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Communication and impact in the mission of the NQF

Proceedings of the SAQA ILO NQF Symposium 8-9 September 2011

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SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

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Contents

Foreword

The collection of papers included in this edition of the SAQA Bulletin is drawn from a symposium that took place on 8 and 9 September 2011. The symposium was jointly arranged by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The symposium, while an important event in its own right, had four points of origin:

First, it is part of SAQA's ongoing in-depth work on the intellectual project of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This work includes the long-term study of the impact of the South African NQF; SAQA's partnership research; the continuing education programme on NQFs currently under collaborative development between SAQA and the University of the Western Cape, and other SAQA-coordinated research activities. Second, the need for an event in this particular form emerged in light of international debates, where country-specific differences and successes are noted but not engaged with in-depth. It was recognised within SAQA following the launch in 2010 of the ILO study of 16 NQFs[1], particularly the unsatisfactory way in which the SA NQF was treated, that there is deep need for further national and international dialogue around NQFs. Third, the NQF Forum – comprising senior representatives from the Departments of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and Basic Education, and the Chief Executive Officers of SAQA and the Quality Councils; chaired by the Director General of the DHET; meeting quarterly since July 2010 – requested and endorsed a SAQA-hosted international symposium to expand existing NQF-related conversations, to inform the further development of the South African NQF. Fourth, the NQF Advocacy project was considering hosting a separate event to engage with ideas around operationalising system-wide and deep advocacy of key NQF principles.

The overarching purpose of the symposium was to facilitate deep engagement with the nature of NQFs by focussing on the theoretical underpinnings and practical development of the NQF in South Africa and beyond. An important focus of the symposium was to consider lessons learned in the global NQF community and participation in cross-country conversations around NQFs. The first day (8 September) focused mainly on the South African NQF and included representatives from South African employers, organised labour and qualifications and quality assurance bodies. The second day (9 September) focused on NQF developments in Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries and included mainly representatives from the SADC region and the African continent.

The SAQA-ILO NQF symposium succeeded in creating an opportunity to discuss the theoretical underpinnings and practical development of the NQF in South Africa and beyond. Considering the papers included in this edition of the SAQA Bulletin, as well as the deliberations during the symposium itself, a sense of impatience is clearly evident.

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[1] Allais, S. 2010. *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries.* Geneva: ILO.

The users of NQFs particularly within the labour market are calling for more assertiveness about the importance of the NQF within the broader context of the labour market. The challenge to the NQF, be it in South Africa, SADC, or further afield, is to take up this challenge with the necessary humility, and confidence to clearly state its contribution backed up with evidence showing its impact.

SAQA looks forward to working closer with its international partners, specifically the ILO, in the future to improve understandings of qualifications frameworks as an increasing number of countries and regions across the world move in this direction.

Joe Samuels
Chief Executive Officer
March 2012

Editorial Comments

Four papers delivered at the SAQA ILO Symposium on 8 and 9 September 2011 are included in this Bulletin. The first paper by Keevy and Bolton is entitled *What is the South African National Qualifications Framework and how can its impact be measured?* This paper focuses on different and evolving understandings of NQFs since first introduced in the late 1980s and the present, drawing in particular on the experiences of SAQA in overseeing the South African NQF since 1998. The paper interrogates the different understandings of the NQF and the implications of each based on historical evidence.

The second paper entitled *Classification of qualifications: in praise of relevance* is prepared by Castejon from the European Training Foundation (ETF) based in Turin, Italy. Reflecting on the work of the ETF in European countries as well as with the EQF, this paper considers three approaches to the development of an NQF: (1) path dependent or historically contextualised trajectory that necessarily entails minimum transaction costs; (2) communicative approach which takes the existing system as a starting point and is mostly led by educational institutions; and (3) regulatory approach which takes a future system as a starting point. Using the French NQF as a case study, Castejon illustrates how an NQF can bring about change in a system based on elements of all three of the approaches.

The implementation and labour market impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: synopsis of ILO research findings is a collection of key International Labour Organisation (ILO) research findings that relate to NQFs and that outlines the ILO's mission on skills development within the context of the G20 Training Strategy for strong, sustained and balanced growth. This paper is prepared by Evans-Klock based at the ILO in Geneva, with support from Aggarwal based at the ILO regional office in Pretoria. Key findings from reports written by Young (2005), Tuck (2007) and Allais (2010) are presented followed by questions for further research. The lack of the inclusion of the voices of employers, trade unions and institutions is noted, as well as the relatively early stage of development of NQFs when the studies were undertaken. The paper also suggests that it may be more useful to investigate broader set of measures for achieving labour market goals, rather than looking at NQFs directly.

The fourth paper prepared by Arnesen is entitled *Taking the NQF to the people: thoughts on the South African NQF Advocacy Project.* This paper provides an overview of the NQF Advocacy Project in South Africa which is based on the principles of social marketing that were introduced in the 1970s: social marketing does not focus on commercial gain, but rather on positive social change without profit to the marketer. According to Arnesen the contribution of this approach to the understanding of the NQF in South Africa provides important insights that may also be of value to other countries.

The final paper is a SAQA commissioned reflection on NQFs following the symposium entitled *Militant modesty: Communication and impact in the mission of the NQF*. The authors of this paper, French and King, attended the symposium and used the debates as a springboard for the discussion presented in their paper. The paper is not intended as a summary of the symposium, nor does it reflect the views of SAQA or the ILO.

The paper provides important insights into the communicative, collaborative and cooperative functions of an NQF, while also presenting a powerful realty check to implementers. Raising a critique of the use of theory in the evaluation of NQFs, French and King make an impatient call for action from implementing agencies to gather evidence about real practices in order to inform the communicative role of the NQF. Building their arguments around a central theme of "militant modesty" the authors argue for humility before the challenges facing the NQF, but with assertiveness about the importance and value of the work.

Following from a reading of the five papers and a reflection on the debates that took place during the symposium it is evident that NQFs are dynamic, complex, multi-dimensional and evolving constructs that can, and are, being implemented using a variety of approaches across the world. It is also true that evidence of the impact of NQFs remains limited, mainly as a result of the relatively early stage of development, but also because the methodologies to measure the impact of NQFs remain under-developed. When understanding an NQF as a relational device that is not an end in its own right, the measurement of impact takes on a new dimension which includes the following:

- Taking network rather than linear views;
- Investigating the broader set of measures for achieving labour market goals, rather than looking at the NQF directly;
- Probing the use of NQFs by employers, organised labour and institutions rather than limiting the focus to the architects of the system;
- Direct participative social marketing of the NQF to influence behaviour rather than brand positioning and awareness;
- Dynamic measurement rather than longitudinal and comparative studies;
- A systematic study of the web of relations rather than isolated events;
- A historical situated and path-dependent approach rather than an ahistorical analysis.

In conclusion it is important to recognise the contributions of a range of people to the success of the SAQA ILO Symposium. These include: Christine Evans-Klock and Ashwani Aggarwal from the ILO for working with SAQA in arranging the symposium, but also for their important contributions to the intellectual project; Jean–Marc Castejon for sharing the experiences of the European Training Foundation; John Arnesen for providing key insights into the advocacy of the NQF, which is an area that requires much more attention and deeper research going forward; Heidi Bolton for contributing conceptual clarity and support to the overall initiative; delegates from South Africa, SADC countries and further afield that went to great effort to attend and contributed to the overall success of the event; Edward French and Melissa King for recording the discussions in the form of the last paper included in the Bulletin; Ntsiki Gumbe, Lucas Malambe, Emlyn Jordaan, and Irene Maminze for arranging the event; Ernst Vorster for assisting with the layout and publication.

James Keevy
November 2011

What is the South African National Qualifications Framework and how can its impact be measured?

James Keevy and Heidi Bolton

OVERVIEW

This paper has been prepared for the *International Symposium on National Qualifications Frameworks* hosted jointly in September 2011 in South Africa, by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The main purpose of the symposium is to contribute to the intellectual project that forms the basis for national qualifications framework (nqf)[2] development in general, as well as for the development of nqfs in Southern and South Africa in particular. The paper focuses on different and evolving understandings of nqfs since first introduced in the late 1980s and the present, drawing in particular on the experiences of SAQA in overseeing the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) since 1998.

Four distinct but interrelated historical understandings of nqfs are identified and explored, and an integrated understanding is then sought. First, an nqf can be conceived as a register of qualifications, where a grid of specified conceptual levels and types serves as a map for the positioning of qualifications and relationships between them. Second, nqfs can be conceptualised as social constructs where the emphasis is on the social actors that theorise, construct, implement and develop (or resist) frameworks. Third, nqfs can be seen as comprehensive systems, comprising several sub-parts of the systems for education, training, development, and work in countries. And fourth, they potentially constitute frameworks for communication, collaboration and coordination in education and training. Conceptualisation of the South African NQF as a relational device subsumes and goes beyond all four.

The paper interrogates these ideas and some of the implications of each based on historical evidence. It considers the potential of each conceptualisation to contribute to the education and training systems, and progression between education, training, development and work in countries. It closes by drawing attention to an urgent need to gather evidence for, and measure and monitor developments associated with nqfs.

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the concept of national qualifications frameworks (nqfs) in the 1980s, nqfs have been developed in most countries across the globe, and continue to be developed (Tuck 2007). The concept of an nqf is based on twin ideas, one being the English *competence-based* model where learners are assessed according to competences they can demonstrate. It is also partly based on the

[2] In this paper the abbreviation 'nqfs' is used to delineate national qualifications frameworks in *general*, while the acronym 'NQF' refers to the *South African* National Qualifications Framework in particular.

Scottish *outcomes-based* approach followed at the end of the 21st century (Young 2005). In this approach aimed-for *learning outcomes* shape the learning itself. The concept of nqfs found significant traction as a result of its promising interrelationship with the renewed emphasis on *lifelong learning* in various parts of the world including the United Kingdom, Australasia and others. At the time it was argued that the strong divisions between academic and vocational systems created barriers to learning, and that there was a need to consider alternative and more integrated models (*Ibid.*).

Within the vocational sector the competency-based system has gradually made way for a learning outcomes approach which made possible consideration of qualifications in terms of *learning outcomes* that were independent of the learning programmes, curricula, and content through which the qualifications were offered. A key driver of the changes within the vocational sector including the move to learning outcomes was power struggles relating to the transfer of control of qualifications away from vocational providers towards employers (Young 2005).

It is argued that the original thinking around qualifications frameworks took place in the context of emerging neo-liberal policies that emphasised the primary role of the *private sector i*n economic development (Allais 2007), and that this thinking is related to the shift within the vocational sector. These ideas were closely associated with Anglophone countries such as England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, and to a lesser extent, also with France (Keevy *et al* 2011).

The concept of an nqf meant and continues to mean differing things in different communities of practice. Some saw the nqf as a vehicle to embed learning outcomes within education and training systems. For those involved in lifelong learning the nqf resembled a concrete reference point through which lifelong learning-related discourse could be prioritised and resourced. Employers saw an opportunity to own and influence workplace learning in such a way that would better prepare workers for employment than was the case. The private education and training sector saw a chance to increase its role in economic development. The extent to which these differing goals were and are being realised and the implications of these ideas are areas in need of research.

Today more than 130 countries and at least four regions across the world are exploring and developing qualifications frameworks (Allais 2010). Some member states of the European Union, the Accession countries, some former Soviet Republics, and SADC countries such as Mauritius, Namibia, Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia and the Seychelles, are at various stages of nqf development and implementation. Providing a useful period-based grouping of qualifications frameworks, Tuck *et al* (2004) identified a range of types of qualifications frameworks being implemented across the world. In another review, Coles (2006) supplements this list with numerous other countries then considering or planning qualifications frameworks comprising parts of, or whole, education and training systems: Albania, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Belgium (Wallonia), Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mongolia, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Swiss Confederation, Thailand, Ukraine and Vietnam (see also Deij 2009).

While these developments were initially confined to the Anglophone countries of the Commonwealth (with the exception of France), they have now extended to a much wider range of countries including South America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Asia- Pacific region (see Burke *et al* 2009, Chakroun and Castejon 2010). There is also increasing activity relating to nqfs within international agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ILO, the World Bank and the European Union. In addition, countries with 'first generation' nqfs, such as England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, regularly engage with other countries to support nqf development and as a result, are supporting the global trend towards the development of national, regional and even transnational qualifications frameworks.

Given the variety of purposes for which nqfs have been designed, their complexity, the range of general perceptions around associated policy interventions, and the extent to which they are prevalent and growing, there is an urgent need to augment research into the impact and implications of nqfs done thus far (see for example work by SAQA 2003, 2005; Scottish Executive 2005; Allais 2009, 2010; Taylor 2010). The potential benefits of nqfs for increased communication, coordination, collaboration, articulation and general coherence in national systems are clear, but in practice *implementation* has often been controversial and attracted strong criticism and resistance. Some features such as over-prescriptiveness and the unitisation of education and training offerings have proved to be unpopular, costly, time-consuming, difficult to manage and even unworkable in practice (Allais 2009). Learning to be gained from these experiences needs to be understood within the context of a highly complex web of situational factors unique to each framework development.

EVOLVING UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF

The South African NQF has been described as an ambitious project, a set of policies forming part of those designed '… to address the educational, social, and economic problems caused by *apartheid*…' (Allais 2009: 139, French 2009, Lugg 2007). It is one of the tools of educational, social, and economic transformation (Republic of South Africa (RSA) Departments of Education and Labour 2002), and a means of creating an 'integrated national framework for learning achievements' and enhancing quality, access, mobility and progression in the education and training system in the country (SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995), especially for those disadvantaged under the *apartheid* political regime.

The six-year review of the NQF spanning the years between 2001 and 2007 ushered in a suite of new legislation associated with the NQF Act of 2008 (see Republic of South Africa, 2008a-d). Although there are changes in the organisational structures of the NQF, its objectives remain the integration of South Africa's education and training system and mobility and progression towards and within the world of work, for personal empowerment and economic development (see Republic of South Africa, 2008c: 13). The portability and articulation of qualifications are key, while access and redress are priorities, especially for those to whom access was denied under *apartheid*. Quality is a central focus.

There are some major changes for South Africa's NQF. From SAQA's point of view, the move from standardisation and an up-front, design-down, prescriptive approach towards one of greater differentiation, practice-based starting points, and a design-upwards and descriptive approach (Walters and Isaacs 2009: 14-16) comprises considerable change. This move includes the shift from an eight-level to a ten-level structure of qualifications, and the moving of standard-setting from SAQA to the three Quality Councils. Importantly, this differentiation is to occur within a greater context of integration, articulation, and collaboration between sectors.

It would be inaccurate to say that the South African NQF has been through successive (distinct) versions. The NQF in South Africa is a multi-stranded entity simultaneously enacted by a wide range of differing types of actors in different contexts, one which is evolving over time. At different times in the 15 years of its existence differing developmental threads have gained prominence; it is argued that useful elements of these components remain, while problematic elements have been, or are in the process of being, and are likely to continue to be, refined in an ongoing way. Importantly, however, the goals of the NQF have remained constant across policy revisions and refinements in implementation processes.

Four distinct understandings of the South African NQF in the period 1998 to 2011 have been noted (Isaacs 2011), and are elaborated briefly here. The sub-sections that follow outline the NQF as a register of qualifications; a social construct; a comprehensive system; and a framework for communication, collaboration and coordination. While these conceptualisations are analytically distinct, however, they are not and have not been mutually exclusive in practice. This paper proceeds from the view that at any given point multiple understandings have co-existed, influenced by the debates and power struggles in the period concerned.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF AS A REGISTER OF QUALIFICATIONS

At one level the South African NQF has been and continues to be understood, viewed and implemented as a register of qualifications that serves as a template for the development and classification of new qualifications (see RSA 2008c and ILO 2011). In this model a number of levels are specified, within which qualifications are located. The idea is that the positioning of individual types of qualifications within a system of qualifications aids learner mobility vertically between qualifications spanning levels increasing in conceptual complexity, and horizontally from one type of qualification to another. In this view learner mobility is not facilitated by NQF levels in isolation; NQF levels are used in conjunction with associated policies such as those for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), and others (RSA 2008c). This interpretation is in line with that of the OECD:

> A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. (OECD 2007: 179)

As it is put in the OECD document, criteria for levels of learning are seen as being implicit (in the system) when they are part of qualification descriptors and explicit when they occur in the form of nqf level descriptors (*Ibid*.).

The scope of frameworks may differ from being broad, and covering all learning pathways and achievements in a system, to being more narrowly confined to particular sectors such as initial education; adult education and training; or vocational education (*Ibid*.). Whether all-encompassing or narrow and sectoral, all qualifications frameworks are seen as establishing bases for improving the accessibility of qualifications; linkages between qualifications; and their recognition by the labour market and public within a country or internationally (*Ibid*.).

Understanding an nqf as a register of qualifications has been criticised as being a technicist view which limits an nqf to being a system for data management (Isaacs 2011). Indeed, there is much data relating to the South African NQF including information on qualifications and their uptake, and learner achievements. Such information is contained in the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD). However, the South African NQF is by no means limited to this information. The database is but one set of activities within a range of others, such as coordination of the three sub-frameworks[3]; extensive career advisory services; research towards implementation and further development of the NQF; and development of policy and criteria after consultation with the Quality Councils, for the development, registration and publication of qualifications and part-qualifications, and for RPL and CAT; in consultation with professional bodies, for recognising professional bodies and registering professional designations, and others. SAQA is legally mandated to infuse nqf principles such as enhancing the integration of components in the system; learner access, mobility and progression; the portability and articulation of qualifications; quality; and redress, into all of these and related activities.

