative processes described below and, where necessary, compensating for the weakness of stakeholder organizations.

- **A loose but variable design**

A framework needs to be loose enough to accommodate different types of learning, to fit different institutional logics and to secure the engagement of stakeholders, especially providers, who may feel threatened by a tight framework. The overall framework needs to be loose but it may vary across sub-frameworks, some of which may require much tighter arrangements. It may also vary over time, in response to changing policy environments, as in South Africa. In both cases the variation in tightness reflects political and institutional as well as technical and epistemological criteria.

- **Labour-market demands**

The intrinsic logic of the framework needs to be aligned with the institutional logic, not only of the education and training system, but also of the labour market. This can be difficult. It typically requires, among other things, that skills are strongly in demand in the labour market, that employers use qualifications as a means of expressing this demand, and that their use of qualifications is not ‘crowded out’ or distorted by other institutional logics such as those associated with wage determination processes, credentialism or the use of qualifications to screen for ability.

- **Iterative alignment**

The process of mutual accommodation of NQF and practice, of aligning a framework with institutional logics and educational practices, occurs iteratively. For example, educational programmes are progressively aligned with the framework as this is used as a tool in programme review and re-design; conversely, the framework may be modified in the light of issues raised by its application in practice, for example, by adding level descriptors for different types of learning outcomes. A similar iterative process is needed to align technical with social/political considerations, for example, to resolve anomalies arising from the pragmatic compromises mentioned above.

- **Balance between sub-framework development and framework-wide development**

A further aspect of ‘iterative’ development concerns the balance between development processes within sectors (or sub-frameworks) and the development of coherent system-wide arrangements. The emphasis is likely to shift between these two over time. In some countries, as in Scotland, NQFs may develop initially as unconnected sectoral frameworks, but based on common principles, which may allow for their eventual integration. This may have implications for the relative influence of stakeholders.

- **Policy breadth**

The implementation and impact of a framework will depend on its alignment with national policy, institutional priorities and other contextual pressures. An NQF may provide a new intrinsic logic, but other measures may be needed to change the institutional logics which determine its use. The South African experience suggests that consistency as well as breadth of policy is important. Policies in support of an NQF need to be consistent across different branches of government, such as education and labour ministries. And the slow, incremental process of introducing an NQF may be frustrated by abrupt changes in national policy, for example, following a change in government.

Earlier in this paper, I noted that transformational frameworks tended to have the greatest difficulties of implementation. This model of change helps to explain why. It points to a tension between the radical *aims* of many NQFs and their need for a *process* of implementation that is the opposite of radical: long-term, incremental, iterative and reasonably consensual, in which NQFs provide tools for change but are not expected to drive it. Successful NQFs develop incrementally and organically. They depend on processes of trust-building, cultural and institutional change that can only occur incrementally and through experience, starting from existing institutions and practices. They need the support and engagement of institutions and organizations with a stake in the existing system. They need a loose, weakly prescriptive design. They may require development to proceed within sub-frameworks with only loose framework-wide coordination. They need other change agents to make them effective. All these factors could be seen to restrict the transformative capacity of NQFs and suggest why transformational frameworks have been less successful - or, at least, why they have encountered greater difficulties - than communications frameworks.

However, the typology is a continuum, not a dichotomy. There are intermediate possibilities between the extremes of a communications framework and a transformational framework. Reforming frameworks, as the Irish example suggests, may get the best of both worlds. And all three case studies show how the character of an NQF may vary across sub-frameworks and over time. The Scottish framework did not need to be transformative or even strongly reforming because it built on earlier reforms which created reforming sub-frameworks with tighter specifications and at least relatively top-down processes of implementation. And it could be argued that the weakness of existing institutions in South Africa made the NQF's radical break with what went before a necessary part of the change process, a short sharp shock that paved the way for the more reforming model of framework now being introduced. In effect, the transformational framework helped to re-define the 'existing system' from which a more incremental model of change could then start. (This is not to deny that the original NQF may have had weaknesses of design and implementation, lacked policy breadth, and suffered planning blight during the prolonged transition to a reforming framework.)

What all this suggests is that the success of a framework depends primarily on its model of change, together with key features of its design; it is not simply an inverse reflection of the scale of its ambition. Even radical transformations of education and training may be achieved through NQFs that are introduced in a manner that is long term, incremental (as far as is possible given the range and capacity of existing institutions), iterative and reasonably consensual, with variation across sub-frameworks and over time, and with supportive policies and measures to drive implementation and use of the framework.

