



THE ROLE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN TEACHING LEARNING PRACTICES

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Abstract

The concept of a qualification is changing. Until recently a qualification was linked to the successful completion of a given course of study. ISCED, the International Standard Classification of Education, developed by UNESCO, was widely used to classify education and training by level. Success meant that a student had completed a course and understood the learning content required for the qualification. In many parts of the world it is now considered more important that students show they master a given set of knowledge, skills and competences than how they have acquired them, and over what duration. The focus of qualifications has shifted from the learning process to the assessment of what has been learnt (the learning outcomes). In accordance with today's learning and learning theories, and in accordance with the context of the development of qualifications frameworks, the teacher has now become an organizer and leader of the learning process. Based on psychological theories of knowledge, skills and habits, nowadays' learning process focuses on the student. In the conclusions of this study, it is important to know that the way teachers teach today can not lead to the learning outcomes required in a modern knowledge society. Thus moving towards student-centered approach requires greater focus on the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment and changing the mindset of the teaching staff is an ongoing initiative in the policy agenda to support modernization of education and training system.

Keywords: *Qualifications, frameworks, teaching, learning, modern knowledge society*



INTRODUCTION

The qualifications frameworks gradually began to be developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During 1989-1995, having in mind the UK-based competence movement, and based on the principle of lifelong learning in Scotland, the first generation of qualifications frameworks was created in six countries: New Zealand, Australia, England, Scotland, Ireland and South Africa. Referring to the context of the "National Qualifications Framework" (NQF), each country tends to apply a framework of qualifications often for very different reasons to each other. Thus, for Scotland, Ireland, and to some extent England, the reasons relate to improving the links between existing qualification systems; for Australia, the national qualifications framework provides a way to modernize the existing vocational education and training system and responds better to labor market demands; for South Africa and to some extent for New Zealand, the reasons relate to the transformation and improvement of the qualification system. Though the sixth above mentioned frameworks have obvious similarities to be recognized as the National Qualifications Framework, there are also significant differences in their goals, scope, and architecture of reference levels.

The development and implementation of the second generation of national frameworks began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to a study conducted by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority in England¹, by 2006, more than 50 NQFs were created in the world, including at least three regional qualifications frameworks at various stages of development: the South African Community Development Qualifications Framework, the Qualifications Framework of the English-speaking countries in the Caribbean, and the European Qualifications Framework in the European Union. The geographical distribution of their development is presented as follows:

According to a study on teacher qualification in nine countries (India, South Africa, Canada, Australia, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, England, Northern Ireland, Jamaica), most of them had a functional NQF, while all others, with the exception of India, are at certain stages of NQF development. Thus:

- Australia has a comprehensive KCF based on reference qualifications, implemented since the 1990s.
- Mauritius has developed a comprehensive NQF since 2002.
- South Africa has comprehensive eight-levels NQF, set up since 1995, which has recently been revised for the necessary improvements.

¹ <https://www.saqa.org.za/>

- England has had a NQF and has recently taken the move towards a "Development Framework" which is in fact a move towards the fourth generation of the NQFs, which will take into account the problems that have been associated with previous generations of the frameworks.
- Sri Lanka is considering developing a qualifications framework for higher education.
- Canada has been involved in discussions on the establishment of the NQF.
- Despite the progress made, has not yet entered the full development of the NQF.

METHODOLOGY

This research analyses the stages of the development of NQFs as a global phenomenon and respective effects in teaching learning models. The first stage of the research took into consideration a variety of relevant strategies and existing analyses found useful for this study and collected a number of data. The most important ones are listed in the section references. When tried to interpret the results from qualitative research, continued to refer back to our initial research, which helped us gain an understanding of the situation and put it in context. It was realized that it might be important to use the international dimension to such analyses.

RESULTS

Do the qualifications frameworks provide answers to the recognition of teacher qualifications between different countries?

For the recognition and transfer of teacher qualifications between different countries, it is important not only to understand what a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) represents, but also to go carefully through the problems and premises linked with its functioning.

What is a National Qualifications Framework?

