4.4 National Qualifications Frameworks

This section looks at the underpinning principles of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs): their purposes, and the purposes of qualifications; the recognition of knowledge and skills in their structure; and the process of their development.

4.4.1 The role of NQFs

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are broad and abstract descriptive maps of the structure of qualifications within national education systems designed to enable national level comparisons to be made about the equivalence of different qualifications.

However, two different approaches to the construction of qualification maps may be discerned: one (mainly Euro) prefers a register approach (a descriptive model) of 'frameworks of communication'; the other (mainly Anglo) is outcomes-based and favours regulatory frameworks (a prescriptive model) (Young, 2007).

A finer distinction may be made between the orientations of qualifications frameworks (Raffe, 2009a):

- 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 rationalise it, improve its coherence, to encourage access and to highlight opportunities for transfer and progression between programs.
- 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 explict 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 programs.

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The experience of early NQFs (e.g. New Zealand, South Africa) has been that 'transformational frameworks' have been the least successful, if success is assessed as those frameworks 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 (Raffe, 2009a).

4.4.2 Assumptions about knowledge in NQFs

Young (2003) has identified six main assumptions underpinning the development of NQFs:

i. it is possible to describe all qualifications in terms of a single set of criteria;

ii. all qualifications can be ranked on a single hierarchy, and it is possible to develop a single set of levels—each with its distinct level descriptor—which apply equally to all of the types of accredited learning and all qualifications;

iii. all qualifications can be described and assessed in terms of learning outcomes that are independent of the site, the form of provision and the type of pedagogy and curriculum through which they are achieved;

iv. all qualifications can, at least in principle, be divided into elements which can (a) be located on levels using the same descriptors and (b) ascribed a volume of learning in terms of notional learning hours (or the equivalent) and therefore assigned a 'credit rating';

v. such a framework provides a set of benchmarks against which learning can be assessed and accredited;

vi. such a framework provides the basis of a learner-centred system of qualifications in which only the learner's own performance would inhibit his or her progress.

These assumptions are radical, but perhaps also illusory in "attempting to classify the unclassifiable" (Blackmur, 2004). Many of the key decisions (e.g. how many levels) are arbitrary (Blackmur, 2004). When outcome statements are not linked to the activities that learners have engaged in, they need to be highly specified, and the need for specificity leads to a narrowing of outcomes and a trivialisation of assessment (Young, Allais & Raffe 2009).

As noted earlier, qualifications discriminate among individuals (Keating, 2008) and play a gatekeeper role in legitimating practice in the professions (Menand, 2010).With a focus on the purposes of qualifications, Keating (2008) distinguishes between the two main traditions underpinning 'academic qualifications' on the one hand and 'vocational qualifications' on the other hand, and identifies the emergence of a third. He suggests that "a robust national qualifications system would be one that maximised and achieved an appropriate balance between these purposes" (Keating, 2008).

The mainly "cultural" purposes of academic qualifications, which are closely attached to the institutions that award them, and are "based upon recognised disciplines in their construct" are seen to be "located dually in the passing on and development of the disciplines, and in broader social purpose associated with social structures and interactions, and beliefs and understandings including citizenship" (Keating, 2008).

In contrast, the human capital development purpose of vocational qualifications gives them a different character, in that they are standards-based testifiers to competence:

> *"Qualifications that meet this purpose have occupational and industry foci and are designed to control occupational entry and standards and to support industry productivity. Typically their currency is in the form of standards-based knowledge and skills. They may or may not be expressed as competencies. The currency is derived from occupational and industrial recognition, trust and use. Recognition can be localised geographically or more widely distributed. A qualification can have a monopoly of this recognition or share it with other qualifications"* (Keating, 2008).

Similarly, Muller (2009) distinguishes between "conceptual coherence" and "contextual coherence" in curriculum. The former is the epistemological core of a discipline, with a hierarchy of abstraction and conceptual difficulty, and involves sequential learning, where higher order understandings depend on prerequisite knowledge underpinnings. The latter is "segmentally connected, where each segment is adequate to a context, sufficient to a purpose" (Muller, 2009). Muller explores the relative mix of conceptual and contextual coherence features for different professional fields, and notes that there are differences within as well as between each kind.

Keating (2008) observes a third purpose for qualifications emerging from the lifelong learning agenda. This purpose he sees as requiring "generalist or platform qualities of qualifications as well as linkages between qualifications"

> *"Qualifications that meet this purpose need to have broad recognition and links with other qualifications at the entry levels and as a bonus through credit. They gain their currency through their platform of general learning or through their capacity to discriminate or create hierarchies, depending upon the nature of and their relationship with their users. There is an obvious tension here"* (Keating, 2008).