Discussion

The model described above is based largely on the experience of early NQFs and is tentative for a number of reasons. First, there are few early frameworks from which to generalize. The model draws on the experience of other countries' NQFs (notably England and New Zealand) in addition to the three case studies, but it still rests on a very narrow empirical base. Cross-national studies frequently find that national typologies based on a small sample of countries work much less well when applied to a larger sample (for example, Gallie 2007, Raffe 2008). Second, even this small sample is unrepresentative of countries which have more recently decided to develop NQFs. It primarily consists of high-income, anglophone countries with open, loosely-regulated economies and with developed education and training systems influenced by liberal, anglophone traditions. Third, although there was substantial mutual influence among the early frameworks, they were developed in an international context very different from that of later frameworks which have been more directly influenced by regional meta-frameworks, by international bodies and donor

organizations or more simply by a fear of being left behind in the race to acquire an NQF. And finally, the evidence even from the early starters is inconclusive. Not only have the full impacts and consequences yet to appear, but the explanation of the experience to date is contested, as the South African example illustrates. And the dynamic model proposed above, with its emphasis on organic, holistic relationships and lengthy time scales, suggests that cause-and-effect models can never be easy to apply to the introduction of NQFs.

The conclusions of this paper are therefore tentative, to be tested against the experience of newer frameworks as well as further experience and further analysis of the early frameworks. It is tentative for a further reason. Earlier in this paper, I contrasted a notion of policy borrowing, based on the assumption that 'best practice' can be transferred across national contexts, with a broader notion of policy learning which recognizes a wider range of purposes of cross-national comparisons. These purposes include increasing national self-awareness, identifying global trends and pressures, clarifying policy options and the issues that they typically raise, and helping to understand the processes of educational change. Commentators who have worked with NQFs in different countries typically draw attention to differences in their contexts, purposes and strategies; few would advocate a single model of best practice applicable to all NQFs. Yet, after a fashion, this is what this paper has done: it has proposed a normative model of change which, albeit stated in general terms, is claimed to be applicable to all NQFs. The question therefore arises: does the normative model of change apply to all NQFs in all contexts?

In both Ireland and Scotland, the relative success of the framework, and the model by which it is implemented, may be associated with a number of contextual factors. These include:

- a policy culture and policy style that already had, in varying degrees, several characteristics of the normative model: policy continuity and incrementalism, consensus, producer dominance and partnership;
- small scale (populations of 4 and 5 million respectively);
- relatively uniform and transparent institutional arrangements, which facilitate the task of aligning 'institutional logics' with frameworks and their technical requirements;
- reasonably well-organized stakeholder groups, especially among providers, with the capacity to act in concert;
- well-developed education and training institutions, and previous policies to increase their coherence, on which an incremental model of change could build;
- a developed economy, and a large formal labour market in which qualifications are a recognized currency; and
- the resources (including expertise, skills, organizational capacity and finances) to establish an NQF.

These factors contributed to the 'success' of the Irish and Scottish frameworks, in part, because they made it easier to adopt the normative model of change described above.

The first step in further developing a dynamic conceptual model of NQFs is to identify the most important features of the context in which an NQF is introduced, starting from the above list. The second step is to develop a more detailed typology of the processes of NQF implementation, in order to see how these might vary in relation to the contextual factors. This could start from the variable features of the normative model of change outlined in this paper. For example, in comparing NQFs it may be important to consider:

- the role and influence of different stakeholder groups, with particular reference to the relative influence of central authorities, education/training institutions and employers and other stakeholders, and to how strongly they are organized and resourced at national level;

- the emphasis on development at sectoral or sub-framework compared with system-wide level. This in turn has implications for the capacity to engage stakeholders who may lack a system-wide frame of reference, and it may affect such processes as the development of awareness and trust and the adaptation of institutional logics. In both Ireland and Scotland, the emphasis switched from sub-frameworks to the comprehensive framework; the same pattern is evident in some newer frameworks such as Romania, where common principles underlie the development of separate VET and HE frameworks, which may be integrated at some future date (Hart and Rogojinaru 2007). In South Africa, the reverse trend occurred;
- similarly, the changing balance of tighter sub-frameworks and looser over-arching frameworks;
- the nature of the iterative alignment of existing qualifications and practice with the framework. A key variable suggested by the three NQFs reviewed above is the relation between ‘legacy qualifications’ provisionally accommodated in the framework and new qualifications that fully conform to its criteria. The process of iterative alignment will be different in frameworks where legacy qualifications are: (i) not formally distinguished, as in Scotland; (ii) modified, over time, to form framework-compliant qualifications as in some sub-frameworks in Ireland; or (iii) replaced by new qualifications, as was the intention in South Africa;
- policy breadth. Not only is policy breadth - the extent to which a framework is complemented by other policies - a variable, but the nature of complementary policies is itself an important source of variation. A similar typology to Figure 1 may be applied to these policies. Thus, the process of introducing an NQF may be very different depending on whether the framework is intended to support: (i) policies to rationalize and coordinate an existing education and training system; or (ii) policies to effect radical change in an existing system; or (iii) policies to develop a substantially new system (or a new sub-system such as VET).

Acknowledgements

An earlier and shorter version of this working paper appeared as CES Briefing No. 48 under the title, “Can national qualifications frameworks be used to change education and training systems? (<http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk>). This Briefing was in turn based on a presentation to the SCQF Partnership International Conference in March 2009. I am grateful to Stephanie Allais, Arjen Deij, John Hart, James Keevy and Michael Young for helpful comments on various drafts, and to participants at the ILO project meeting in June/July 2009 for further discussions. Responsibility for judgements and opinions in the chapter is mine alone. – David Raffe.

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