First, there must be a common understanding on what a NQF represents. A broadly acceptable definition is as follows: NQFs categorise qualifications by level, based on level descriptors and learning outcomes. "This classification reflects the content and profile of qualifications - that is, what the holder of a certificate or diploma is expected to know, understand, and be able to do. The learning outcomes approach also ensures that education and training sub-systems are open to one another. Thus, it allows people to move more easily between education and training institutions and sectors".²

² <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf>

According to a UNESCO report³, the main goals for developing national qualifications frameworks are:

- Promote lifelong learning for economic or social reasons
- Regulating Qualifications and Qualifications Authorities to Improve Quality and Inclusion in Qualification Packages and / or Reduce Their Duplications
- Enhance recognition of qualifications within national or international systems
- Improve the quality assurance of the sub-sectors of qualifications that are part of the framework
- Improving communication and understanding of qualifications from stakeholders

While such statements highlight critical aspects of a NQF, one can say that a NQF is more than a "qualification framework", it is a quality assurance mechanism, that recognizes and standardizes qualifications and professions in a given country or region. This broader view has to do with what the phenomenon of national qualifications frameworks has provided to governments around the world: an effective mechanism for achieving very specific goals in their own countries. These goals include transformations and adjustments, equality and assessment, permeability of education and training, different hierarchical levels, vertical and horizontal divisions, mobility, validation of prior learning, etc. A good example of a qualification framework used for more than merely recognition of qualifications is the European Qualifications Framework, which has the main aim, more work and better jobs for European citizens, and the creation of Europe as a leading knowledge-development economy (European Commission, 2005).

There are different interpretations for NQFs, ranging from those considered to be the weakest to the strongest ones. At the weaker extremity, the NQF is confined to being a "framework" in which we simply set qualifications according to the reference levels; in the strongest extremity the qualification framework is seen as a "social construct" which can be used as a mean to revolutionise an education and training system and to fix factual imbalances (Isaacs, 2010).

Second, trying to answer the question of whether NQFs provide for recognition of teacher qualifications between different countries requires a deeper investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of the frameworks in general.

On the one hand, the weaker frameworks generate less controversy, but on the other hand have less achievements and ".and even can be considered as a barrier to achieving their goals if they are not well coordinated within local and regional developments" (Ron Tuck, 2007).

³ <http://www.unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=TVETipedia+Glossary+A-Z>

According to Johan Muller and Michael Young, "standardization that accompanies the NQF limits the space in which different kinds of knowledge can be structured - a typical example is the consistency between marketisation and competition principles, and trust and cooperation within educational practices".

The initial features of the National Qualifications Frameworks may be lost during implementation. Thus, in the Scottish context, pressure may be imposed on characteristics such as voluntarism, partnership and pragmatism.

Significant differences are noted in the administration of the NQF - the bureaucratic nature of Agencies responsible for the development and implementation of NQFs varies widely. For example, in Scotland, the oversight body "is not a central authority or bureaucracy that runs or has authority over awarding institutions or". While in South Africa, the Qualifications Authority has been established by law, it is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and has overall mandate for the development and implementation of the NQF. A growing government control brings about improved education alternatives and increased enrolment in vocational education and training, but also prompts constraints on vocational education and training institutions to provide the demanded qualifications.

All National Qualifications Frameworks, in most cases, aim at providing a common understanding of qualifications, approaches to qualification design, links between qualifications, career paths, credit transfer and student achievement results (Tuck, 2007). Many countries demand their qualifications to be comparable to those supplied in other countries, aiming to support the possibility to recognize qualifications for immigrants. Thus, many small countries use frameworks to facilitate the mobility of individuals and respective competencies more between countries than internally. However, national qualifications frameworks should reflect the needs and expectations of the society of the respective countries, and should be owned by stakeholders for these developments (Allais, 2010).

It remains a dilemma how to reach a local viability and international portability. Regional qualifications frameworks can help improve the mobility of skills and learners, but the impact may not be the same everywhere. For educational service providers, students are a lucrative market, while for the consumer countries, a regional framework can offer to a small part of the population a "passport" toward the most prosperous countries. Qualifications frameworks need to be rational, regional and international in their scope, design, and achievement. The process of designing and implementing NQFs in small countries should reflect the particular characteristics and circumstances, and be sensitive to the respective culture and context (Tuck, 2007).

While the NQFs have contributed positively to qualification systems, there is no sound evidence that current generation (fourth generation of NQFs) has no dilemmas. Although more autonomy has been given to working groups with members from different sectors, e.g. higher education, private sector, etc., the process of development still remains centralized.

All frameworks have one thing in common: the development of qualifications frameworks is largely dependent on trust between individuals, interest groups, sectors, countries, and even regions. Creating such trust can be facilitated but not rush, in Trust mostly is created after many years of joint work, common problems faced, lessons learnt and solutions found. Always the qualifications frameworks, will fulfil this principle. Rapid and comprehensive enforcement is needed, but legal framework has not been able to avoid the backwardness of the NQF due to the insufficient level of trust and stakeholder involvement.

