

Can National Qualifications Frameworks be Used to Change Education and Training Systems?

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As more countries commit themselves to introducing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), it becomes more important to learn from those that already have them. The experience of these countries suggests an apparent paradox: that the NQFs whose implementation is most successful are those with the most modest ambitions for system change. This *Briefing* explores this paradox. It discusses how NQFs vary in their purposes, design and implementation, and it draws on the experience of first-generation frameworks to propose a model of change that describes the development and implementation of 'successful' frameworks.

- ▶ NQFs may be placed on a continuum from 'communications' frameworks which start from the existing education and training (ET) system and seek to make it more transparent, coherent and open, to 'transformational' frameworks which start from a vision of the future system that they aim to introduce. 'Reforming' frameworks comprise an intermediate category.
- ▶ 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. NQFs need to develop incrementally and 'organically' in relation to existing institutions and practices. This reduces their transformational potential.
- ▶ NQFs can be used to achieve change in ET systems, but only types of change consistent with this model: long-term, incremental, iterative and reasonably consensual.
- ▶ The factors driving and constraining NQFs are pragmatic and political as much as they are technical.
- ▶ Our knowledge base is limited. We need research on the implementation and impact of second- and third-generation frameworks. We need to test this *Briefing's* provisional conclusion that despite their diversity a single model of change applies to all NQFs.

Box 1. Definition of qualifications framework (from OECD 2007, p.22)

A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved ... The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector ... Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

Introduction

A growing number of countries have introduced, are introducing or are planning to introduce an NQF. Some NQFs are 'partial' and cover a single sector such as higher education (HE) or vocational education and training (VET), but many countries are developing comprehensive frameworks which cover all sectors of learning. Comprehensive NQFs are the main focus of this *Briefing*.

Despite this explosion of NQFs there is limited evidence on their implementation and impact. The international literature (eg OECD 2007) has more to say about their purposes than about whether they achieve these purposes in practice. The empirical evidence is still largely based on the five first-generation frameworks identified by Tuck (2007) - Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa and England-Wales-Northern Ireland - and older second-generation frameworks such as Ireland.

The experience of these frameworks points to an apparent paradox. On the one hand, many countries introduce NQFs in order to transform aspects of their ET system, their society or their economy. On the other hand, the NQFs whose implementation appears to be most successful are those with the most modest ambitions for system change. To resolve this paradox we need to understand the diversity of NQFs and how they interact with ET systems.

Box 2: Possible purposes of NQFs

To increase transparency and improve understanding of the ET system and its parts

To promote access, transfer and progression

To provide an instrument of control or accountability

To enhance the quality of provision, or make it more consistent

To update, improve or extend standards

To promote the mobility of labour or learners

To make ET more demand-focused

To promote lifelong learning

To support wider social and economic transformation

To meet international obligations and to provide an interface with meta-frameworks

The diversity of NQFs

NQFs vary across countries in their purposes (see Box 2), structure and design. Frameworks may be comprehensive or partial. They may be tight or loose, depending on the stringency of the conditions for a qualification to be included. They may be based on whole qualifications, on smaller units or standards or on a combination of these. They may or may not include a credit measure. They may vary with respect to the number of levels, the level descriptors and whether and how they categorise fields of learning or award-types. Some commentators distinguish 'outcomes-based' from other frameworks, although most modern frameworks are based on learning outcomes and it may be more helpful to distinguish them according to the concept of learning outcome and the nature of this basis, a distinction partly captured by the contrast between tight and loose frameworks.

NQFs also vary in how they are implemented. They may be driven by national governments or agencies, by stakeholders outside the ET system, and/or by ET providers themselves. Some NQFs are compulsory and based in legislation; others are voluntary. Some NQFs are introduced in a single step; others develop incrementally over a series of reforms. And NQFs vary in the extent to which they are expected to have a 'stand-alone' impact or are part of a coherent suite of measures.

These differences of purpose, design and process are related. 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 emphasis. It starts by distinguishing three types of framework:

- A *communications framework* takes the existing ET system as its starting point and aims to make it more transparent and easier to understand, typically in order to rationalise 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, for example by enhancing quality, increasing consistency, filling gaps in provision or increasing accountability. It typically has a statutory and regulatory role.
- A **transformational framework** aims to drive radical change in the ET system. It takes a proposed future system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in this system.