In its early stages while the South African NQF was viewed by many as a register of qualifications it was also seen to be a device for (socio-economic) transformation (Allais 2009). The legacy of *apartheid* had left the country with a skewed and largely dysfunctional system that privileged few, disadvantaged many, and urgently required transformation. The South African NQF conceived and implemented as a register of qualifications could certainly not achieve these ends. There is general acknowledgement in present times, that nqfs are single tools in policy toolboxes. The idea of the South African NQF as a register of qualifications has not necessarily been superceded, it has been enhanced by other conceptualisations described here. It remains a thread in more elaborate conceptualisations.

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[3] In South Africa there are three coordinated sub-frameworks with a coordinating body, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The three sub-frameworks for General and Further Education and Training; Higher Education; and Trades and Occupations respectively, are maintained in turn, by three quality councils (Umalusi: Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training; the Council on Higher Education; and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations). Each quality council is responsible for standard setting and quality assurance in its sector.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The South African NQF has been conceived as a *social construct*:

> The essential nature of [an nqf] is that of a social construct, in that we as social actors in society not only theorise about, construct and implement it, but we also enable, actively change or work against it (Isaacs 2001: 124).

In this interpretation of an nqf it has been suggested that there are three necessary criteria: the democratic participation of stakeholders; intellectual scrutiny and adequate resourcing (Isaacs 2001). Keevy (2005) shows how nqfs as social constructs are inextricably linked to power struggles, while Bernstein's (1996) concept of the *pedagogic device* is useful for theorising such power relations. It is elaborated here, as it can be used to broaden understanding of an nqf as a mechanism for relaying communications (a communication relay), that is, how the nqf works as a relay, as well as what it relays.

In current times, studies of education and training systems tend to take into account socio-political, historical, economic, ideological, cultural and other contexts. Decades of research show how education and training systems can serve to reproduce inequalities along race, gender, class, regional, belief-based, and other lines. Pedagogic communication is often viewed as an (apparently neutral) "carrier", a 'relay for ideological messages and for external power relations', or 'a relay of skills of various kinds' (Bernstein 1996: 39). While the focus in many studies is on the message that is relayed, Bernstein's (*Ibid.)* concept of the *pedagogic device* comprises theorising around the relay itself. He distinguishes between "the relay" and the "relayed", both of which it is argued are key for understanding the South African NQF.

Just as in language, where potential meaning is created via the device of language (the carrier), and what is carried (the relayed communication or message), so is pedagogic potential realised through a *pedagogic device* (the carrier) and the pedagogic communication itself (*Ibid*.: 40). As there are relatively (but not entirely) stable rules that govern language devices, so are there (perhaps more unstable) rules in the operation of pedagogic devices. Bernstein identifies three types of rules. *Distributive rules* 'regulate the relationships between power, social groups, forms of consciousness and practice' – they 'distribute forms of consciousness through distributing forms of knowledge' (*Ibid*.). If the NQF is seen as a *pedagogic device*, its *distributive rules* would have the power to shape relationships between power, social groups, forms of consciousness (ways of thinking) and practice – it would influence who was included in and who was excluded from access to particular ways of thinking and doing.

Bernstein (1996: 43) mentions the 'thinkable' (known and validated knowledge) and the 'unthinkable' (not-yet legitimated knowledge), noting that major control and management of the unthinkable is usually carried out by 'higher agencies of education' (those individuals who have been 'legitimately pedagogised'), while the thinkable is managed at lower levels. *Distributive rules* shape who has access to the "thinkable" and the "unthinkable".

A second type of rules at play in Bernstein's (1996) *pedagogic device* is *recontextualising rules*. Pedagogic discourse is a principle for the re-ordering of discourses: it takes an activity from its original site and re-creates it within a pedagogic site (*Ibid.*). For example physics-related work conducted within universities or carpentry in workshops, are transformed into Physical Science and Woodwork respectively, within schools. The sources from which National Certificate: Vocational subjects have been recontextualised in South Africa are an area needing research. The call for 'increased relevance' in vocational education is a call for more direct recontextualisation from the workplace, in vocational courses. An examination of the *recontextualising rules* operating at any pedagogic site is likely to expose the power struggles at play in relation to that site.

Bernstein's (1996: 48) distinction between the *official recontextualising field* (ORF – state departments and agencies) and the *pedagogic recontextualising field* (PRF – schools and colleges) is also useful. If there is only an ORF, there can be no institutional autonomy. It is argued that in South Africa while NQF-related legislation is aimed at coordination between components of the ORF and the PRF, there remains considerable space for the PRF to influence pedagogic discourse: there is thus a degree of autonomy and struggle over pedagogic discourse which any NQF impact study in the country would need to track.

A third type of rules, *evaluative rules* involve measuring of the criteria transmitted in pedagogic settings. If the pedagogic device is a "symbolic ruler for consciousness", a system for "creating and controlling the unthinkable" as well as the "thinkable", continuous evaluation is key for its pedagogic practice (Bernstein 1996: 50). The theory helps us to formulate questions in relation to nqfs such as Whose regulator? What consciousness? Who is included and excluded? What does the consciousness enable, for whom?

Hacking (1999) describes a range of stances in relation to social constructs, that are useful for teasing out possible positions in what Bernstein (1996) has termed the official (state) and symbolic pedagogic fields (the field in which education and training providers operate). One stance termed by Hacking (*Ibid.*) as *historical*, involves taking something (such as thenqf) as inevitable on the basis of its historical trajectory. A second is *ironic* in that the position of the construct (in this case annqf) is understood (for historical reasons), but is felt to be imposed and acceptance of it forced. This stance could be associated with a rebellious position. A third approach is *reformist*: here a social construct is seen as being modifiable. An associated activist-based approach that seeks change in a phenomenon is *revolutionary* (*Ibid.*). Certain positions are likely to be concentrated in the State and symbolic fields respectively, and to influence the associated pedagogic activities there. The positions and shifting positions that social actors can assume in relation to social constructs such as nqfs provide useful insights for understanding nqfs.

How then sustain a particular configuration of an nqf? Waghid (2007) suggests that an nqf can be sustained as a social construct if spearheaded by strong, strategic leadership. In this regard, drawing on the work of Sherman (1997) he suggests constitutive *meanings of friendship* in order to increase the possibility of cultivating strong leadership based on mutual attachment, mutual attunement and mutual action. Mutual attachment, he argues, is about the 'idea of correcting one another and

learning from each other in an atmosphere of trust, goodwill and mutual benefit that holds much promise in reshaping leadership beyond giving 'instructions' as required by the nqf discourse' (Waghid 2007: 43). Mutual attunement 'involves people being interested in coming to know themselves and learning to assess through argument and thought whether their actions and emotions are indeed fine' (Sherman, 1997 in Waghid 2007: 43). Waghid (*Ibid*.) points out that this idea of coming to know oneself has potential to undermine uncritical acceptance of things. Mutual action is about keeping activities ongoing and continuous. In this case drawing on Popper, Waghid (*Ibid*.) argues for an approach 'wherein the outcomes achieved are inconclusive, suggesting a process of trial-and-error towards a new stage of evolution'.

In Waghid's (2007) view in other words, a specific outcome can never be conclusive for that would mark the end of a discourse. The understanding of the NQF in South Africa as a multi-stranded entity simultaneously enacted by a wide range of differing types of actors in different contexts, one which is evolving over time is in line with this view. The idea of the NQF as a register of qualifications is not incompatible with the NQF as a multi-stranded social construct, providing that the register of qualifications is but one thread running through the nqf discourse. These ideas are elaborated further in the sections that follow.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF AS A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

The idea of the South African NQF as a comprehensive system comprising three sectoral sub-frameworks, namely those for General and Further Education and Training; Higher Education; and Trades and Occupations is embedded in the recently promulgated NQF Act (RSA 2008c) and related legislation (RSA 2008a,b,d). This understanding is arguably currently the dominant one, notwithstanding the fact that there are also clear moves towards the view that the NQF is a system for communication, collaboration and coordination (see for example SAQA 2010b).

The NQF as a comprehensive system paradoxically includes integrative aspects such as a single Department of Higher Education and Training responsible for the entire post-school system (both education and training); and the three separate (although coordinated) sub-frameworks noted immediately above. Its comprehensiveness lies in the fact that the South African NQF, through its distinct but coordinated bodies, encompasses all aspects of education and training in the country. It is worth elaborating on the relatively recent coordinated activities.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF AS A SYSTEM FOR COMMUNICATION, COORDINATION, AND COLLABORATION

The interpretation of the South African NQF as an instrument for communication, coordination and collaboration across education, training, development and work is not new (see for example Parker and Walters 2008). It is however increasingly gaining strong support within the education and training system; coordinated activities and collaborative partnerships are on the increase. There is for example, an 'NQF Forum' made up of senior officials of the four primary NQF implementing bodies and

two education departments that meets bi-monthly. That this grouping and its sub-committees (such as the Chief Executive Officers' Committee) are used to address issues affecting implementation and development of the NQF jointly, is amply captured in the minutes of the meetings. The group provides leadership regarding transversal issues affecting the system as a whole. The Chair of the NQF Forum, the Director General of Higher Education and Training, has described the four statutory bodies as being 'one body' with different parts working collaboratively; the spirit is collegial and collaborative.

Since mid-2009 there have been several other joint activities since part of SAQA's role includes providing intellectual leadership towards implementation and development of the NQF. A bi-monthly NQF seminar series has been hosted by SAQA's Research Directorate for staff from SAQA, the Quality Councils and both education departments for the purpose of sharing and engaging with SAQA's research partnership findings (see SAQA 2010a) and creating a space for joint engagement with transversal NQF-related issues. Attendance at these meetings has doubled over the last two years. An NQF Research Conference *Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration for Quality in Education, Training, Development, and Work* was also hosted by SAQA in 2010 for a range of organisations including SAQA, the Quality Councils and other NQF stakeholders.

While not all articulation pathways are yet clear, SAQA and the Quality Councils attend each other's Board meetings, and participate in joint research projects such as the South African NQF Impact study. Much collaborative work has been accomplished towards the development of policy and criteria for recognising professional bodies and registering professional designations, and for RPL and CAT.

AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NQF

The position in this paper is that the South African NQF is a device for understanding the components of the education and training system in a relational way. As noted elsewhere (SAQA 2010b: 2), the NQF is a device to assist relational thinking, "... thinking about the education and training system as a whole, and how its constituent parts relate to each other and to development and the world of work". Two points are made in this regard.

First, that in South Africa bodies such as SAQA, and the Quality Councils, or approaches like outcomes-based education, outcomes-based unit standards, and level descriptors do not necessarily constitute the NQF. These aspects are manifestations of the over-arching relational idea, namely the desire for a high-quality integrated articulated education and training system to which there is access for all, and which creates possibilities for mobility and progression. Second, the South African NQF is not an end in its own right – it is one of a set of mechanisms to improve lifelong learning (LLL) along with other policies and initiatives such as CAT, RPL, and others.

Socio-material theory (Fenwick 2010a, b, c) is useful for understanding the NQF as a relational device. In this approach individuals and social processes are not seen as being distinct, in contexts that are separate from them. What appears to be a context, and the individuals and actions that are part of these 'assemblages', are continuously acting on each other. Fenwick (2010a: 130) draws on the concepts of 'co-emergence' and 'mutual specification' to elaborate the idea that individuals and contexts are inseparable. The idea is that when two entities are associated, they begin to imitate each other in some ways (Varela et al 1991, cited in Fenwick 2010a). A series of dynamic, non-linear interactions produce 'emergence' (Davis and Sumara 2006, cited in Fenwick 2010a: 130), or the understanding that in (complex adaptive) systems and phenomena, events and actors are mutually dependent, mutually constitutive, and actually emerge together in dynamic ways. No clear lines of causation can be traced from these interactions to their outcomes, because at any given time unrealised possibilities are present in a system. Further, what emerges – whether learning, practices or other objects – is specific to the system from which it emerged; it changes if it migrates to another system. Coupling changes or 'co-specifies' participants, creating new transcendent entities that could not have been achieved independently (Fenwick 2010b: 108).

The idea of a body of theories described as socio-material has been articulated in relation to sets of theories articulated as complexity theory, cultural-historical activity theory, actor-network theory, and others (Fenwick 2010b). Fenwick (*Ibid*.) draws links between these approaches, suggesting firstly that they tend to take the whole system (including human and material elements) as the unit of analysis. Fenwick (*Ibid*.) suggests secondly, that research conceptualised on the basis of these theories focuses on tracing the formations, and ongoing stabilization and destabilisation of elements. Third, this approach conceives of human knowledge and learning as being embedded in material action and inter-action (or intra-action).

What is the relevance of these ideas for conceptualisation of the South African NQF? If actions, the material, and the social construct or discourse which is the NQF are understood as being mutually constituted, it becomes difficult to isolate single aspects as being constitutive of the NQF. It has been noted that the NQF can be seen as continually evolving as a result of the interactions of multiple actors, ideas, physical realities, and other factors. It has been shown that conceptualisations such as the NQF as a register of qualifications, a social construct, a comprehensive system and a mechanism for communication, coordination, and collaboration comprise some of the developmental threads within the discourse. To re-iterate, these ideas are not mutually exclusive; they are accompanied by other ideas – some of which are current; some, which have been discarded.

In this view, answers to the questions *What is the NQF?* and involve network rather than linear views. The South African NQF at present is more about opening dialogue and 'moments of impact' or 'relational moments' than about the imposition and measuring of rigid structures. Key constituent strands; nested layers and moments of impact (such as workers and employers in dialogue; work beyond the academic-vocational split); relational moments; what comprise quality and accountability; and new doors opening need to be identified. The general approach needs to be systematic; the web of relations needs to be studied.

SUITABILITY AND COMPATIBILITY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The two sets of theories elaborated above – Bernstein's (1996) *pedagogic device*, and Fenwick's (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) concept of socio-material theories on the other – differ fundamentally.

Bernstein's ideas are premised on the notion of social structures and the relationships within and between these structures. Subjects are distinguished clearly from contexts. Analytical categories stem from binary opposites, although it has been shown that these opposites can generate wide ranges of sub-categories on continua (see for example Bolton 2005, 2009). *Socio-material theory* on the other hand is based on the idea of fluidity and ongoing change. Webs of elements are considered within whole systems. Entities and their contexts – and the elements of which they are fashioned – are not seen as being distinct, but are mutually constitutive.

Bernstein's (1996) concepts potentially bring the considerable value of linking macro and micro-level elements in a systematic way. They enable an extraordinarily high level of abstraction for a social theory, as they are highly articulated. This facility alone is extremely valuable for a complex conceptualisation such as that of the NQF, since it potentially enables relating diverse components. Structuralist criticisms (see for example Harker and May 1993) have been contested convincingly (see Bernstein 1995; Bolton 2005, 2009).

Fenwick's (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) ideas potentially lead to an approach focusing on 'moments of impact' or 'relational moments' rather than on baselines and social structures. The ensuing web of relations that would be studied is also likely to yield the kinds of insights that SAQA needs for NQF policy development.

Importantly, it is argued that theory underpinning the NQF needs to rise above the constructivist-critical realist divide – what Fenwick (2010d) refers to as the 'knowledge wars'. Multiple ontologies underlie conceptions of knowledge. The pedagogic device (Bernstein 1996) and socio-material theory such as cultural historical activity theory (Fenwick 2010b) are both useful for making sense of how people are able to use and move through systems. Given that the NQF comprises several distinct but inter-related initiatives, differing activities could utilise differing appropriate theoretical bases. It is however important that all sub-projects have clearly articulated theoretical foundations, as this practice aids understanding across contexts.

THE PURPOSES OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

In a sense, the purposes of nqfs relate to their conceptualisation. For an nqf as a register of qualifications a robust register of articulated qualifications or learning pathways may be the purpose. If an nqf is seen as a social construct for public benefit, overriding areas of concern may include who the construct benefits, who decides on the beneficiaries, and how benefits accrue. If an nqf is a comprehensive system, its primary goal may be inclusivity. A relational device would seek to facilitate relationships between components of a system. All of these models could conceivably seek to enhance systemic communication, coordination, and collaboration.

Raffe (2009) adapts a typology initially developed by Allais (2007), suggesting three types of purposes for nqfs. First, 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, to improve its coherence, to encourage access and to highlight opportunities for transfer and progression between programmes. Second, 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 typically has a statutory or regulatory role. Third, 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.