Additionally, the increasing atomisation of learning through modularised bite-size-bits, and just-in-time units, has provided "a more conducive platform for recognition of learning outside the formal processes that are typically defined by qualifications" (Keating, 2008). Consequently, contemporary designers of qualifications frameworks are having to wrestle with enigmatic relationships. A particular impetus is being given by governments, for economic purposes, and backed by employer groups and unions, to the development of arrangements that focus on the human capital and lifelong learning purposes, typically to the neglect of, or even disdain for, cultural purposes. And when the cultural ingredients of sequential learning in discipline frameworks are poured into the stew of segmented bits they can lose their shape and flavour.

One might argue with Muller's assumption of tight sequentiality, or with Keating's distinction between academic and vocational qualifications; learning is not always linear, and many higher education qualifications are, and have long been, vocational in purpose, whether in the fields of theology, medicine, engineering, law or accounting. Moreover, disciplinary cores fracture or even disintegrate periodically (Lazerson, 2010) and also reconstitute themselves over time (Menand, 2010). The important difference is what defines learning. The premise is that qualifications for professional practice obtained in academic environments are different in kind, by virtue of the disciplinary framework for learning and the cultural context of learning, than qualifications obtained in other ways.

A further difference is important; learning in universities, particularly where research is an integral part of the culture, is defined by an understanding of provisional knowledge. University learning is not merely about mastering what is known, but about developing the ability to create intellectual maps for dealing with the unknown and unpredictable, and for discerning falsity.

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In the narrow discourse of 'relevance' these values and perspectives may be dismissed as unfashionable if not elitist or self-indulgent. However, the massification of higher education in itself does not diminish their importance, even though it may make their advocacy less popular.

Noting that "all qualifications carry value—for the graduates and for the users", Keating has distinguished between 'intrinsic' and 'exchange' value (Keating, 2008):

> *"The intrinsic value is the personal benefit and status that a qualification gives to the learner, the platform and motivation it gives for further learning, and the wider social value of an educated citizenry. The exchange value is realised in the employment market and in access to further formal learning. Both intrinsic and exchange value need to have a base in knowledge"* (Keating, 2008).

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Keating argues that "qualifications must have relational qualities, and it is the nature of the relational aspects of the knowledge that is central to the intrinsic and the exchange value of the knowledge and the qualification (and) "the relational aspects of qualifications are drawn from their purposes and constructs" (Keating, 2008). Academic qualifications are seen to have a relational quality drawn from the disciplinary structures of knowledge, whereas the relational quality of vocational qualifications is drawn from work practices, and "the value of the recognition is its exchange capacity in the workplace or labour market" (Keating, 2008). From this perspective he argues that NQFs cannot by central mandate fuse fundamental differences in the nature of the knowledge (including skills) that qualifications represent, and the nature of the learning that has led to the knowledge:

"It seems unlikely, if not impossible, that they can be imposed from above. In one sense this is possible through a mix and match of different 'chunks' of learning. However, such processes would deny the historical and social processes of the formation of qualifications. As the paper has attempted to outline these processes and as a consequence the relational aspects are different—and this needs to be so. This is the rub—and the central problem for an NQF—and especially a single NQF" (Keating, 2008).

Reflecting on the failure of the South African Qualifications Framework to achieve its aspirations, including its aims for upward social mobility through articulation, Muller (2009) notes that general rules are not appropriate; rather different qualification pathways require different arrangements:

"For each qualification pathway, the following must, from a knowledge perspective, be determined: What is the degree of specialisation required? What are the conceptual demands of the knowledge to be acquired? The greater the degree of specialisation, the more sequence matters, the more specific will the entry levels of competence have to be. If these are not in place, then bridging courses may be needed to supply them" Muller, 2009).

Wheelahan (2007) points to the hollowness of learning that deprives learners of the opportunity to develop a capacity to reason and imagine:

"A focus on specific content for a specific context means that the meaning of that content is exhausted by the context. Unless students have access to the generative principles of disciplinary knowledge, they are not able to transcend the particular context. Students need to know how these complex bodies of knowledge fit together if they are to decide what knowledge is relevant for a particular purpose, and if they are to have the capacity to transcend the present to imagine the future. Knowledge is not under their control. This simultaneously denies them epistemic access to the structures of knowledge relevant in their field and social access to the 'unthinkable'" (Wheelahan, 2007).

A major concern is the over-generalisation of competency-based training (CBT) assumptions in the construction of expectations of qualifications by focusing on the knowledge and skills that people need to 'do' their job, and by insisting that assessment be directly aligned with these outcomes (Wheelahan, 2007). This approach does most damage to those most socially disadvantaged (Allais, 2003).