The European Qualifications Framework is described as a meta-framework, a special kind of regional qualifications frameworks, which has more facilitating character in creating opportunities rather than binding character. Thus, a meta-framework can be understood as an instrument that enables a qualification framework to be interconnected with others, and consequently for a qualification within a framework to be linked to others located in another framework (European Commission, 2005).

The national qualifications frameworks vary and evolve continuously. According to a study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2005) some of the potential impacts of the development of qualifications frameworks can be summarized as follows:

For the public sector:

- Recognition and better use of skills, increased employment opportunities, career prospects and a fair reward system.
- Flexibility for mobility in the labour market;
- Flexibility for entry into formal education;
- Supporting qualification planning and career development
- Gives motivation to lifelong learning.

For businesses:

- Reliable indicators to understand the level of candidates' ability to be employed;
- A tool to identify the skill gap and training needs;
- Serves as a guide to human resources development practices

- Provides standards for performance appraisal;
- Provides quality products and services to customers.

For education institutions:

- Increases the degree of credibility and public image (i.e. Commerceability)
- Provision of appropriate and qualitative qualifications.

For the government:

- Increases public accountability for the offer of qualifications
- A greater division of responsibilities with the private sector and individuals to learn.

The features of a modern framework include simplicity, more responsibility, a more comprehensive and diverse environment, and a reduced bureaucratic impetus (Tuck, 2007). In many cases, NQFs are considered to be more effective instruments than change agents. If expectations regarding their capacity to produce changes are high, then frustration and failure will come. Using NQFs as a change instrument demands links and relationships with a wider community of responsible organizations in education and training. Creating trust, searching for tools for engaging diverse organizations in ways they expect to be in line with their agendas, and in the meantime presenting a change, are an integral part of this process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With the development of a market economy, efforts are increasingly being made to change the nature of teaching and learning. In accordance with today's learning and learning theories, and in accordance with the context of the development of qualifications frameworks, the teacher has now become an facilitator and leader of the learning process. Nowadays' learning, focuses on the student and is characterized by three main features:

- It is based on competencies and not on knowledge;
- Mainly oriented through student action;
- Oriented by clear and observable objectives for student achievement.

These features are realized through the way of organizing content in the curricula, as well as through the forms of teaching process organization and the learning methods used. It is now being passed from the traditional teaching approach to teachers at the center of the curriculum toward student-centered approach. Learning outcomes are the first logical step for moving towards a student-centered approach.

The teacher-centered approach has these features:

- Teachers serve as a center of epistemological knowledge, guiding the learning process and controlling student learning.
- Students are considered as "empty containers" and learning is considered as an additional process.
- Teaching refers to an "average" student and the rest of students is obliged to progress at the same level.

While in the student-centered approach:

- Students are not passive. They come with their expectations frame
- Students learn in different ways
- Learning is a very dynamic active process
- Students build comprehension through reading' writing, listening, speaking and reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns

However, the two above approaches have a certain role. Firstly, learning with the student at the center, places the focus of the learning activity on the student and:

- The role of the teacher lies in the management of learning;
- Recognizes that a large part of learning happens outside the classroom;
- Students should be actively involved in learning planning and management, and should take more responsibility in this regard.

Secondly, moving towards student-centered approach requires greater focus on the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

In this context, it is imperative to reconfigure the way teachers teach, making them aware of the limitations that traditional teaching methods have. All major national or international strategies need a more active role for the learner. The active role of the student implies that they ask more questions, generate more ideas, take more leadership role in organizing learning and engage more in group work with other students. The aspirations and attitudes required in a knowledge society and the global economy can be developed more effectively in an environment where learners speak and undertake more initiatives than they are today. It is important to know that the way teachers teach today can not lead to the learning outcomes required in a modern knowledge society. Changing the mindset of teaching staff is quite challenging for the ongoing reform toward a more modernised education and training system in all countries.

Nowadays, as teachers play a crucial role in the quality assurance of the provision in education and training, the aspect of competence, in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes and respective development has particular importance in creating twenty-first century teacher profile. Therefore, it is imperative to introduce further empirical studies with the aim to identify and design a catalogues of future competences required for the teaching profession in the light of changing environment of qualifications providers. In this perspective, in one hand the inventory of future oriented competences for teachers will steer future policies in initial and continuing professional development of teachers for 21st century.

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