None of the categorisations describes the South African NQF fully. All the categorisations are in a sense on a continuum focusing on the change-related dimension of nqfs. While there was an urgent need for and emphasis on the transformation of South Africa's then skewed education and training system at the start of its democracy, the emphasis now is on opening and enhancing learning pathways to increase lifelong learning for the maximum number of people in the country, and on upping the quality of education and training offerings. As already noted, the NQF goals of access, redress, success, integration, articulation, mobility, progression and quality have remained constant for over 15 years. Current public support of NQF-related activities suggests that there is broad acknowledgement and acceptance of the strong elements in the system, and that constituencies across the board are prepared to form partnerships for, or become involved in further strengthening them. To use Bernstein's (1996) terms: in the *official recontextualising field*, State institutions like SAQA currently lead key NQF initiatives such as advocacy campaigns; the NQF and Career Advice Helpdesk; the development of national RPL and CAT policy; research towards increasing learning pathways in the system, and others. While this work is well supported by organisations in both the *official* and *pedagogic recontextualising fields*, organisations in the PRF independently generate well-supported initiatives of their own towards enhancement of the system.

While the South African NQF may appear to fit Raffe's (2009) reforming framework category, a fuller and more accurate description would be that it is a mechanism for ongoing communication, coordination and collaboration towards increasing access, success, articulation, integration, progression, and quality in education and training. As noted above, it is to assist relational thinking, about these components and their sub-parts. The South African NQF is not an end in its own right – it is one of a set of mechanisms to facilitate and improve lifelong learning in an ongoing way.

THE QUEST FOR EVIDENCE

For accountability purposes it is imperative to provide evidence of effective and fair spending of public funds. Evidence of the ongoing benefits of nqfs is clearly needed. It is, however, difficult to pinpoint precisely, cause and effect when the focus is a complex social phenomenon like an nqf. There is only a small body of research into

the impact of nqfs to date (see Keevy 2011), the main studies being those of the International Labour Organisation (Allais 2009, 2011); the National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI 2009); the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (Scottish Executive 2005); and SAQA (SAQA 2003, 2005; Taylor 2010), but this work provides a firm foundation for further work. Lessons from these studies are noted briefly here, as is work currently underway in a SAQA-led initiative involving key NQF organisations in South Africa.

The first lesson relates to the foci of nqf impact studies. Some of the earlier studies (see SAQA 2003, 2005 for example) did not evaluate the objectives of the nqf concerned; others did (see for instance, Scottish Executive 2005). One possibility is to place the nqf goals themselves under scrutiny; another is to measure achievements in relation to articulated nqf goals, and the success of the means towards achieving these goals. Considering all of these aspects would be useful for broadening and deepening understanding of nqfs.

The second lesson relates to methodologies used in nqf impact studies so far. Given the complexity of the phenomena under investigation and the number of organisations involved in their realisation, it is particularly important to employ mixed methods. In-depth qualitative methods for aspects such as cohort studies are of key importance for deep understanding; higher-number quantitative methods are imperative for greater generalisability. In the qualitative studies including the greatest numbers of subjects feasible would enhance their generalisability. In their quantitative counterparts, including as much depth as possible would increase validity. Rigid sampling techniques such as the stratified random sampling used in the early South African studies (*op cit*) potentially confines findings to pre-conceived categories that may be more 'nested' in actuality. The purposive sampling (used in differing ways in the Scottish, Irish and International Labour Organisation (ILO) studies (Keevy 2011: 11-18) in contrast potentially facilitates the gathering of a range of suitably diverse and triangulated data sets. This latter approach, if based on representative selections made on the basis of broad and deep consideration of the whole system concerned, and if incorporating explications of the reasons and contexts for the selections – could provide multi-dimensional views.

Third, the timing of the measurement of any given factor is also clearly important. Taylor (2010) suggests that in the first two years of implementation, measurement of the architecture of an NQF is possible; in fairness two to five years are needed before the effectiveness of implementation can be attempted; and similarly five to ten years before impact can be assessed. In the ILO study the limitation of the newness of several of the nqfs investigated is acknowledged (Allais 2010).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The paper has discussed evolving understandings of the South African NQF; understandings of this NQF as a register of qualifications, a social construct, a comprehensive system, and a system for enhancing communication, coordination, and collaboration in education, training, development and work.

As Raffe (2009) correctly points out, once it it recognised that 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. Two sets of theoretical concepts have been put forward as means to enhance broader and deeper understandings of nqfs. Bernstein's (1996) *pedagogic device* provides useful foci for what is essentially an extremely complex communication-relaying device (an nqf) with complex multi-stranded messages. The associated ideas of *distributive rules, recontextualising rules,* and *evaluative rules* are similarly useful when respectively looking at the benefits of nqfs, how nqfs are interpreted in differing parts of the systems of which they are part; and criteria set up by nqfs as being of key importance. The separation of the official and pedagogic recontextualising fields assists investigation of multiple take-ups of nqf-related ideas across parts of the system. Fenwick's (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) socio-materialism enhances consideration of an integrated view where material and non-material factors influence each other, and potentially leads to a useful approach in which the focus is on 'moments of impact' or 'relational moments' rather than rigid structures and patterns – when attempting to measure the impact of nqfs.

An attempt has been made to begin to show some of the strengths of nqfs in general and the South African NQF in particular. The number of nqfs is growing; successful practices and their benefits and beneficiaries urgently need to be described and measured. Raffe's (2009) claim that the success of a framework depends primarily on its model of change, together with key features of its design is certainly not misplaced. NQF-related developments in South Africa have indeed occurred in the long-term, incrementally, and iteratively.

There is currently a moment of reasonable consensus – a momentary dynamic equilibrium, and one not without contestation. One area of contestation revolves around the diffusion of qualifications frameworks and, to a lesser extent, also outcomes-based education, into Africa (Chisholm 2007). Under the broader discourse of policy borrowing, qualifications frameworks are seen as exemplars of foreign, mainly Anglo-Saxon policies imported into developing countries (mainly in Africa) without the necessary 'indigenisation' taking place (Keevy et al 2011). A second area of contestation relates to the new forms and divisions brought about by globalisation: the distinction between academic and vocational systems (education and training) potentially contradicts the unifying approach inherent in many qualifications frameworks (Mukora 2007).

The South African NQF allows for variation across sub-frameworks. It is the intention that with appropriate supportive policies and measures to drive implementation and use of the framework (the necessity for which is noted by Raffe 2009), this relational device will not only enhance high-quality lifelong learning for the most inclusive number of individuals in the country, but provide ongoing mechanisms to address contestations as they arise.

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Notes

Classification of qualifications: in praise of relevance

Jean-Marc Castejon

The European Training Foundation (ETF) has adopted a model of policy learning in its work with its 29 partner countries: rather than borrowing models of development from other countries, they should learn from international experience in order to develop policies appropriate for national aims. This model is in line with the European Commission's open method of coordination and peer learning activities. This tension between path-dependence, that is the embeddedness of reforms in local contexts, and pressure for convergences tends to be lessened with the development of global organisational models such as National Qualification Frameworks. The rise of the regional or transnational frameworks has an influence on national policy reforms and the traditional dichotomy between home-grown and borrowed reforms is no longer so clear cut. Information has never been so easy to come by; benchmarking is ongoing.

The advent of the European Qualifications Frameworks (EQF) has made a difference in the way neighbouring countries of the European Union are looking at their qualification systems and in the way they want to reform these systems. The first difference that the EQF makes is that it causes policy-makers to embark on reforms of the qualification system. International models on national agendas seem to have produced an over-abundance of policy objectives and this is particularly the case with qualifications. What NQFs are supposed to do is impressive:

- Make the education and training system and its component parts more transparent and easier to understand.
- Increase the coherence and coordination of this system and make it more 'unified'.
- Establish parity of esteem for vocational and general learning.
- Promote access, transfer and progression into, within and between programmes of learning.
- Provide an instrument of accountability and control.
- Update and extend standards, and make them more relevant to current needs.
- Enhance the quality of learning.
- Promote the recognition and consequently the utilisation of existing skills, including those acquired through informal and non-formal learning.
- Promote the international mobility of learners and workers.
- Provide a means for referencing national qualifications to transnational frameworks such as the EQF.
- Make education and training more demand-focused, increasing the influence of learners and employers relative to the providers of learning.
- Promote lifelong learning.
- Transform the economy and society.

This is what national qualification frameworks are *supposed* to do. In the language of the symposium, it is the *potential* of NQFs. The issue is to increase the relevance of qualifications which are already there, to get rid of those which are useless and to create new ones if need be. But the needs are not the same in every country. The needs might concern to one degree or another:

(i) the learners in terms of access to learning, transfer, progression and mobility;

(ii) the education system itself in terms of increased communication and coordination between the stakeholders and in terms of consistency and relevance of standards;

(iii) the labour market in terms of matching supply and demand of skills; and

(iv) the country as a whole in terms of competitiveness. A country without an NQF runs the risk of being excluded from a global market of skills which is no longer a national market. Professional mobility is at stake, at least in theory.

Signals of irrelevance such as unemployment, lack of competitiveness, rate of learners dropouts, et cetera indicate that it is possible and even necessary to increase the rate of return (payoff) of qualifications for these players. So policy-makers might wish to provide a structure for exchange between all concerned players, with reduced costs of transaction and costs of transformation. How well the institutions solve the problem of coordination and production is determined by the motivation of players, the complexity of the environment and the ability of the players to decipher and order the environment. An NQF is such a platform for exchange and so is the EQF.

EQF recommendations define an NQF as an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, an instrument which aims to integrate national qualification sub-systems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society (European Parliament and Council 2008). As David Raffe remarks, there is an apparent tension between the two parts of the definition: how could such wide-ranging aims be achieved merely by classifying qualifications into levels? How can this instrument relevant for so many things, be so far-reaching? Well, first no one quite knows how far reaching it is and second, being relevant does not mean being accountable. The NQF cannot do *all* that *everywhere, every time*. The issue is not (or is no longer) to make up for the weakness of institutional settings or to design a new or a parallel system of qualifications. The process of improving the transparency and the comparability of qualifications does not have to be a major shamble. In France, it was not, as the case study below will show.

A classification of qualifications by level is a result of an institutional process which is “path dependent”: the institutional framework will shape the direction of the acquisition of knowledge and skills and that direction will be the decisive factor for the long-term development of that society. Path dependence means that the process is not altogether deliberate. History matters. We cannot understand today’s choice without tracing the incremental evolution of institutions. As the French case shows, the development of a qualifications framework uses the incentives which are built in the system and does not replace them. Lifelong learning in a country which has no adult learning arrangements or tradition is not a specific area of relevance. A lifelong system is based on legal arrangements which will facilitate the development of an NQF or not. The causal links runs in both directions.

What an NQF does to improve the relevance of qualifications and their rate of return to learners is to provide a platform for exchange and the directions in which improvements are necessary. NQFs improve:

- communication and coordination between key stakeholders, with a view to identifying mutual interest and work together to serve them. NQFs frequently bring stakeholders together who do not have other opportunities to meet (such as private and public actors);
- transparency of qualifications: The necessity of making qualifications more transparent is related to the need to make them fit for purpose both socially and economically;
- quality assurance which is strongly associated to the issue of NQFs, whether it is enforced through regulation or not.
- regulation: the governance of the NQF may be an issue in countries where providers are many and no clear leadership exists. NQFs may play a regulatory role.

The approaches to the development of NQFs are "path dependent" in that they adopt an approach which entails the minimum transaction costs. It is in this respect that the choice of the approach is not fully deliberate. It is linked to a history.

The "communicative" approach of frameworks takes the existing system as its starting point and provides tools for change but does not try to drive change directly. The communication approach could also be called the institutional approach because most of the time, educational institutions (mainly public) are in the lead. This type of approach is likely to involve social partners and flourish in a context where collective agreements are in use. It aims to make the system more transparent in a loose sort of way and to provide conceptual tools for rationalising it, improving its coherence and developing progression pathways. The issue of transparency and comparability are paramount, which entails the development of a common language of levels, outcomes, credit and so on. The search for a common language is in itself a driver for change and this is why a classification of qualifications can lead to important changes in a system.

The regulatory approach takes a proposed future education and training system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in a transformed system, without referring explicitly to existing provision. It tries to drive change directly based on broad reform principles such as shift from a supply to a demand led system and learner-centred provision of learning. This type of approach is likely to appear where public-private partnerships are frequent, and is reflected in the fact that reforms are often carried out by external agencies whose job it is to bring about the changes in the absence of strong institutional leadership. NQFs themselves tend to substitute for weak institutions. The prevailing model of NQF has long been associated with this approach and this is why the impact assessment of NQFs so far has not been encouraging. What NQFs had to do was intractable.

Each approach can be illustrated by the Arab countries of northern Africa. On one hand, the Maghreb countries (Morocco, Tunisia) are pursuing a communication approach because they are still influenced by the French model, which includes a communication model. On the other hand, the Mashrek countries (Egypt, Jordan) are using an Anglo-Saxon regulatory model. The NQF is in the hands of experts and mandated for drastic changes.

The identity of the frameworks depends in part on the degree of transparency, of comparability and of convergence which are required of qualifications systems. This in turn is a function of the bargaining powers of stakeholders and the incentives which are built into the system (see the case of France): the qualifications sub-systems can be, and are most of the time, outcome-referenced rather than outcome-led. It takes strong leadership to impose outcome-led qualifications systems and considerable transaction costs and transformation costs. Learning outcomes are for the time being more associated with the rhetoric of NQFs than with their successes.

So it is not so surprising that a classification of qualifications as an institutional process induces a changed process: it poses anew the issue of new and old relevances and so it digs into entrenched resistance. The expected result is not a new system, but a better system defined in terms of better returns for the players involved, and of positive sum game. It is too early to say how much better.

The choice of France as a case study is made to illustrate the change that the classification (repertoire) has brought about in the system, the role of history and how the NQF has built on incentives and payoffs present in the system. The French framework dates back to 2002 and so was not influenced by the EQF to which is it only now starting to adjust. France is a good example of path-dependency in the sense that the national qualifications framework has made so little difference in the ongoing reforms. Right from the beginning of the 1970s, the perspective of the rise in unemployment and the need for massive re-skilling of workers, laid the ground for the first principles of continuing education based on the principle that initial and continuing training should target the same qualifications (law 16 January 1971 on continuing training). When the problem was to identify among the huge number of existing diplomas those which were acting as “signals” or “indicators” of qualifications, the choice was to call “qualifications” only those which were related both to a level of training and to a field. Initially, the duration and the quality of the training were considered as relevant defining features but in time and as lifelong learning principles came to pre-eminence the reference to a duration of training lost its relevance and the quality feature evolved towards criteria such as relevance for the labour market, ‘engineering’ of qualifications based on job analysis, and a definition of competences to be assessed. An inventory of diplomas recognised as indicators of qualifications were created at the end of the 1990s by the *Centre de Recherchesurl’ Emploi et les Qualifications* (CEREQ), and it is this inventory which became the classifier of national qualifications with the Law of 17 January 2002. So when the Recommendation on the European Qualification Framework was drafted/finalised in 2008, the classifier became the national qualifications framework.

The French decision to call certification what the rest of the world calls qualifications is to indicate that the definition of outcomes – which are a feature of all qualifications - changed from being a guide for those devising assessment and curricula to an indication of a person's capabilities, to claiming to be a precise definition of a person's competence 'or what he or she should be able to do' (Young 2007: 122). The official French definition of a "qualified person" is the following: 'a person is said to be qualified when she/he has demonstrated a set of knowledge, of know-how and aptitudes which allow her/him to carry out a combination (*combinatoire*) of activities in a given professional context, at a given level of responsibility and autonomy' (Charraud 2010). The description of certifications comes under a unique format which necessarily includes competences to be assessed as well as activities targeted by the certification.

Only the diplomas considered as indicators of qualification are registered in the National Register of Vocational Competences (*Répertoire National des Compétences Professionnelles*). The 2002 law aimed at a better readability of individual competences for the world of work as a way to combat rising unemployment, on the belief that owning a formal "diploma" was the best way to find a job for people, if this diploma proved evidence of a number of years of professional experience. For this very reason, not all the diplomas in France could act as evidence of a qualification. The only eligible diplomas are those which are the result of a tripartite consultation[4]. All policy decisions pertaining to vocational training in France must be the result of a negotiation between social partners, the conclusions of which are translated into the law. The logic which has been applied to the registration of qualifications in the national repertoire is the following: registered in the first place are the qualifications coming from a tripartite consultation. The requests for registration of a qualification which are not the result of such consultation are examined by a national committee which is itself comprised of representatives of the State and of the social partners. A ministerial decree then ratifies this registration.

As a result, the national framework includes three registers of qualifications:

- Vocational diplomas delivered or not by the State and registered by law. The main ministries ("the Certifiers") have tripartite Vocational Consultative Committees (*Commission Professionnelle Consultative*) comprised of the State, employers and employees. Their job is to assess the relevance of a qualification for the labour market, to describe the job and the competences to occupy it, and to define the evaluation standards.
- Vocational qualifications (*Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle*, CQP) delivered by economic sectors, registered upon request and defined in the framework of a national parity committee comprised of representatives of employers and employees.
- Diplomas registered upon request by ministries which do not have any National Committee (such as the Ministry of Defence), public and private bodies, and chambers.

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[4] Consultation between the Representatives of the Government, the Employers and the Employees.