4.4.3 Learning about change management in the development of NQFs

Notwithstanding the conceptual and technical difficulties with the proposed 'strengthening' of the AQF, a serious problem with the approach of the AQFC is its management of the process of change. It seems more focused on 'borrowing' from overseas frameworks than 'learning' from their experiences of success and failure (Chakroun, 2010). Despite all of the rhetorical claims about the virtues and benefits of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), there is very little empirical support for their realisation (Tuck, 2007; Keating, 2008), and only limited evaluative knowledge to draw upon. The main evaluations relate to the Scottish, Irish and South African NQFs (Raffe, 2009b; Raffe, 2009c; Allais, 2003; Allais, 2007).

The experience of first-generation NQFs suggests that effective implementation requires long time scales, institutional embedding, stakeholder involvement, an iterative process of development, a loose design, and complementary policy measures (Raffe, 2009b). NQFs need to develop incrementally in relation to existing institutions and practices, even though this reduces their transformational potential (Raffe, 2009c). The starting point is that the introduction of an effective NQF has to be understood as a dynamic process, and that it is a social and political process as much as (or more than) a technical process, in that it involves:

- maintaining and/or building trust in qualifications and confidence in their underpinning standards and processes;
- aligning the 'intrinsic logic' of an NQF with the 'institutional logics' of the education and training system;
- a similar alignment with the institutional logic of the labour market: the ways in which employers use qualifications should correspond to the NQF rationale;
- widespread understanding and fluent use of the 'language' of learning represented by an NQF;
- cultural change, for example in basing pedagogies around learning outcomes;

- accommodating the interests of stakeholders, including education and training providers, and reconciling differences among them (Raffe, 2009c).

One of the few evaluative studies of NQF implementation is the Framework Implementation and Impact Study of the Irish NFQ in 2008-09 (Collins et al. 2009). Features of the Irish NQF are outlined in Box 46. The Irish NFQ can properly be seen as a reforming framework; an attempt to achieve substantial change through an evolutionary process.

Box 46. The Irish National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

"The Irish NQF was launched in 2003 under the terms of an Act of 1999. Its broad aims include supporting lifelong learning and cultural change, promoting access, transfer and progression, promoting quality and standards, rationalising existing provision and extending this provision where necessary. It is led by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), which oversees the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) which award qualifications in non-university higher education and in other post-school education and training (ET) respectively. It builds on, and extends, earlier measures to reform and rationalise qualifications in these two sectors. It is a comprehensive, outcomes-based, qualifications-based framework, with ten levels and a number of 'award types'. The NFQ is a relatively loose framework, in the sense that it does not impose tightly prescriptive conditions for the qualifications within it, although it contains tighter sub-frameworks such as the Common Awards System being introduced by FETAC. However, guidelines for quality assurance and for access, transfer and progression are intended to cover all programmes and qualifications in the framework. The approach to implementation has varied across sectors, although the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC are to be amalgamated and the emphasis may shift from development within sectors to integration across them. The impact of the NFQ has also varied across sectors. It is greatest in the sector led by FETAC, which is re-modelling qualifications through its Common Awards System, filling gaps in provision and creating new pathways and progression routes. The framework also has a regulatory role in the HETAC sector, where more powers are delegated to ET institutions. The NFQ has no regulatory role with respect to schools or universities. It has had least impact in the school sector, but its close alignment with the Bologna framework has helped it to become established in universities."

Raffe (2009c).

There is a tension between the radical aims of many NQFs and their need for a process of implementation that is the opposite of radical: that starts from the existing education and training system and proceeds incrementally, relying on the engagement of institutions with a stake in that system.

An imposed top-down approach to qualifications prescription and alignment risks breaking the communities of trust that underpin the integrity of qualifications (Young, 2007), privileging one set of purposes for learning (Wheelahan, 2009), and ignoring the distributed nature of ownership of qualifications (Keating, 2008), thereby constraining the quality of higher education.

"…the most successful NQFs appear to be those with the most modest ambitions for system change."

In line with the experiences in Scotland and Ireland, the South African NQF has been modified to be more modest in its ambitions (Keevy, 2010), taking note of the caution that NQFs designed to achieve the most change will be the least successful:

> *"The experience of these (Scottish and Irish) frameworks points to a paradox. On the one hand, many countries introduce NQFs in order to transform aspects of their education and training system, their society or their economy. On the other hand, the most successful NQFs appear to be those with the most modest ambitions for system change"* (Raffe, 2009a).