These three types of framework tend to differ in design and in the process of implementation, as well as in purpose. A communications framework tends to have a loose design, to be voluntary, to be developed from the ‘bottom-up’ and led by ET institutions, and to pursue incremental change for which the NQF provides a tool but other factors (complementary policies or social and economic pressures) actually drive the change. A transformational framework 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 (see Box 3). Reforming frameworks combine features of each. Like communications frameworks they take the existing system as their starting point. But they tend to be statutory, to be tighter, to have more specific ambitions for change and to try to drive change directly.

Of the early NQFs, Scotland provides an example of a communications framework, Ireland of a reforming framework and South Africa of a transformational framework. However, NQFs’ purposes and features may change over time, as currently in South Africa, or vary across sub-frameworks as in Ireland. Most comprehensive NQFs incorporate sub-frameworks which cover sectors such as HE and VET, and many have been created by bringing sub-frameworks together, as in Scotland.

A model of change

Despite their diversity, many of the conditions for success are the same for all NQFs. ‘Successful’ frameworks, as described here, are 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. On the basis of the early frameworks we can identify common features of the process of introducing a successful comprehensive NQF. These features include:

- **Long time scales.** A successful framework depends on familiarity, understanding, cultural change and trust. These can only develop over time, with experience of the framework.
- **Institutional embedding.** A successful framework must similarly be embedded in institutions whose ‘institutional logics’ are aligned with NQF objectives. These logics determine, for example, the extent to which access, transfer and progression are based on framework levels. This in turn requires time, and reasonably strong institutions in which to embed the framework.
- **Stakeholder involvement and partnership.** Success depends on the involvement and ownership of stakeholders, including ET institutions. As a result, framework development involves political and pragmatic compromises, for example in decisions about the level at which qualifications are placed and their credit value.
- **An iterative process.** Institutional logics and educational practices are aligned with the framework, and anomalies arising from the pragmatic compromises mentioned above are resolved, through an iterative process. There is a similar alternation between development within sub-frameworks and the development of coherent system-wide arrangements.

Box 3. 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

- **A loose design.** A framework needs to be loose enough to accommodate different types of learning, although it may include tighter sub-frameworks. As tight frameworks are implemented they tend to become looser, or to narrow their scope and become sub-frameworks of a larger framework or register.
- **Policy breadth.** An NQF on its own is a weak driver of change. Its implementation and impact depend on complementary policies and other drivers to promote its use.

Each of these features reduces the transformational potential of a framework. Successful NQFs develop incrementally and organically. Their capacity to transform institutions and practices is restricted because they depend on processes of trust-building and cultural and institutional change that can only occur incrementally and through experience, starting from existing institutions and practices. They need the active support of institutions and organisations with a stake in the existing system. They need a loose, weakly prescriptive design. They need other change agents to make them effective.

Implementing an NQF does not depend only on technical issues such as quality assurance or correctly applying a learning-outcomes approach. It is first and foremost a social and political process. Technical features such as learning outcomes are blunter instruments for change than their advocates - or their critics - sometimes claim.

Conclusion

NQFs *can* be used to change ET systems, but only if the change is long-term, incremental, iterative and reasonably consensual, and if the NQF is complemented by other change agents. Of the types described above, communications and reforming NQFs, despite their less transformative aims, are more likely to achieve change. However, the important distinction among NQFs is not the scale of their ambitions but the process and the time scale by which they try to achieve them.

Further research

The provisional conclusion of this *Briefing* is that, despite the diversity of NQFs, a single model of change leads to success. This conclusion is based largely on early frameworks and needs to be tested against the experience of later-generation NQFs. An alternative view is that the model of change for a successful NQF depends on such factors as the size of a country, its political culture and its socio-economic context. It may change as framework developments become increasingly cross-national. And it may depend on the aims of the framework. The process of introducing an NQF designed to rationalise and coordinate an existing well-developed ET system may be different from that of an NQF designed to guide the development of a substantially new system.

References

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About this study

This *Briefing* is based on a workshop presentation to the SCQF Partnership International Conference, Glasgow, March 2009. A longer and more developed version of the paper will be published as a Discussion Paper by the ILO project on *The Implementation and Impact of NQFs*.

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