The registration of a qualification is a major task on the part of the Certifiers, which have to set up a formalised process based on the description of the activities, of the competences. The classifier as a national qualification framework is a powerful tool because it is based on this unique format of description of qualifications which is very different from the previous one with its still very widespread practice based on curricula and on the organisation of the training. The outcomes-based approach to training is a new exercise for social partners and the process leading to the registration in the national classifier is a learning exercise for all this process goes through the following phases:

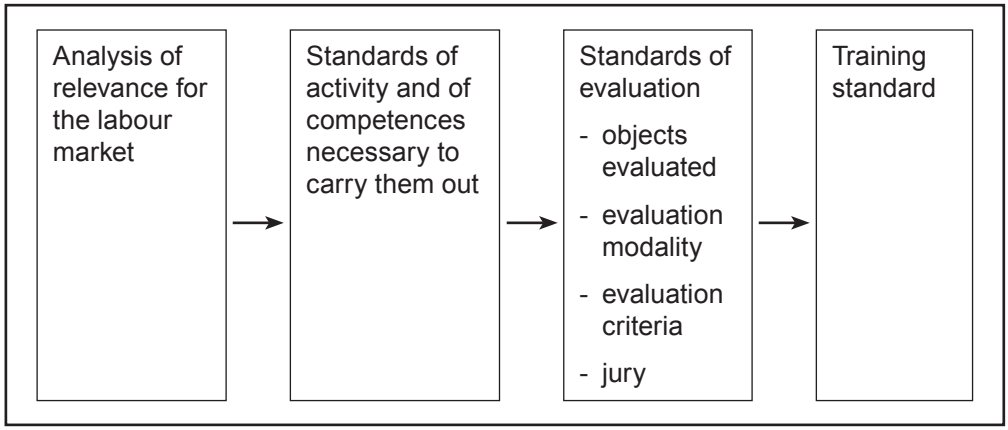

Diagram 1: Process leading to the registration of a qualification

However, if organisations consent to such investment, it is because of the key incentives which are built into the system (North 1990). Certifications in France apply equally to initial and continuing training. In cases where a certification is not registered in the Register, the courses cannot be refunded by the State to the companies. This legal disposition hinges on the spirit of the 2002 law which sought to increase the readability of competences for the labour market and fight against unemployment.

There are similarities between the case of France and South Africa: first they were both somehow ahead of their times in developing qualification frameworks. Second it can be seen in both cases as an aggregate of national responses to current policy challenges rather than as an attempt to adopt a model of educational organisation within a trend towards “institutional isomorphism” between countries. Both countries are moving between a regional pull and a national push. In South Africa, it is more a case of national pull and regional push as this country is a leader in the field.

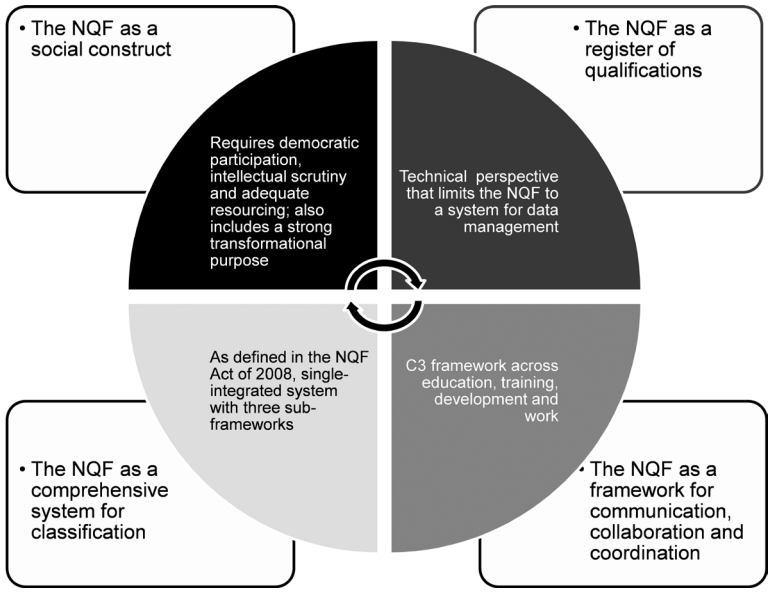

Diagram 2: Evolving understandings of the NQF (Isaacs 2011)

The evolving understandings of the NQF in Isaacs' (2011) diagram show the balanced, mature way in which the NQF is envisaged in South Africa. It seems that the phase of advocacy versus criticism is over and that a phase of communication is in order. It is questionable to say that in France the NQF is a social construct, considering the small number of people who are even aware that there is an NQF, and of what an NQF is. Learners and families are using a very valid intuitive notion of qualifications: qualification equals employment, even if this equation no longer holds in practice. But people will only see the pay off if NQFs are contributing to enhancing their employability: transparency, quality assurance, good governance have been the tools in France. They might also be relevant in South Africa.

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Notes

The implementation and labour market impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: synopsis of ILO research findings

Christine Evans-Klock

THE ILO'S MISSION ON SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

In the International Labour Conference 2008 *General Discussion on Skills to improve productivity, employment growth and development*, many member States identified reducing skills mismatch and improving ability to meet current and future labour market needs as their main objective in the area of skills development. The member States requested that the Office develop policy advice and technical cooperation to help them develop institutions and practical tools for anticipating and meeting skills needs, for linking employers to training providers, for including skills development in broad employment policies and development strategies, and for ensuring that training systems target women and broaden accessibility to persons with disabilities, to disadvantaged youth, and to those in rural areas.

Thus the ILO's mission in the area of skills development is to work with constituents so that their skills development policies and systems improve the employability of workers, the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises, and the inclusiveness of economic growth.

The need to improve the pathway from education and training to productive and decent work and to lifelong learning was conveyed in the 2008 *Social Justice Declaration for a Fair Globalisation*, which defines an enabling environment for promoting employment as one in which "individuals can develop and update the necessary capacities and skills they need to enable them to be productively occupied for their personal fulfillment and the common well-being." The global job crisis in 2009 heightened awareness of the need for skills development systems and institutions and for public employment services that can respond to rapid changes in labour markets, that can identify where new jobs are being created and identify and meet training needs to move workers and young people into them, moving from areas of lower productivity to those with higher productivity.

Constituents request information on skills development policies and programmes that have proved successful, assistance in identifying the enabling conditions for their success, and support in adapting good practices to their own circumstances and policy priorities. Their consistent request to the Office is to not just identify "good practices" but to help them understand why some policies or approaches work well, with what financial and human resources, over what period of time, and, importantly, depending on what complementary policies in other areas of concern to education, employment, and economic development.

NQFS IN PERSPECTIVE: THE G20 TRAINING STRATEGY FOR STRONG, SUSTAINED AND BALANCED GROWTH

In Pittsburgh in 2009, the G20 called on the ILO, in partnership with other International Organisations to develop a training strategy to support strong, sustainable and balanced growth. In preparing this strategy, the ILO also worked closely with employers and workers and drew on the tripartite agreements adopted at the International Labour Conference in June 2008 on *Skills for improved productivity, employment growth and development* (ILO 2008).

The resulting *G20 Training Strategy* (ILO 2010), submitted at the Toronto G20 Summit, provides a strategic framework for linking training to the world of work. It takes a life-cycle perspective based on broad availability of good-quality education as a foundation for future training; matching skills supply to the needs of enterprises and labour markets; enabling workers and enterprises to adjust to changes in technology and markets; and anticipating and preparing for the skill needs of the future.

The Multi-Year Action Plan on Development adopted at the G20 Seoul Summit, in November, 2010, called on international organisations to work together to support developing countries, in particular low-income countries, to "build on the G20 Training Strategy submitted at the Toronto Summit and begin by identifying existing gaps that act as barriers to increasing investment in skills development and productivity..."

The following excerpts from the G20 Training Strategy set out the underlying principles, list the essential building blocks and identify the critical areas of policy coordination that are needed for a robust skills development system. The excerpt serves as a reminder that any set of tools, such as qualifications frameworks, can never be effective in isolation.

WIDELY AGREED GUIDING PRINCIPLES LINKING SKILLS AND WORK

Good-quality basic education for all is an agreed goal and an essential prerequisite for further skills development.

Establishing solid bridges between vocational education, training and skills development, and the world of work makes it more likely that workers will learn the "right" skills, namely those required by the evolving demands of labour markets, enterprises and workplaces in different economic sectors and industries.

Effective partnerships between governments, employers' and workers' organisations, and training institutions and providers are critical to anchor the world of learning in the world of work.

Broad and continued access to training and skills development opens up the opportunities for and benefits of both initial and lifelong learning to all, enabling women and men of all ages, in both urban and rural areas, to fulfil their aspirations.

Dedicated policies and measures are required to facilitate access to training and skills development by individuals and groups hindered by various barriers, including poverty and low income, ethnic origin, disability and migrant status.

Education and skills policies are more effective when well-coordinated with employment, social protection, industrial, investment and trade policies.

By using up-to-date information, those working in education and training can assess the match between the skills they are teaching and those in demand in the workplace.

When that information is put at the disposal of young people and workers by employment and vocational guidance services, it can help them to make better-informed choices about education and training.

SUSTAINING ROBUST TRAINING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS

Robust training policies and systems are grounded in the characteristics and institutions of each country. Nevertheless, a number of *common building blocks* can be identified. A good skills development system will be able to: anticipate skill needs; engage employers and workers in decisions about training provision, including in specific sectors; maintain the quality and relevance of training; make training accessible to all sectors of society; ensure viable and equitable financing mechanisms; and continuously evaluate the economic and social outcomes of training.

To keep training relevant, institutional and financial arrangements must build solid bridges between the world of learning and the world of work. Bringing together business and labour, government and training providers, at the local, industry and national levels, is an effective means of securing the relevance of training to the changing needs of enterprises and labour markets.

CONVERGENCE ACROSS POLICIES

Skills and employment policies should be viewed together. The full value of one policy set is realised when it supports the objectives of the other.

For investments in training to yield maximum benefit to workers, enterprises and economies, countries' capacity for coordination is most important in three areas:

(1) connecting basic education to technical training, technical training to labour market entry, and labour market entry to workplace and lifelong learning;

(2) ensuring continuous communication between employers and training providers so that training meets the needs and aspirations of workers and enterprises; and

(3) integrating skills development policies with other policy areas – not only labour market and social protection policies, but also industrial, investment, trade and technology policies, and regional or local development policies.

In sum, the effective *utilisation of skills in the workplace* both depends on and contributes to conditions conducive to innovation and enterprise development; effective labour market orientation and mediation services; and well-informed decisions about education and training policies.

ILO RESEARCH ON NQFs

The ILO's research on NQFs began with the publication of a Working Paper by Professor Michael Young in 2005, entitled *National Qualifications Frameworks: Their feasibility for effective implementation in developing countries*. He examined both the potential benefits and challenges of NQF implementation in some depth. The following excerpts are taken from his overview and conclusions:

> A growing number of countries, at very different stages of economic development and with very different cultural and political histories, either have introduced, or are in the process of introducing, some form of NQF. There is also evidence of considerable "borrowing" of structures and design principles that were originally formulated in industrial countries such as England, Scotland and New Zealand, where the early NQF developments were introduced in the 1980s.
>
> The growing international support for establishing NQFs reflects both the mediating role and support of international agencies such as the OECD, the World Bank and the ILO, and the funding priorities of donors and the growing interest on the part of regional organisations such as the EU in promoting links, interchangeability and portability between national systems of qualifications.
>
> On the other hand, the broadening support for NQFs across the world is based on relatively little evidence from the experience of countries that have already introduced NQFs that they can achieve the goals claimed from them. Furthermore, the new proposals appear to take little account of the considerable difficulties faced by countries that have already attempted to implement NQFs.
>
> It may appear that the report places greater emphasis on the problems rather than on the benefits of NQFs. However, first, the report endorses the widely accepted public goals of NQFs that are associated with promoting social justice, improving access to education and training and raising standards. Secondly, the introduction of NQFs has faced real difficulties, in all countries, that cannot be wished away or put down simply to prejudice, vested interests or unthinking opposition to change. Thirdly, the potential benefits of NQFs are already widely publicised in many government and other proposals. ... up to now, governments considering the introduction of an NQF have neglected the institutional context within which the implementation of NQFs is designed to take place.
>
> There is undoubtedly evidence of convergence and increased mobility both within and between national economies, and this lends support to at least some of the assumptions of the movement to introduce NQFs. Qualification systems are likely to become more, not less, international and make more demands on NQFs as systems of reference or quality assurance. NQFs, can contribute modestly to greater integration of the developed and developing worlds from which both can benefit, provided lessons are learned from past experience, and they do not get bogged down in the complex and ultimately disastrous specifying of standards, units, levels and credit systems and quality assurance.
>
> It is also possible, if the implementation of NQFs is not forced through prematurely, that the existence of even a relatively "loose" framework could contribute to cross-sector dialogues and agreements which might not have happened without it. In

the process, it is possible that those involved in formal education, employers and employees and the wider community will develop a greater understanding of the kinds of learning that are possible in such different contexts, and as a result develop a greater trust in the potential of equivalences. However, this will only occur on the basis of recognising the fundamental differences between the types of learning and knowledge rather than assuming their equivalence a priority.

It is less clear that NQFs are a tool either for redistributing education and training opportunities, or for stimulating demand for more people to get qualified, as governments in many developing countries hope. Inequalities in education are a product of the institutional arrangements of a society; it is those institutional arrangements more than the qualification structure that sustains wider inequalities.

Another reason for being cautionary about the distributional possibility of NQFs is that the potential, at least on its own, of accrediting the informal, the experiential and the tacit dimensions and types of learning and knowledge has been vastly exaggerated. All learning involves a tacit dimension; it is never adequately described as the transmission of formal knowledge or skills. However, much tacit or experiential learning is limited on its own because it remains cut off from the powerful bodies of knowledge that human societies have developed over the centuries, and from which so many in developing countries are excluded.

The limitations of an NQF are inherent in the assumption that learning can be adequately expressed in terms of outcomes. Outcomes cannot grasp the nature of bodies of knowledge and the complex processes we describe as transmission, pedagogy and curriculum through which they are acquired and renewed. An effective NQF must expand the space for these processes and will be better able to do this if it is less, rather than more, prescriptive. Narrow prescription is always a product of insecurity and a search for certainty and accountability in a world which is neither certain nor accountable.

A major theme of this report has been the importance of trust and the dependence of qualifications, and therefore NQFs, on trust. Establishing trust is incompatible with a narrow prescription of outcomes, especially where both skills and bodies of knowledge are becoming more fluid and changing faster than ever before. In these new circumstances, establishing trust rather than merely setting and monitoring standards will be the major task of qualification agencies and authorities.

Three factors have been identified as inhibiting the implementation ofNQFs: over-complex approaches, over-ambitious visions, and top down strategies. None of these approaches to implementation take account of the realities in which qualifications actually work. A logical conclusion would appear to be that any future strategy especially for a developing country with limited resources should be based on simplicity, an incremental vision and encouraging local initiative.

Expanded local learning needs qualification frameworks to link the learning acquired in local institutions in more formalised systems and provide pathways to their highest reaches. It is in institution building, supported by a developmental approach to qualification frameworks, that developing countries must put their investment and their energies, not the other way around. Countries can link

> local, regional and sector initiatives to a long-term vision. They can draw on the potential of collaborating with neighbouring countries – not necessarily in regional frameworks, but in pooling resources for research and development and pilots. NQFs need units, credits and level descriptors, but they have to be embedded in their uses, not developed as abstract lists as is so often seen. A fully workable NQF is not something that can be designed in advance of implementation; it will be the outcome of many different initiatives and reforms over many years. There is no other way.

Building on this realistic examination, the ILO then produced "*An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks: Conceptual and Practical Issues for Policy Makers"*, written by Ron Tuck and published in 2007. The uniqueness of this Guide is that unlike the body of literature available at that time which mainly focused on the potential benefits of such frameworks, it brings a more balanced perspective to the subject. Setting up an NQF, in a mechanical sense, may be a relatively quick exercise. And many initiatives set off without a realistic and practical expectation of the preconditions and potential pitfalls, and the amount of time and financial resources required, in their development. The Guide responded to the relatively large degree of enthusiasm and the relative paucity of understanding of the technical and institutional complexity of NQFs. It aimed to assist policy-makers in making informed judgments not only how but whether to pursue the development of an NQF in meeting the specific needs of their training systems.

The Guide's conclusions include the following key advice to policy-makers:

> An NQF can help to address a number of skills challenges; however, an NQF is not a quick solution to the many skills challenges faced by a country. Without clear objectives and an understanding of how an NQF can best be developed, implementation can be a lengthy and costly endeavour.
>
> Conducting a preliminary analysis to be clear about rationales for the development of an NQF is vital. It should enable policy-makers to get beyond general NQF rhetoric and focus on the specific needs of the country and lay the foundation for a needs-led approach to NQF design and implementation. It is important to be sure that there is a real problem or need to be addressed. Obviously, it is highly counter-productive to impose 'solutions' where a problem does not exist. It is also important to be clear about priorities, especially where there are significant resource constraints. For example, revising all VET qualifications to create a fully outcome-based modular system is an expensive undertaking and the benefits may not immediately justify the investment. It may suggest focusing efforts on one sector of education and training rather than a comprehensive NQF.
>
> The approach to NQF construction should also be decided on the basis of fit-for-purpose. The experience of first generation NQFs suggests that there is practical value in allowing for sector differences within an overall framework.
>
> An NQF is only a framework. It can play a vital role in supporting reforms but if it is not part of a wider strategy, it may achieve very little. There can be exaggerated and unrealistic impressions of what the building of an NQF can achieve in isolation from other developments. The key to successful NQF implementation is to develop a broad strategy that takes account of all factors influencing success.

These include: policy coherence across different ministries; an enabling funding regime; support to education and training institutions including the development of learning materials and professional development. The most important thing is to develop genuine support and trust for the NQF among stakeholders. Employers' and workers' organisations have a key role to play in this process.

The key issue for policy makers in relation to the development of new qualifications is the pace and scale of development. While the exact costing of NQF development is extremely difficult, a large-scale NQF can be expensive (for example nearly Euro 14 million over eight years in South Africa), developing the framework itself may be a relatively quick exercise. However, it can take a substantially longer time to build other supporting elements, including trust and credibility and for an NQF to take root in society and achieve intended objectives (for example 15-20 years in Scotland and in New Zealand and 10 years in Australia).

DEFINITIONS

A *qualification framework* is an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes, that is, clear statements of what the learner must know or be able to do whether learned in a classroom, on-the-job, or less formally. The qualifications framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another, within and across occupations or industrial sectors (and even across vocational and academic fields) of the NQF, is designed to include both vocational and academic qualifications in a single framework. (Tuck 2007)

But what is a "Qualification"? Traditionally, the word relates to formal means of signifying that someone has completed a prescribed process in an education or training programme offered at an educational or training institution. In some countries, qualification means something close to a "competence" for a given occupational practice. Qualifications have been linked to official statements that an individual has been accepted to practice in a certain field (such as plumber, teacher or lawyer.) Degrees, diplomas and certificates are seen as types of qualifications, as formal "awards" which signify that the bearer has some knowledge or competencies, or that they have successfully completed some learning programme.

A different usage of "qualification" has emerged as synonymous for education programmes, or as a set of formal requirements for achieving a qualification. In this usage the "qualification" is the statement of learning outcomes and associated requirements for awards. The creation of a qualification here refers to the official development of a set of requirements for the awarding of the qualification in practice (Allais 2010).

To expand the empirical evidence available, the ILO launched an international research project on the implementation of NQFs and their use and impact in 2008, looking mainly at developing countries. The research aimed to produce empirical

evidence and analysis of the design process, implementation and the impact of NQFs on the labour market and employment outcomes that countries expect from them. The research examines the evidence of countries' results to date and the extent to which stakeholders have confidence or questions about NQFs' eventual effectiveness. The evidence was intended to inform ILO's advice to countries on whether, and if so, then how, to introduce a qualifications framework as part of a strategy to achieve their wider skills development and employment goals.

STUDY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF NQFS IN 16 COUNTRIES

The fundamental objective of policy advice is to help constituents avoid "borrowing" policies from elsewhere, and to help them inform their own policy choices based on consideration of a good menu of options, capacity to assess needs, and understanding of the potential costs, risks, and benefits of different approaches and policies. The ILO Skills and Employability Department is continually asked by constituents to provide advice in adapting and applying the principles and practices included in the *ILO Recommendation concerning Human Resources Development: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning,* 2004 (R-195) to their specific needs and objectives.

Thus, empirical research on NQFs looks at what works under which circumstances, with what efforts by which stakeholders over what period of time, and with what complementary or related policies, institutions, and capabilities. The research focuses on countries' experience with NQFs at the decision and design stage as well as at the implementation stage in order to identify the source of problems and the elements of success.

The research report was written by Dr. Stephanie Allais, a Research Associate in the ILO Skills and Employability Department. Several of the country studies were conducted by the European Training Foundation (ETF), which has separately drawn its own conclusions from the studies. The draft ILO report was presented to an international experts meeting held at the ILO in May, 2010. Representatives of international organisations and bilateral agencies, and independent researchers discussed the findings and analysis and compared them with their own research and experience.

KEY QUESTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF NQFS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

- To what extent are employers using qualifications frameworks in their hiring decisions?
- What difference do these qualifications make to workers in the job market? To what extent are national qualification authorities monitoring these results?
- Are qualifications frameworks helping to make the most of investments in education and training, or is there concern that NQFs are crowding out investments in extending accessibility of good training, improving teacher training and working conditions, or developing labour market information systems and employment services?

- Are NQFs helping countries better match skills provision and demand, improve accountability of training providers, and expand the involvement of employers and workers in training systems?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The selection of cases was based on an attempt to balance a range of criteria. Firstly, countries were chosen to ensure inclusion of four regions: Africa: Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa and Tunisia; the Americas: Chile and Mexico; Asia and the Pacific: Australia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, New Zealand and Sri Lanka; and Europe: England, Northern Ireland and Wales, Lithuania, Scotland, Russia and Turkey. Within regions, cases had to meet the criterion of there being at least some progress in terms of implementing an NQF, so that there would be something of substance to research. There was also an intention to include countries which were outside the Anglophone tradition which has dominated a lot of NQF literature. The selected countries also represent a wide spread of levels of economic development, and a range of differences in terms of geographical and population size, and so on. The study also deliberately included two countries which had not yet started developing NQFs, but which have many years experience in developing frameworks of occupational competencies, Chile and Mexico.

The research was carried out through case studies on each of the 16 qualifications frameworks. Five case studies on the early starter qualifications frameworks (Australia, the English NVQs, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa) were conducted on the basis of existing research and documentation only. No field work was conducted. As qualifications frameworks in these countries have been under implementation for some time, there is a broad existing body of research, literature, evaluations, policy analysis, and official documentation, on the basis of which the case studies were produced. Researchers were asked to summarise the debates about what has and has not been achieved by qualification frameworks in their respective countries and why.

The case studies in the remaining 11 countries were conducted through two stages of field work. For the first stage, the focus was on a description and analysis of the qualifications framework and on the existing system of qualifications that it is designed to reform. For the second stage, the focus was on implementation, use, and impact of the qualifications framework.

Researchers were asked to provide an analytical description of why a qualifications framework was decided upon, how the qualification framework in question has been/is being designed, the progress that has been made, and the problems that have arisen. Researchers were asked to learn from employers, training providers, workers, government agencies the extent of their use of the qualifications frameworks and the extent to which they felt it was serving their needs. Exploring the extent of the use of the qualifications framework was a necessary first step to exploring how well they were achieving some or any of their broader goals. If the framework in question was still in the initial stages of development, researchers

were asked to attempt to understand the extent to which stakeholders feel that, given the design and implementation strategies, it is likely to be used and to succeed in achieving its objectives.

Practical considerations also affected the selection of countries—primarily, locating appropriate researchers in a very short timeframe. Individual researchers were expected to have a minimum of three years professional experience at the national level in education or skills development research or policy implementation, demonstrated ability to undertake research and excellent analysis and writing ability, proven ability to be constructively critical and objective, knowledge of local policy environment, and ability to secure meetings with key roleplayers. One of the more challenging criteria was to identify researchers who were knowledgeable about skills development systems in those countries, but had not been directly involved in the development or implementation of NQFs and thus were more easily able to take an objective view.

For the first phase, researchers collected documents and interviewed as appropriate, the official agency responsible for the qualifications framework, ministries of education and labour, and international and donor organisations working in each country.

The second phase of the research included interviews with a wider range of responsible parties stakeholders, with a focus on understanding the use, implementation, and impact of the qualifications framework, as well as further information on what those interviewed feel the framework will achieve. Interviewees included:

- Representatives of unions from leading industries as well as teacher unions;
- Employer representatives and representatives from leading industries;
- Education and training providers;
- Officials from bilateral or multilateral agencies providing assistance on qualifications frameworks, or consultants and officials from qualifications framework agencies in other countries providing assistance.

Starting from the assumption that qualifications frameworks may differ substantially in different countries, with respect to aims, design, development, approach to implementation, and use, specific evaluation criteria were not developed. Instead, researchers were asked to focus on three main issues:

(1) What systems or approaches exist for monitoring or analyzing impact? How do the designers and managers of the framework expect to see and evaluate impact?

(2) Is there, in the view of designers and managers of the NQF, evidence of impact, and what is it?

(3) How do stakeholders view impact? What do/did they expect from the NQF, and did it meet/is it meeting/do they think it is likely to meet their expectations?

Researchers were provided with an indicative list of possible positive and negative outcomes, and possible indicators for them. For example, a positive outcome could have been increased numbers of people gaining qualifications (through institutional provision and through assessment of informal learning); increased progression of learners to higher levels; increased opportunities for credit accumulation and transfer; evidence of impact in labour markets (e.g. use by employers in recruitment, improved match between education and labour market, and any indicators that this would improve labour market performance, better links between qualification levels and wage/salary rates, emergence of new industries, reduction of gender differences); evidence of continuing involvement by stakeholders; evidence that qualifications had assisted migrants/returning migrants in accessing the labour market. Some possible negative outcomes included a proliferation of unused qualifications; bureaucratization of assessment (e.g. evidence of over-specification and 'box ticking' types of assessment); lack of trust in the new qualifications by employers or educational institutions; opportunity cost—valuable resources redirected into qualifications framework development at the expense of more important priorities such as building or improving educational institutions, upgrading teachers and lecturers, and so on. The emphasis, however, was on researchers finding out what was considered to be evidence of success and failure in their respective countries.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Perhaps the two central messages which must be emphasised is that there is no single right model of NQFs, and that NQFs do not provide quick-fix or simple solutions to the complex problems facing countries in relation to education, skills development, and employment.

Expectations that qualifications frameworks can achieve the ambitious policy objectives claimed for them in relatively limited time periods seem to be ill-founded. This research found little evidence that NQFs are achieving their goals. In many instances this was because NQFs are a recent intervention, and it may be simply too early to tell. Nonetheless, the absence of clearly available evidence of successes, particularly for the older frameworks, is an important finding for a policy that has been so widely accepted internationally. The framework which emerges from this study as the most successful, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, had relatively limited ambitions and may also be the most difficult to replicate, because of the very long-term incremental policy reform process of which it was a part, and the relatively strong educational institutions in Scotland.

The research found little evidence that NQFs have substantially improved communication between education and training systems and labour markets. Case studies were not able to find evidence demonstrating that employers found qualifications easier to use than they had been prior to the introduction of an NQF, nor were other data found to demonstrate that qualifications frameworks have improved the match of supply and demand between education and training

institutions and the labour market. Representatives of qualifications authorities, government agencies, and industry bodies interviewed did not have concrete evidence, evaluations, research that there had been achievements in this regard, and neither did publically available information from these organisations contain such evidence. (See the attached table for a summary of the extent of involvement by employers' organisations at the various stages of NQF design and implementation.)

By comparison with labour market outcomes, there is greater evidence of success of education outcomes. There is some evidence of increased numbers of certificates which recognise existing skills, knowledge, and abilities of workers and potential workers being awarded, although this is on a small scale in most of the countries in the study.

However, in a number of the countries with longer experience of NQFs, a common problem seemed to be that many new qualifications (the word is used here in the sense of formal specifications to obtain a qualification) had been designed and registered on the frameworks but not used.

The main mechanism to create transparency in most of the countries is the specification of *learning outcomes or competency statements*, as well as broader outcomes in level descriptors. Official sets of levels have been created in all the countries, and level descriptors in most of them. While there are considerable expectations about what level descriptors can achieve, the study found little specific evidence from any of the countries that they are useful in making decisions about the location of qualifications on the framework, or about credit transfer, with the exception of Scotland, where they are described as assisting professional judgments. In many cases the implementation of outcomes or competency-based approaches seems to necessitate very elaborate and detailed rules and specifications, which may account for why so many qualifications and competency-standards were developed but not used.

Nearly all case studies suggest that the *lack of employer involvement* in the existing systems is a key reason why qualifications do not meet their needs, and many cite lack of willingness of employers to participate in education and training systems as a reason for introducing NQFs. However, most of the cases revealed continuing disappointment in employers' use of the new system.

In general case studies were not able to find evidence demonstrating that employers found qualifications easier to use than they were prior to the introduction of an NQF. Qualifications authorities, government agencies, and industry bodies interviewed did not have concrete evidence, evaluations, research or even strongly articulated opinions that there had been achievements in this regard.

Several case studies found that qualifications and unit standards/competency standards had been developed with industry involvement but had not been used – in the sense that no institutions had developed learning programmes against them, no one has been assessed against them, and no one has been awarded them. They are merely qualification specifications on an official framework.

Some examples based on the data available at the time the case studies were prepared are outlined below:

- In the English NVQs, many of the qualifications that have been awarded have been linked to specific government-funded projects or government requirements, and not based on direct requests from industry. Employers seem to prefer the old qualifications, even when industry was involved in the design of new ones. Even where there is dissatisfaction with existing qualifications, they may be preferred over qualifications from newly created authorities with no track record.
- In Mexico, 16 of the 128 standards generated 83% of total certificates. Of around 6,330 labour competence technical standards registered up to 2008, 530 had not had any assessment and certification use.
- In South Africa, 787 new qualifications were developed of which only 180 had been used, and the awards conducted against those 180 qualifications represent a tiny fraction of the total awards made, despite the original intention that the new qualifications would replace all existing qualifications.
- In Mauritius none of the new qualifications have been used, eight years after the introduction of the NQF.
- In Botswana only ten courses have been developed based on the standards. The Botswana Training Authority does not have records of learner numbers in these courses, or numbers of achievements against the standards. Few employers found it easy to translate unit standards into practice.

Some of the cases with unexpectedly low use of NQFs by employers may be explained more by business strategies that do not emphasise training than by the characteristics of the training system. More successes were reported where new qualifications were developed in specific sectors, with examples cited in Mexico, Bangladesh and Botswana. These successes have been based on strong human resource development policies in the workplace, that is, where business strategy is based on improving skills and productivity. In many cases, however, industry was reluctant to be involved in training that could lead to demands for higher wages.

- In Malaysia, small companies in particular prefer to employ trained workers or outsource rather than organise training. The provision of publicly-funded training, including for redundant workers, has been met with weak take-up.
- In New Zealand, many firms do not seem to see improving the skill of their lower level workers as part of their competitive strategy and many areas of the labour market do not require such workers to have high levels of skills.

A further discouraging sign of lack of influence on employers is that in the countries with older NQFs, there is little evidence that industry has taken up a greater share of the cost of technical vocational education and training. The difficulties with employer involvement as well as lack of take up of qualifications and competency standards is cause for concern about the likelihood of greater

employer contribution to the financing of training, assessment and certification. Another contradiction with regard to financing is that while NQFs are argued to be necessary to increase access to education and training, they are often associated with the introduction of user fees, both for training, and for assessment and certification.

Besides the practical problem of getting employers to be involved, researchers have also suggested that employers may not always be able to articulate what it is that they require. In some instances, research-based curricula may be more successful, as industry itself may not know what it will require in years to come. Professional bodies and industry chambers may play crucial roles. Seeing such processes as ongoing and developmental, rather than fixed quickly through standards specification, may yield better results. This may help explain what the evidence in the case studies show that NQFs have had relatively more success in specific sectors.

In many instances, NQFs attempt to use *learning outcomes* as providing an exact and transparent description of occupational competencies, and at the same time, providing an exact and transparent basis for the development of learning programmes, for the conducting of assessments, and for evaluation of education quality. Many of the studies show that when outcomes are used in this tight manner, and when expectations are placed on outcomes or competence statements, they tend to proliferate over-specified, detailed, unwieldy, narrow documents which are supposed to be the basis for assessment but their length and complexity makes them unintelligible to anyone other than those involved in standards design. This is often the reasons for qualifications not being used at all. Where they are used, it leads to narrow forms of assessment and fragmented learning experiences. Forcing curricula to be “designed down” from outcome statements trivialises knowledge, and reduces it to pieces of unrelated information. This may explain the low take-up of such qualifications in general and particularly at higher levels. It is also in direct contradiction to policy goals related to “knowledge economies” as well as broader notions of raising educational levels of the workforce, as it leads to narrow qualifications without theoretical components.

Despite some success in the education impact of NQFs, none of the case studies was able to find any specific evidence demonstrating that the status of technical and vocational education and training qualifications had improved since the introduction of the NQFs. Status is obviously not an easy thing to research. However, it is likely that changes like greater influx of learners into programmes previously seen as less desirable (than general education) would have been observed, if they had in fact occurred. In Malaysia and Scotland, the aim of NQFs to develop alternative pathways to higher education had the undesired effect of weakening the character of TVET education as an exit qualification leading into employment.

Finally on this point, if employees’ interests are going to be addressed in NQFs, clearly there needs to be more public concern for building and supporting the involvement of trade unions. The experience from the various countries suggests that far more thought needs to go into considering what roles different stakeholders can and should play, in what types of structures and in which processes.

Policy borrowing emerged as a strong reason why NQFs are being introduced, as well as playing a significant role in how they are being developed. Many countries appear to be influenced more by the claims made about NQFs in other countries than by their proven track records, without considering differences in contexts, and without understanding all aspects of how the framework was developed and implemented. The English NVQs in particular were mentioned in many of the country studies as having played an influential role in the adoption of NQFs or competence frameworks. Donor and development agencies seem to play influential roles, in some cases with regard to decisions to adopt a framework as well as which model to adopt, and in others with financial support.

FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS – FOR THE ILO AND ITS CONSTITUENTS

One of the limitations of the research undertaken to date is that the case studies reflect the views of relatively few representatives of employers, trade unions and training institutions. More in-depth studies in selected countries could be designed to further probe employers' use of qualifications frameworks in their decisions on recruitment, hiring, and on-job-training.

Furthermore, several of the case studies were undertaken at a time when the NQFs had only begun to be implemented. They now merit further efforts to follow their general progress, as well as to look more in-depth at their use in specific sectors. Several countries have subsequently conducted reviews of their system's use and impact (including South Africa, Mexico and Scotland). Both cases could yield important new findings of interest to other countries.

Another approach, apart from looking at NQFs directly, is to investigate a broader set of measures for achieving the important labour market goals pursued through NQFs, as either complementary to qualifications frameworks or as alternative strategies.

The ILO's support for national skills systems reforms in several countries includes sector-based or even national NQFs – as selected between constituents and donor agencies. The design stages with intensive involvement of employers through industry skill councils, as in Bangladesh, will be reviewed to reveal the extent of employers' engagement and how the vocational qualification framework could serve as an integral component of broader skills reform plans.

The ILO continues to follow the documentation being produced on the continuing emerging experience of European Union (EU) countries, in particular through the work of European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and ETF, and of the impact not only on national labour markets but on the European Commission (EC) objective of unifying the European labour market. One of the key questions will be how national governments and the EU track the effect of the European Qualifications Framework on labour migration within the EC. This experience will be of particular interest to other regions which have begun working on regional frameworks.

KEY ILO DOCUMENTS ON SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

All of the country case studies, and the following papers, are available at www.ilo.org/skills.

Allais, S. 2010. *The implementation and impact of national qualifications frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*. Geneva: ILO.

Allais, S., Raffe, D., Strathdee, R., Wheelahan, L. & Young, M. 2009. *Learning from the first qualifications frameworks*. ILO Employment Working Paper No. 44. Geneva: ILO.

ILO. 2008. *Skills to improve productivity, employment growth and development*. Report V of the International Labour Conference. Geneva: ILO.

ILO. 2010. G20 *Training strategy for strong, sustainable and balanced growth*. Geneva: ILO.

Tuck, R. 2007. *An introductory guide to national qualifications frameworks: Conceptual and practical issues for policy makers*. Geneva: ILO.

Young, M. 2004. *National qualifications frameworks: their feasibility and effective implementation in developing countries*. ILO Skills Working Paper no. 22. Geneva: ILO.

Notes

Taking the NQF to the people: thoughts on the South African NQF Advocacy Project

John Arnesen

INTRODUCTION

The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) established some 15 years ago by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) intended to impact positively on the education and training system to the point where it contributed, albeit modestly, to the acceleration of redress, enhancing learning portability, improving articulation and progression, ensuring quality and ultimately creating a better life for all (RSA 1995).

A recent review of the NQF which took over five years, resulted in the introduction of the NQF Act No. 67 of 2008 (RSA 2008), replacing the SAQA Act. The new NQF Act came into effect in June 2009. It reaffirmed the need and role of an integrated NQF. While the NQF Act (*Ibid.*) spells out the roles of three Quality Councils for standard setting and quality assurance namely; the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi), and of SAQA as the oversight coordinating body, it also stipulates that SAQA with the support of the Quality Councils is required to inform the public about the NQF. This part of SAQA's mandate gave rise to the *NQF Advocacy Project*.

The broad intention of the *NQF Advocacy Project* is to communicate with the public, using social marketing principles, so as to enable people in the country to make more informed choices relating to qualifications, providers, career and learning paths, and education, training and development in general. The idea of *social marketing* was introduced into the academic literature in the 1970s (Kotler and Zaltman 1971) and has since gained traction as an emerging discipline in organisations, mostly in the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK). In the UK today, there is an *Institute for Social Marketing*[5] and the *National Social Marketing Centre*[6]. In the USA the Social Marketing National Collaborative is the most prominent and active community of experts.

In social marketing, the focus is not commercial gain but rather positive social change without profit to the marketer (Kotler and Lee 2005). A popular definition of social marketing is 'the systematic application of marketing, along with other concepts, to achieve specific behavioural goals for social good' (National Social Marketing Centre 2010). A typical example in South Africa of a social marketing campaign is the *Love Life* awareness campaign relating to HIV and AIDS. The campaign intention in this instance is to change behaviour so as to support positively and measurably the reduction and ultimately the containment of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in South Africa.

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[5] www.ism.stir.ac.uk

[6] www.nsms.org.uk

The bigger challenge of social marketing unlike in commercial marketing is that the social marketer needs to develop an integrated marketing and communication strategy and campaign to influence desired shifts in behaviour without the usual attraction of the features and benefits of a tangible and desired product/service/brand. To explain this further, some typical social marketing challenges are:

- To give up an addictive behavior – stop smoking;
- To resist peer pressure – be sexually abstinent;
- To be uncomfortable – donate blood;
- To give up leisure time – volunteer; and
- To reduce pleasure – take shorter showers.

The above examples are all social marketing challenges where a positive impact will benefit society but in all cases a behavioural change is needed. These outcomes are very different to the outcomes of commercial marketing where the consumer exchanges money for a product or service sometimes even regardless of the impact on society.

NQF ADVOCACY PROJECT ORGANISING FRAMEWORK

To ensure that the *NQF Advocacy Project* is seen as a collaborative effort, a Project Steering Committee (PSC) has been formed. The PSC comprises two nominated representatives from each of the following organisations: the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), SAQA, the CHE, the QCTO and Umalusi. The intention in the project is to bridge communication gaps, introduce innovative communication ideas and gain maximum leverage across NQF partner organisations for the *NQF Advocacy Project*. The PSC is convened by SAQA's *NQF Advocacy Project* Director.

The PSC held its first meeting late in 2008. It encouraged public positioning of the NQF in terms of NQF objectives as set out in the Act (RSA 2008). In addition, the NQF is also positioned as the source of trusted and valued information and advice on qualifications, providers and career paths. The PSC in subsequent early meetings set the following strategic objectives for the project team:

- Originate an Integrated Marketing Communication campaign that will educate the public in respect of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
- Ensure that communications look to inform and raise awareness across many markets as to what an NQF accredited qualification truly means.
- Ensure that communications are aimed towards to specific niche markets within the frame of a NQF brand awareness campaign.
- Create top-of-mind ideas for individuals whilst building the NQF as a valued "national asset".
- Move from brand positioning and awareness to a more direct, participative campaign.

- Educate the market on the roles and responsibilities of all South African organisations/ institutions that have any part in the NQF.
- Develop an internal initiative to excite and motivate aligned institutional staff at the same time as the campaign comes to market, that is, deliver on and support the campaign promises.
- Use multiple advocacy communication pathways.

The planning framework in the diagram featured here was agreed to by the PSC. It directed the work of the project team in its early months. The brand positioning (outer ring) was clarified early on and from there the initial awareness campaign was developed and taken to the market.

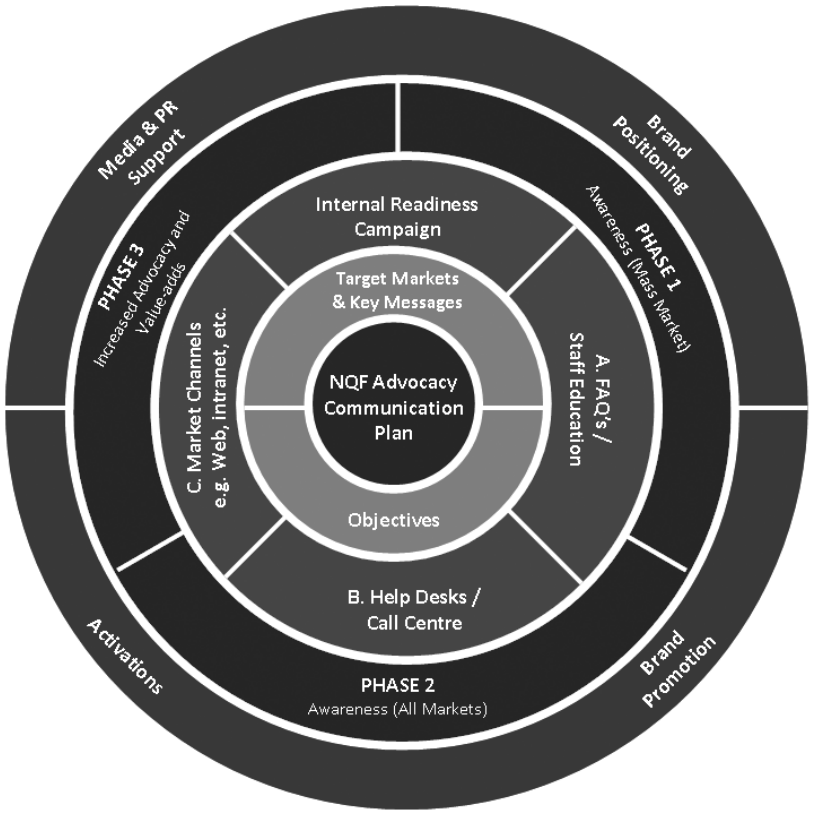

Diagram 1: Planning framework

The NQF brand promise was agreed by the Project Steering Committee, as: "Ensuring genuine, quality qualifications leading to a better life for all". In addition, all related communication collateral produced included the sentence; "*The NQF Advocacy Project is a joint initiative of SAQA, DHET, CHE, Umalusi and QCTO*" as a footnote to the communication element.

The first campaign was to create general awareness of the NQF. The funding for the advertisements was very limited, but where placed, the desired campaign objectives were achieved.

It was essential also to focus on the internal readiness of SAQA and the Quality Councils to ensure that the public awareness campaign was supported by the kinds of advice promised in the campaign. In this regard, three sub-projects were launched early in 2009. They were an NQF website, the establishment of an NQF helpline and the *NQF Ambassador Projec*t – the latter called *Masithethe*.

The website www.nqf.org.za aims to provide a platform for answering questions submitted by learners. The website currently hosts over 14 000 visitors per month. The helpline (0860 111 673) is operating well and currently deals with over 1 000 cases per month. The *NQF Ambassador Project* is gaining momentum. To date there are over 120 active NQF ambassadors from the NQF partner organisations. To support the campaign an NQF exhibition stand was created. This stand is proving to be very popular with both learners and educators at exhibitions.

A joint radio initiative was launched in 2010. Weekly slots have been secured with nine African Language SABC radio stations and each week an expert is hosted by each station who talks to the listeners on a topic related to education, training and development. Public service announcements precede and follow the programme and in these announcements the value of the NQF is reiterated. These programmes reach 2.3 million deep rural and poor South Africa listeners weekly.

The current media campaign targets specific communities and strongly suggests a call to action. It was launched in 2010. It is known as the *kidz campaign.* This initiative is an integrated campaign with supporting posters, brochures, a video and web banner adverts. The website and helpline are clearly advertised and the response is very positive.

The *NQF Advocacy Project* is also planning a series of seminars to build general awareness, understanding and appreciation of the NQF. These workshops will target specific groups of people, such as life orientation teachers. The latest concept that will hopefully be piloted in the current financial year will be the *NQF Outreach Project*. The intention is to train a team of NQF promoters who will spend at least a week in a rural community talking to community groups, teachers, learners and local leaders.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

There has been much progress since the *NQF Advocacy Project* launched in May 2009. However, there is still much to do. Currently the original Integrated Marketing Communication campaign is under review and a formal market research project is also underway to better understand the size and shape of the primary target market (poorest of the poor learners, and learners living in deep rural areas). Current levels of awareness, understanding and appreciation of the NQF in this market segment will also be researched.

In addition, following a recent special *NQF Ambassadors* workshop held for NQF leaders from the Department of Higher Education and Training, SAQA and the

Quality Councils it was agreed that while the public campaign was essential and must continue to grow, a special initiative needs to be launched to build NQF awareness, understanding and appreciation of the NQF among educators, policy-makers, organised business, organised labour and civil society.

The social marketer in the 21st century needs to also influence regulation and service delivery, and educate and change leadership perceptions (Andreasen, 2006). The *NQF Advocacy Project* can potentially assist the leaders of NQF organisations by providing information about target markets, and data regarding challenges or systemic blockages within groups of learners.

The project aims to awaken learners and stakeholders to opportunities in the system but recognises that there needs to be a balance between building 'brand awareness' and facilitating a deeper theoretical understanding of the NQF. The *NQF Advocacy Project* cannot run in isolation from the systemic development and implementation of the NQF. While there is an opportunity to create both 'push and pull' factors within the wider system through the *NQF Advocacy Project* as described, it is important to balance these activities with the reality of what the NQF, through the partner organisations, can deliver. While the initial plan was focused on building the awareness of the NQF amongst learners, it is also evident that the NQF needs to be understood and valued within the education training and development sector as well as by organised business, organised labour and organised civil society. Ongoing effort and resources are needed in this regard.

CLOSING COMMENTS

The *NQF Advocacy Project* is built on the understanding that the NQF is an important building block for creating a society that understands the importance of learning and recognises quality learning regardless of where it is achieved. The *NQF Advocacy Project* aims to play a small role in the creation of a world class NQF which provides an effective and efficient framework for communication, collaboration and coordination for the benefit of learners, communities and the country at large.

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Notes

Militant Modesty: Communication and impact in the mission of the National Qualifications Framework

Edward French and Melissa King

INTRODUCTION

This article is a personal reflection by the authors on aspects of national qualifications frameworks in terms of scope and impact. This reflection is based in part on the collection of papers, presentations and debates from two symposiums that were convened jointly by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on 8-9 September 2011. While the two days gave us a springboard for discussion, the article is not intended as proceedings of the symposiums, and neither does it reflect the views of either SAQA or the ILO. The various concept and research papers by SAQA and the ILO informing the symposiums are included in this publication, as are the presentations given in the second symposium by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) regions. These speak for themselves, and this article does not reproduce or summarise these. Responses and points made by participants during the two days offered us a way into what we have selected as issues for discussion: these emerged from recurring themes and concerns throughout the symposiums.

In some taxonomies of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) the minimal NQF is described as "communicative", while the most comprehensive and ambitious is described as "transformative". In this article we use an enhanced notion of communication that sees communication as central, and as something much more powerfully transformative than a minor intervention. Together with "communication", the notion of "militant modesty" provides a linking motif in this reflection on the very diverse proceedings and background literature of two symposiums aimed at "*Maximising the potential of qualifications frameworks*".

In order to set the scene for readers who did not attend the symposiums, we open with a summary overview of the two days, with reference to the papers and presentations included in this publication. We then move on to a broad reflection on communication, considering why it should not be regarded as a mere starting point in the mission of the NQF. The phrase "militant modesty" is unpacked to make it available as a controlling stance in taking forward communication in the NQF. Much of the debate on communication during the symposiums is linked to the problem of stakeholder participation in the NQF, so we explore the possibilities and limitations of collaboration and cooperation in relation to stakeholder groups. We then move on to a central focus of the symposium: that while the NQF is an enabling mechanism, a qualifications framework should not be expected to address the entire range of challenges relating to employment and skills development. This reality check leads us to consider and critique the notion of impact studies. We discuss whether the very idea of "impact" in evaluation can be seen as an adequate notion for the valuing of interventions, and include an urgent call for the presentation of far more concrete, non-conceptual evidence for the effects and influence of the NQF. A related undercurrent throughout

the symposiums was the issue of the role of theory and research in the work of the NQF, and we include some reflections on this topic. We close by returning to the idea of the "communicative NQF", and consider some striking developments in communicative action in the new landscape of the South African NQF.

OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUMS

Common to both symposiums were the presentations related to lessons learned from NQF research. These covered conceptual theories of national qualifications frameworks (Keevy and Bolton 2011), qualifications frameworks for portability and transfer (Castejon 2011), and labour market impacts of national qualifications frameworks (Evans-Klock 2011). The first day focused on the South African NQF for a predominantly South African audience, including representatives of South African employers, organised labour, and qualifications and quality assurance bodies. On the second day the focus was on research and progress overviews relating to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and the African continent. The ILO presented a research survey of national qualifications frameworks of twelve countries in the region, including a synthesis of views on design and impact from those involved (Aggarwal 2011). Inputs on emerging NQFs in the region (Modungwa and Molwane 2011, Ramdaz 2011, Gertze 2011, Nkanza 2011, Keevy and Bolton 2011) were given to an audience which included representatives from the SADC region and the African continent.

In addition, each symposium provided an opportunity for information sharing on two projects currently taking place in support of the *NQF: the South African NQF Advocacy project*, aimed at taking the NQF to the people, and the University of the Western Cape's continuing education programme '*Lifelong Learning and National Qualifications Frameworks: Leaders for Learning*', which is supported by SAQA and will be launched in February 2012.

On both days opening remarks were made by Samuel Isaacs (CEO, SAQA) and Vic van Vuuren (Director, Decent Work Team for Eastern and Southern Africa and South African Country Office). Both talked to the need for a balance between the urgency of skills development in the context of the current economic climate, and the need for careful and sustained long term planning and researched understandings of goals and methods. On both days also specific responses to key presentations were invited from organised business and organised labour: a number of pertinent issues relating to stakeholder participation were raised in these interactions, as discussed in Section 3 below.

The group discussions on Day 1 were informed by the various ways in which the South African NQF and its value is perceived. Responses from groups tended to focus on the expectations of users, in particular workers with lower-end skills, and the needs of the "NEET" youth (not in employment, education or training). Several participants expressed concerns about the levels of frustrations in the country, and fears that notions of lifelong learning do not speak to those with practical priorities such as employability. In this respect, it is clear that as a country we need to engage in deeper

consideration of the dimensions of the interaction between national qualifications and labour markets, as suggested by the ILO research. Some groups concluded that there was a need to 'repackage' the NQF in relation to what it can realistically achieve and support.

On Day 2 the focus was on progress in the development of national qualifications frameworks in the SADC region, as described above. Within the international community there is a specifically African community of increasingly expert practice regarding national qualification frameworks. What is especially interesting here is the development of decidedly individual approaches in each country. Listening to the speakers, one was inclined to qualify the idea of "policy learning". There has been abounding advice and influence, but none of the SADC countries involved seemed in any way to have slavishly followed a model. This approach is in line with the suggestion given in the ILO research, that '… any future strategy, especially for a developing country with limited resources, should be based on simplicity, an incremental vision and encouraging local initiative' (Evans-Klock 2011).

While there were some differences in approach (primarily in terms of scope and sector focus, as can be seen in the regional presentations in this publication), various common areas and concerns were also discussed. The key challenge was recognised as moving from planning to implementation, and underlying this were concerns about human resources and capacity building for successful implementation. In the process of moving towards implementation, ensuring common understandings of the aims and objectives of the NQF across different stakeholder groups is central.

The group discussion report backs on Day 2 took very different trajectories. One issue raised by more than one group and in plenary discussion with regional representatives was that of RPL. The necessity for RPL is clearly recognised, and qualifications frameworks are seen as an enabling mechanism for RPL; but challenges associated with over-complex processes, resistance to change, and different conceptions of knowledge still need to be addressed. And indeed the plea from one group report back was to move from talk to implementation of the SADC qualifications framework, in order to share learnings and deal with common concerns. It was also noted that SAQA, representing a pioneering NQF, is doing valuable work in various African countries. Far from pushing some triumphalist model, this work encourages reflective and appropriate development in order to learn more from shortcomings revealed in the South African experience.

In a foreshadowing of our exploration of "the communicative NQF" in the rest of this article, we note that the collaboration with the ILO and with representatives from the rest of region in itself represents one type of communicative action enabled by the NQF.

SOME THOUGHTS ON COMMUNICATION

In this perspective of the "communicative NQF", we would like to argue that communication is the most powerful function of an NQF.

It sometimes seemed to the developers of early NQFs that while they were committed to flexibility and responsiveness, they could not do their work without legislating strict requirements. This was perhaps especially the case in South Africa, where the NQF was seen as an instrument for transformation from the debased formalism of learning under apartheid, to learning that satisfied a range of ideal critical outcomes. The achievement of these outcomes was backed by a complex regulatory regime to "give teeth" to the aspiration. Each requirement was highly rational, but the totality was seen by many as unmanageable and stimulated resistance, withdrawal or desperate efforts to appear to comply.

In the form of the South African NQF subsequent to the new NQF Act of 2008, the more prescriptive requirements of the original NQF (such as those relating to qualification design and quality assurance compliance) are applied with a lighter touch. Three quality councils enact sub-frameworks which they deem appropriate to their sectors, but satisfying broad statutory goals. SAQA as the overarching authority has lost much of its regulatory power. Some felt that it had been reduced to a "mere" communication and research role, with various minor responsibilities. Instead, however, the enhanced demand for communication looks set to become a far more effective source of power. We will see this later in the article when we look at some of the communicative functions of SAQA.

In nature, information and communication systems are what life is all about. Genes, cells, synapses, enzymes are essentially bearers of information: instructions, warnings, design specifications, advice. These lead to sensations, movements, actions, feelings, beliefs. And then there is the brain and the greater mystery of the –mind-processors, interpreters, makers of "reality". This is not at all mechanical, but intensely organic and ultimately spiritual. Information, effectively communicated, changes reality. It cannot do this without some form of power or authority, but its power can lie in the ability to activate and shape the power and authority of other agencies. In the case of an institution like the NQF a statutory responsibility to inquire, inform, enable informed judgments, and communicate these effectively in places where it matters (among workers, learners, educators, directors general) can be much more powerful than managing power-draining direct interventions for which it is not resourced.

COLLABORATION AND COOPERATION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS

Communication gives power to the NQF. But the NQF is also seen as a 'relational device', a mechanism not only for communication, but for cooperation and collaboration across education, training and work[7]. In this view, a central aim is to facilitate relationships between different components of the education and training system.

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[7] The phrase "Communication, coordination, collaboration for quality in education, training, development and work" is a key motif in *Towards a map of NQF-related research: Abstracts and summaries for the NQF Research Conference June 201*0. The terms "a framework for communicating, coordination and collaboration" is also used as a descriptor for the NQF in Keevy and Bolton's paper developed for the symposium.

At a systemic level, this position is reinforced by the *Guidelines on Strategy and Priorities for the National Qualifications 2011/12* (Department of Higher Education and Training 2011), which puts forward the idea of collaboration between the different quality councils responsible for schooling, occupational training and higher education:

> The system of collaboration is a fundamental requirement of the new NQF arrangements for which SAQA is responsible (NQF Act, s. 13(1)(f)(i)). The system of collaboration will guide mutual relations among SAQA and the QCs (Department of Higher Education and Training 2011: 3).

As a proposition for a central goal of the South African NQF (and also for regional qualifications frameworks), there is certainly support for ideas relating to collaboration and cooperation. As one participant put it, "Everyone agrees that without collaboration, the mismatch between education, training and the world of work will continue and indeed worsen". But understandings of the nature of the mismatch, and the nature of collaboration through the NQF, are varied. To what degree a qualifications system is responsible for or can address any of the disparities between education, training and work is at the heart of understanding what the NQF as an instrument for cooperation and collaboration can and can't achieve.

We begin with an indication of some of the views expressed during the symposiums, in relation to areas of challenge in education and training: these have been noted as 'mismatches' in the education, training and development landscape. We then move on to a discussion of how (and whether) the NQF as a tool for collaboration between stakeholders could address these.

There is a mismatch between the products of basic education in terms of their readiness for vocational or technical training; and in terms of their readiness to enter the world of work.

In the ILO presentation the crucial role of basic education as a platform for further learning was strongly emphasised. Evans-Klock (2011) noted one of the guiding principles of the G20 Training Strategy: "Good-quality basic education for all is an agreed goal and an essential prerequisite for further skills development." In discussion this standpoint was endorsed, and problems in South African schooling were identified as having a negative impact on throughput in relation to skills training and the achievement of occupational and professional qualifications. Clearly, though, the improvement of general schooling is an endeavour way beyond the scope of the NQF; and while the NQF notionally incorporates the schooling system, and should influence it, its core concern is post-school learning and its relationship to the world of work.

There is a mismatch between vocational and technical qualifications and their related training offerings, the needs of employers in terms of skills gaps, and the needs of learners in terms of job opportunities.

Clearly this is a key area for the NQF as a collaborative project. A qualifications framework should be able to play the role of establishing what one participant termed as "solid bridges" between vocational education, training and skills development on the one hand, and workplace needs and job opportunities on the other: such bridges

ensure that workers learn skills that are in demand, and that training interventions are focused on the needs of an industry or a sector. Throughout the symposiums it was recognised that our qualifications and training landscape is characterised by gaps between what is on offer and what is needed – one example brought up was that the number of qualifications which continue to be generated and registered on the NQF is not matched by uptake and delivery of these qualifications in the real world by real learners through real providers and institutions. We do not appear to have successfully used a qualifications framework to (for example) improve labour mobility, match skills to job opportunities, develop sufficient recognition of prior learning and experience mechanisms, and so on.

In the ILO presentations, both Evans-Klock (2011) and Aggarwal (2011) stressed that, "The potential benefits of training are not realised without job rich-growth." The importance of developing and understanding strategies for education and training in the context of economic scenarios and fiscal policies was a key topic throughout both symposiums. Vic van Vuuren of the ILO noted that in South Africa 9% growth is needed to address our high unemployment rate of 26%: whether this is feasible or not, the challenge of skills development is to use the sense of urgency generated by these figures to go beyond a "business as usual" approach in order to prepare people for employment or income generating activities. Obviously the NQF in itself cannot create economic growth and the resultant employment opportunities. But the point made by Castejon (2011) (and reiterated by many of the speakers from African regions) is that collaboration between stakeholders can at least result in relevant qualifications as the drivers of relevant training and skills development. In his paper Castejon (2011) describes factors such as unemployment, lack of competitiveness and rate of learner dropouts as "signals of irrelevance" in a skills landscape: the potential of an NQF is "to improve the relevance of qualifications and their rate of return to learners". One of the ways in which it does this is through collaboration and coordination between key stakeholders.

There is a mismatch between the ideal of inclusive stakeholder participation in the NQF project, and the reality of sporadic and patchy involvement.

The ILO study of NQFs in the SADC region (Aggarwal 2011) noted that involvement of employers and unions seemed to happen in sporadic and incomplete ways, a perception borne out in the regional presentations. Zimbabwe, for example, noted that where employers have been involved, as in the Manpower body, the standards have currency and those qualified are employed; however, the situation regarding TVET is different and employers are not open to these qualifications. Botswana noted that a key aim of its NQF is to enable industry and providers to develop programmes together, so that the existing fragmented credit system can be harmonised: it is too early to comment authoritatively on the success of this endeavour.

THE IMPORTANCE AND LIMITATIONS OF STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Views on what it means to be excluded or included in the NQF were expressed in different ways on both days, with some effort being made to understand what "stakeholder involvement" actually means, in order to use the NQF effectively as a mechanism for collaboration and cooperation.

There is an assumption that everyone understands what is meant by "stakeholders" in the South African NQF. Broadly, stakeholder groupings are assumed to be government (Department of Basic Education and Department of Higher Education and Training), the statutory Quality Councils (the Council on Higher Education, Umalusi and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), professional bodies, organised business or industry, organised labour, learners as beneficiaries of the NQF, education and training providers, and education and training practitioners. Ultimately, the primary stakeholder is the public at large comprising learners, holders and users of qualifications.

Already this listing suggests some of the difficulties of discussing "collaboration and cooperation" between stakeholders in any generalised way. For some groupings, representation and authority are legally prescribed, and structures for participation are clearly delineated. But for others, the mechanisms for participation, and the degree of influence or authority which they may exert, are either unclear or contested. Understanding these dynamics for different stakeholder groupings may go some way to envisioning the NQF as a means for collaboration and cooperation more clearly.

Some illustrative examples of these debates are taken from the symposiums. One speaker from organised labour, for example, expressed a sense that labour is excluded from genuine involvement, with only lip service being paid to consultation. In response to this, one of the group discussions focused on differences between levels and types of participation, such as formal participation, technical participation, decision-making participation, workplace participation and so on. The point was made that there is little clarity on what kind of participation is feasible, appropriate and useful in this context; the possibility of revisiting participation models such as those of craft unions who were actively involved in protecting their trades, or professional body models, was raised. Another participant felt that there was a lack of synergy between theories and visions of the NQF, and the institutional bases from which these qualifications would be provided (an echo of frequently noted concerns about the tensions between theory and practice, vision and implementation). She cited the example of the closing down of teacher training colleges, and asked where the provider stakeholder grouping fitted into the NQF landscape. Certainly, if the NQF is to be an instrument of collaboration and cooperation to bridge some of the gaps between work and training, the commitment and inclusion of the provider base is key.

On the first day of the symposium both organised labour and organised employers spoke passionately about the perception that the NQF in South Africa has offered only "false hope". The voices of employers, SETAs and labour spoke up for a key group: the unemployed and the under-educated (in particular the youth, whose prospects for employment look grim), identified as a beneficiary group in NQF Objectives 2 and 4. There is general acknowledgement that there is little progress in reaching these groups, and it is also clear that a qualification framework cannot in and of itself 'fix' the factors that have led to the existence of these groups. But the NQF can aim at helping people access employment, through accessing relevant programmes that will address gaps and provide relevant skills. It is here that the collaboration between employers and providers becomes essential, and the NQF through SAQA can facilitate this. Issues raised in this context include the fact that full qualifications

are sometimes too much of a long distance and overwhelming goal for many learners – and for many training units in business and industry. Notions which have been onstage in the NQF drama before, such as modules of employability skills and needs-driven short courses, need to be revived in the context of emerging debates on Part Qualifications. These may prove to be a useful vehicle for addressing short term needs and the informal economy. Currently, some constituencies have strong feelings against the use of very short-term courses by industries for employees, alleging that these are simply a means to claim back skills levies without really benefiting recipients. This view may perhaps have overshadowed the usefulness of modular short courses linked to longer term training interventions. Providers, employers and SETAs have much to contribute to this discussion: some Sector Skills Plans, for example, show that many industries spend a large proportion of their training budgets on short courses and unaccredited training. The reasons for this could be fruitfully explored. While the limitations of short courses are well known, their advantages have been less well documented.

Finally, reaching the ultimate stakeholders in the NQF, the learners and the public, is an unfolding endeavour in which there has been positive progress. Ways in which communication with these groups is being fostered are discussed at the end of this article, along with other interventions in support of cooperation with NQF partners.

REALITY CHECK

NQFs have their origins in the 1980s: an era of growing optimism among the world's powerful about the rationality of markets, the economic benefits of privatisation and deregulation and the speed of change from manufacture to services and production delivered by IT. This optimism included high hopes that learning and skills markets could best be supplied by developing guidelines and articulating frameworks that would be more flexible and responsive than centralised, bureaucratically prescribed State provision. The perception existed that school systems should be driven by the demand of the users, not by professional educators, curriculum developers and the like. Even more, post-school training for work and careers should be shaped by employers and workers, not by professional providers. The latter could have a limited role, with kind permission. The more balanced view of ongoing collaboration between educators and users did not take centre stage. In the South African experience at least, educators and curriculum specialists have tended to be marginalised in the development of the NQF.

Well before the economic events of 2008 and the shaming of hard-line deregulators, the optimism was seen as folly and hubris by critics. Frameworks setting out targets, objectives and goals in pseudo-business practices have had many unintended consequences: actual increase in centralisation, crippling expenditures in effort and time in accountability, the loss of essential and valuable regulated practices and the general degradation of public space and civil service by denigration and the prioritisation of bottom lines followed by private provision governed by individual or shareholder profit. The opportunities for corruption have been multiplied and have led

in turn to a huge increase of often petty and unsustainable regulation. This is the case in public health, transport, municipal services, civil engineering - by no means only in education and training.

It is common knowledge that the neo-liberal market and world managerialism has yielded huge profits and produced excessive wealth and vast poverty. Its failure to provide jobs, especially for the poor, is also well-known. Although globalisation has been thought to promote the standing of the local ("glocalisation"), this has all to do with the fashion of the rich and nothing to do with the poor or the affirmation of community.

For the global South, and for Africa in particular, the deregulated market has introduced many practices that are singularly inappropriate to developing societies. The undermining of working or emerging practices and of community values has been accelerated, while the glorification of consumerism - of bling - has triumphed among the youth through the power of rich world images. This has profound consequences for the valuing of hard-won knowledge and skills, and favours a shallow sense of entitlement to quick wealth - or at least display.

Southern African countries have responded in different ways to these pressures, most of which have been irresistible. (The question, "What else, how better could we have done under the circumstances?" is certainly difficult to answer in post-apartheid South Africa.) The greatest successes seem to have been the result of maintaining more regulations in the economy than have been fashionable in the rich world. But if things could hardly have been otherwise, they may be made better. Lost opportunities for human development are very difficult to recover, but there is no lack of a sense of urgency among politicians and planners about doing this. In various ways the policy borrowing has meant the adoption of policies with little fit with regional conditions. Perhaps the greatest misfit in the NQF idea is that it was generated in societies with adequate, even good, provision of general education, and made potentially workable systems only for post-school vocational or occupational education. The problem of the effect of poor quality or unrealised basic education surfaced throughout the symposium in various guises – its impact on work-readiness, on educability, on successful completion of training. The need to compensate in Southern Africa for massive numbers of young adults with little or poor general education puts great strain on the system, while leading to a situation where the NQF in itself becomes an unrealistic flag of hope.

There is surely no way back to the old forms of highly planned and prescriptive state provision any more than we are likely to re-instate the old steam engines. This is neither desirable nor possible. But it is very important revive the standing and scope of public provision, to simplify structures and systems so that ordinary people can engage with them without layers of intermediaries. Above all, we need to learn from the mistakes and unintended consequences of ambitious approaches that haven't worked. But we must not repeat the mistakes of prematurely phasing out working practices that have been either successful results of policy, or happy unintended consequences.

One of the main problems of the application of a certain range of business management to national provision of learning has been the proliferation of jargon and abstractions. The pure abstractions of mathematics (or money management allow for powerful manipulation and for the realisation of what sometimes looks like superhuman achievements. But the mix of systemic, bureaucratic and academic abstractions in education and training systems has increasingly become disabling. Unanchored from actual learners, trainers, teachers and the working of institutions it has seemed to float far from the shoreline where struggling humans dwell and where mutual intelligibility and sensible implementation might be possible.

It is one of the messages of the symposium that this must stop. NQFs need to recognise that they are dependent on the economy's generation of jobs and must focus their energies on enabling roles in this problematic process. They must do everything possible to discourage the idea that they are capable of solving the problems of jobs. They need to look very concretely at ways in which their practices have been enabling of growth in learning and its quality, but also at ways in which they have been disabling - including the problem of totalising their scope and inadvertently discouraging any learning provision which is not in the frameworks. (In this regard, indeed, there were voices from the floor which talked to the need, once again, for more immediately beneficial training interventions which are aimed at lower levels, or do not encompass a full qualification.) NQFs need to work much more communicatively in public provision, and need to be far more productive of knowledge about labour market learning provision and needs than they have been. Perhaps, above all and in response to problems implicit in the first paragraph of this section, they need appropriate communication, relationships and role division between regulators, stakeholders and providers. It is not only the role of the NQF to talk 'to' others, but to offer mechanisms to enable these different actors to talk with each other. In short, they must become much more effectively communicative, with militant modesty about their roles (in the spirit outlined above).

In amongst all these deliberations on the expectations put onto the NQF, and concerns about what it has or hasn't achieved, or can and cannot achieve, comes the knotty question of impact; and to this we now turn.

IMPACT

Forced prematurely by extraordinary political pressures which put it on the defensive before it had taken shape, the SA NQF moved into a series of premature impact studies. These necessarily focused on market perceptions of stakeholders and did little more than establish that stakeholders thought the NQF was a good idea in principle, with reservations about emerging practices.

Subsequently, the ILO is able to report on a study of the impact of major international NQFs from New Zealand to Scotland and including South Africa. Their findings provided some of the most important input into the symposiums. Put bluntly, they find that NQFs have poor data to support assumptions about impact, but seem to have had little or no impact on improving synergies between education and training

systems and the labour market. There has been very little uptake of newly-developed qualifications. The use of unit standardised qualification development has been a signal failure. With due reservations about the scope and timing of the research, and some thoughts about the relatively more successful NQF in Scotland, the ILO team recognises that the picture may change.

The ILO research related to the SADC countries clearly shows that demands for evidence of impact are often made too soon, but that these demands are generally in response to over-ambitious claims made for NQFs. The guidance from the ILO studies is that an incremental approach to NQF development may be effective, as part of a wider strategy related to skills development and job creation. This in turn suggests that useful impact studies could be linked to more specific milestones, supported by appropriate methodologies[8].

In the context of the unfolding of the South African NQF, we would like to pose two sets of questions as a prompt to reflection on ideas around impact. The first problematises the idea of impact and impact studies. The second, far more seriously and in line with the plea in the previous section, appeals to NQFs to get down to the job of collecting data, information and rich ethnographic pictures of how their work is affecting institutions and practices.

There is something brutal in the term "impact". The brutality is softened somewhat when we talk of the impact of a painting or a poem, as there is when we are "struck" by a thought. But the term is fundamentally a military or ballistic metaphor if it doesn't refer to accidents. It has unfortunately become a fixture in evaluation studies, and needs to be used, if at all and preferably not, with great caution. Evaluation specialists do treat it with caution, reserving it for decidedly long-term studies.

Special reservations have to be placed around impact studies of endeavours with organic cultural intentions. It has proved virtually impossible, for example, to isolate and measure the impact of literacy in a society. Even the failure of a whole system to teach reading is almost impossible to attribute to the impact of a programme, or of teacher training, or of school management. Isolating historical and social variables inevitably falsifies reality.

Having raised this reservation, it must be admitted that NQFs make instrumental claims about their reasons for existence. They aim to promote access to learning pathways that lead to jobs, to facilitate the international mobility of skills, to enable effective quality assurance of learning programmes across sectors, to clarify the learning landscape of a society... and so on. While impact in any of these and other aspirations is difficult to pin down, it is far from difficult to collect evidence of effectiveness and influence. Facts, figures, case studies (in the words of one participant, which reveal the 'stories' of the NQF) about real people in actual programmes and institutions should provide insight that would enable proper judgements about whether an intervention or system is, on balance, productive or counter-productive - whether it is better that we have than that we don't have it.

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[8] The paper '*Notes on measuring the impact of the SA NQF*' (Keevy 2011) provides a review of methodologies employed in South Africa, Scotland, Ireland and the ILO.

Some studies like this have been done, notably by Umalusi. Most point to seriously dysfunctional situations, but not necessarily ones attributable to the NQF as such. Some reveal unmanageable practices and have led to corrective action. But far too little has been done to collect, present and analyse existing information from the millions of lives touched, for better or worse, by the NQF. The result is a pervasive bad press, especially in South Africa for SETAs. Yet a visit to one of the larger and more successful SETAs will provide a picture of hundreds of dedicated people, strongly believing that what they do is worthwhile - mapping provision in their sector, guiding and approving programme development, helping to solve structural questions in specific trades, strictly quality assuring hundreds of providers serving workers in tens of thousands of companies, administering learnerships, dealing with dysfunctional regulatory situations which limit their authority ... and so on. For doing this they are admired, criticised, and sometimes berated by their stakeholders. Annual NQF accreditation procedures govern this work. The system is changing in response to perceived - perhaps real - shortcomings. But as a whole it is vulnerable to an often toxic environment of political rumour-mongering rather than credible communication.

Whatever the case, the design of the NQF almost certainly disables as well as enabling, but this is open to correction. It is simply difficult to believe that the NQF has no impact.

THEORY, RESEARCH AND INFORMATION GATHERING

One of the repeated themes touched on in the symposiums was the insistence that the NQF and its doings should be properly “theorised”. This ranged, implicitly at least, from the theoretical foundations of the NQF to the quest for an appropriate theory for the evaluation of the NQF’s impact.

We find the use of the notion of “theory” in this context questionable; interesting, but not especially useful. This is not because we do not value the role of “theory” in learning and the development of competence. In fact, we are inclined to subscribe to the radical view that there is nothing but theory. But we don’t. Something probably exists outside of theory, but our only sources for understanding whatever this may be are provided by the lenses of theory - among them religious or mythical views of the universe, including for example, the wonderful Khoi theories that so shake our general theoretical perceptions of our world in their assured limitations. In short, if it matters, we are relative realists. All this, by way of necessary genuflexion to the real theorists.

What we object to is the use of “theory” for a kind of mystification, usually privileging academic interests and a view of life from the lofty towers of “higher” education. This mystification comes about when it is used without any clarification of its referent. The demand for theoretical legitimacy for the work of the NQF may thus be no more than an abject appeal for recognition from those towers - from which the cognitive concerns of the labouring masses, supposedly served by the NQF, look very tiny.

But "theory" can be clarified. Its uses in the context of the NQF include:

- general theoretical understandings or conceptual frameworks of everyday life in communities, classes et cetera.
- theoretical understandings shaped by a reasonably successful modern schooling
- theory needed by people seeking occupational or professional advancements, without which there are theory thresholds to the realisation of various potentials - sometimes insuperable gaps to further individual development
- trade theory - the broader and deeper scientific and technological insight that enables intelligent responses to problems in an occupation
- theory that enables a grasp of further learning in a particular discipline

These forms of theories are very different in character though similar in type. The NQF has a major commitment to the promotion of theory, whether it is to ensure that suitable balances of theory and practice are present in approved curricula, or to go further and require demonstrations of effective integration of theory and practical learning. In this sense, the NQF has no reason for embarrassment about its real commitment to theory and especially theory/practice relations.

However, the nature of theory and its relationship to practice even in these graspable forms is not well understood. Studies of the NQF have raised the question, but have not faced it squarely as far as we know. Within the NQF, the need for a balanced relationship between theory and practice is generally taken as commonplace, but is not interrogated. However, is it worth investing in interrogation outside of academic dissertations? There may well be no way of getting to the bottom of the issue. There is a rough and ready general understanding of what is meant by theory/practice relations which can and must be interrogated in specific instances. There is, however, no way of ensuring that the theory curriculum fits the practical curriculum only and exactly and also does justice to both theory and practice. (If the theory is fitted too perfectly to practical curricular tasks or "elective" requirements it is neither true to the broader theoretical discipline, nor to the knowledge-needs for growing and applying beyond the practical tasks.) Whether those working in the context of NQFs are sufficiently conversant with the theoretical dimensions of theory/practice relations is a matter for the development of communities of practice in specific trades or disciplines - not for abstract theoretical finesse.

The discussion so far, is, though, a red herring. It does not begin to deal with what might be an adequate theoretical foundation for an NQF or for research into the impact of an NQF. The truth is probably that there is not one. The NQF is necessarily a politically contingent institution dedicated to a range of divergent concerns loosely gathered under clusters of abstractions. (This is, of course, one theory of what an NQF is.) All of the NQFs' concerns are expressed as secondary abstractions, expressive of assumptions about the way things work. For example, a major theory of an NQF is that a framework - usually seen as a rectangular matrix - is useful for various purposes. One leading purpose is to demonstrate the rationally-established

equivalence of different qualifications. Recent claims (valid or not) suggest that this matrix, emphasising vertical mobility, may in some respects be damaging of the uptake of learning programmes most needed by individuals and society - discouraging the pursuit of learning at or below one's current achieved level. The importance of this example is to show how little we have thought about matrices as representations of learning progression and relationships, and of the relevance of equivalence and progression to vitally lived and used knowledge.

Now it would be possible to examine and test each of the assumptions underlying the NQF and its common practices. In good empirical practice this would require a welcome theoretical concretisation of each assumption into observable or testable hypotheses and the effective testing of the hypotheses. We could unpack the theoretical dimensions of the idea of the matrix, its assumed uses and values. We could then conduct surveys to establish the extent to which the matrix had been clarifying, developmentally useful, limiting, distorting et cetera. In an ideal world, this would be admirable. We have touched on its real problems in our discussion of impact studies.

Whether this level of theoretical aspiration is worth following is another question. Most human actions and institutions carry on without being much affected by this kind of investigation. Schools carry on without experimental insight into the question of whether taking the register at the beginning of the day casts a pall over the enjoyment of learning - though the possibility is real. There is a difference between being alert to problems, or following through intelligently on complaints, and engaging in the side-tracks of profound introspection.

At the loftiest level we find the quest for an adequate theoretical foundation for the NQF drawn into the coercive and intimidating academic arena of theories of the sociology of knowledge and knowledge/power relations. This gladiatorial arena with its parade of seraphim and cherubim who have been initiated into the very nature of knowledge, is full of interest to those, including the present writers, who find it interesting but useful only in the very long term. Engaged in by those required to research the work of the NQF, the engagement can look like defensive delaying tactics, if not navel gazing.

For historical reasons, the NQF is a tissue of higher order abstractions worked through into bureaucratic (regulatory) abstractions, expressed in turn in lower order abstractions in some cases. There seem to have been political, structural, constraints - too complex to go into here - why it has not felt free to instantiate the layers of abstractions into specific effects, to engage with actual and well sampled everyday practices shaped or influenced by its work.

One way of expressing what we mean here is to draw a distinction between "theory" as discussed above, and the necessary research (more simply viewed as information gathering) which of course is needed for various purposes – accountability and funding, long term tracking activities, projections and planning, to name only a few. This is not to deny that any research – and even 'information gathering' - has an implicit theoretical base. But what we are suggesting here is the need to define a

different kind theoretical approach which draws on field work and empirical evidence rather than conceptual frameworks only. Research which genuinely describes actual situations (the "stories" mentioned above) is in fact just as difficult and demanding as discourse-focused research - if not more so.

It is our belief, strengthened by the proceedings of the symposiums, that it is time to gather evidence and information, thickly-textured accounts where possible, about real practices emerging from the NQF in order to inform its communicative role, its concerns with effectiveness, and to feed back into the conceptual discourse of its communities of practice. Without this, the theorising of the NQF threatens to slip into "ignorance and irresponsibility" and "a preference for engaging with universal problems and foreign utopias..."[9]

FOSTERING ROBUST COMMUNICATION IN THE SA NQF

A militantly modest upbeat about the increasingly communicative "interdependent" NQF in South Africa is possible because of two presentations in the symposiums. These lit up the proceedings with their enthusiasm about the impressive developments they discussed: the NQF Forum, the incorporation of professional bodies, the work of the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) and the Recognition of Foreign qualifications, the Masithethe Advocacy Campaign and the linked NQF and Career Advice Helpdesk. We look briefly at these.

Ironically - or through the wisdom of the review processes that the South African NQF went through - the NQF seems in various ways more communicative than it has ever been. The irony lies in the fact that in the new NQF Act of 2008 the proudly "integrated" NQF was broken up into three sectoral sub-frameworks for trades and occupations (new), and the already existing Quality Councils for schooling and universities. This looked to some like the bitter defeat of an ideal. However, by allowing relatively autonomous powers and procedures to the sectoral quality councils, it has been possible for each sector to assert its special perspectives. The new Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) especially creates the opportunity to promote the due recognition of workplace and experiential learning - concerns which tended to be sidelined by the more established schooling and university sectors when there was no clear voice for this sector. The NQF Forum convened by SAQA across the sectors has brought issues and conflicts as well as solid agreement to the surface, which is undoubtedly good for development.

Related to the work of the NQF Forum, the new, formal incorporation of professional bodies into the NQF is a very important move, allowing the recognition of professional designations as well as qualifications. This is essentially, again, communicative action. There are many challenges of definition, relationship and status, but the positive intent has been welcomed in most sectors.

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[9] 'It was their ignorance and *irresponsibility* that he found so annoying, and in such contrast (in the case of intellectuals) with the claims they made on their own behalf. ... their uninterest in the reality of France, their preference for engaging with universal problems and foreign utopias...' .... (In Aron's own words): 'Only the hidden is truly scientific, burbles the tribe of Parisian philosophisers - none of whom has ever practiced any science at all.' (Tony 2007).

The NLRD is starting to come into its own as a resource for individuals, but with increasingly powerful sources of information for understanding the availability of skills in the country. Given the widely recognised poverty of our labour market skills analysis, this work must be accelerated, and become a priority for the quality councils.

Guiding and informing the recognition of foreign qualifications has become a major project for SAQA. This requires the growth of complex conceptual insights into the nature of qualifications from different countries, fascinating verification procedures and detective work across strange borders. Although SAQA does not make decisions about the final status of a foreign qualification, it has gained seriousness and scope because the Department of Home Affairs demands its stamp of approval on qualifications linked to work permits. The amount of communication involved in some of the approximately 30 000 qualifications processed each year can be huge.

The Masithethe Advocacy campaign is concerned with the social marketing of the NQF. It has multiple objectives, ranging from informing the staff of the quality councils, SETAs and other NQF agencies so that they can be positive ambassadors for the mission of the NQF, to running numerous radio programmes and participating in education and training fairs around the country. Here there is a particular emphasis on helping learners to access programmes, exercise the educational rights - and understand the processes needed for access to appropriate learning pathways.

Finally, closely linked to Masithethe, is the new NQF and Careers Help Desk - set up just over a year ago. Tens of thousands of inquiries come in every month. These include individual requests about the standing of qualifications and institutional queries about accreditation status or procedures. People having problems with access because of disputes about the status of their qualifications are helped in various ways. People trying to make career decisions are advised about where to go for more information. And so on. The very concrete problems of real people (not elements in a system) bring to the fore structural problems - often because of officials who misunderstand or misuse the functions of the NQF. These problems bring a welcome whiff of grounded reality to the mission of the NQF. The Helpdesk is characterised by an activist spirit, where communication and interpretation are enabled by the NQF, and would scarcely be possible without it. The role of providing useful information which can help potential learners find a pathway into relevant training goes some way to answering the plea of one of the labour delegates, to “speak to us on the ground”.

This, symposium delegates seemed to feel, was what the NQF was really about.

INTO THE FUTURE: REFLECTIVELY, ACCOUNTABLY, BOLDLY

In his closing remarks for the symposiums, the CEO of SAQA, Mr Samuel Isaacs pointed to the reports from the helpdesk and the advocacy campaign with their examples of access, as illustrative of NQF action. The NQF is not only about access, however, but about the question of access to what? In other words, it is about transformation – changing the system. The urgent needs for access now and better provision for the future mean a constant management of the short-term and long-term

perspectives. In SAQA, this is reflected in running an immediately responsive career advice service, but also a research programme which will only bear fruit in years to come. Both are priorities, and there is no place for an either/or approach. Change is slow and uncertain, but there are no assured quick fixes. In the face of expectations of dramatic short term impact, Mr Isaacs pointed out that estimates suggested that SAQA had generally cost 0.01% of the education budget in South Africa.

Mr Isaacs ended with a suggestion that we change Descartes's famous dictum to "we relate, therefore we are". Developing the relations and communication at the heart of the NQF, we must act reflectively, accountably and boldly. (Perhaps, he thought, we haven't been bold enough.) At the same time, reflecting on the complexity of action, even communicative action for improvement in education and training, he quoted from Michael Fullan: "In the face of complexity, it's good to be humble."

Which brings us back to militant modesty.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CAT	Credit accumulation and transfer
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CEREQ	*Centre de Recherchesurl' Emploi et les Qualifications*
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CQP	*Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle*
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EC	European Commission
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LLL	Lifelong learning
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ORF	Official recontextualising field
PRF	Pedagogic recontextualising field
PSC	Project Steering Committee (of the *NQF Advocacy Project*)
QC	Quality Council
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
Umalusi	Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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