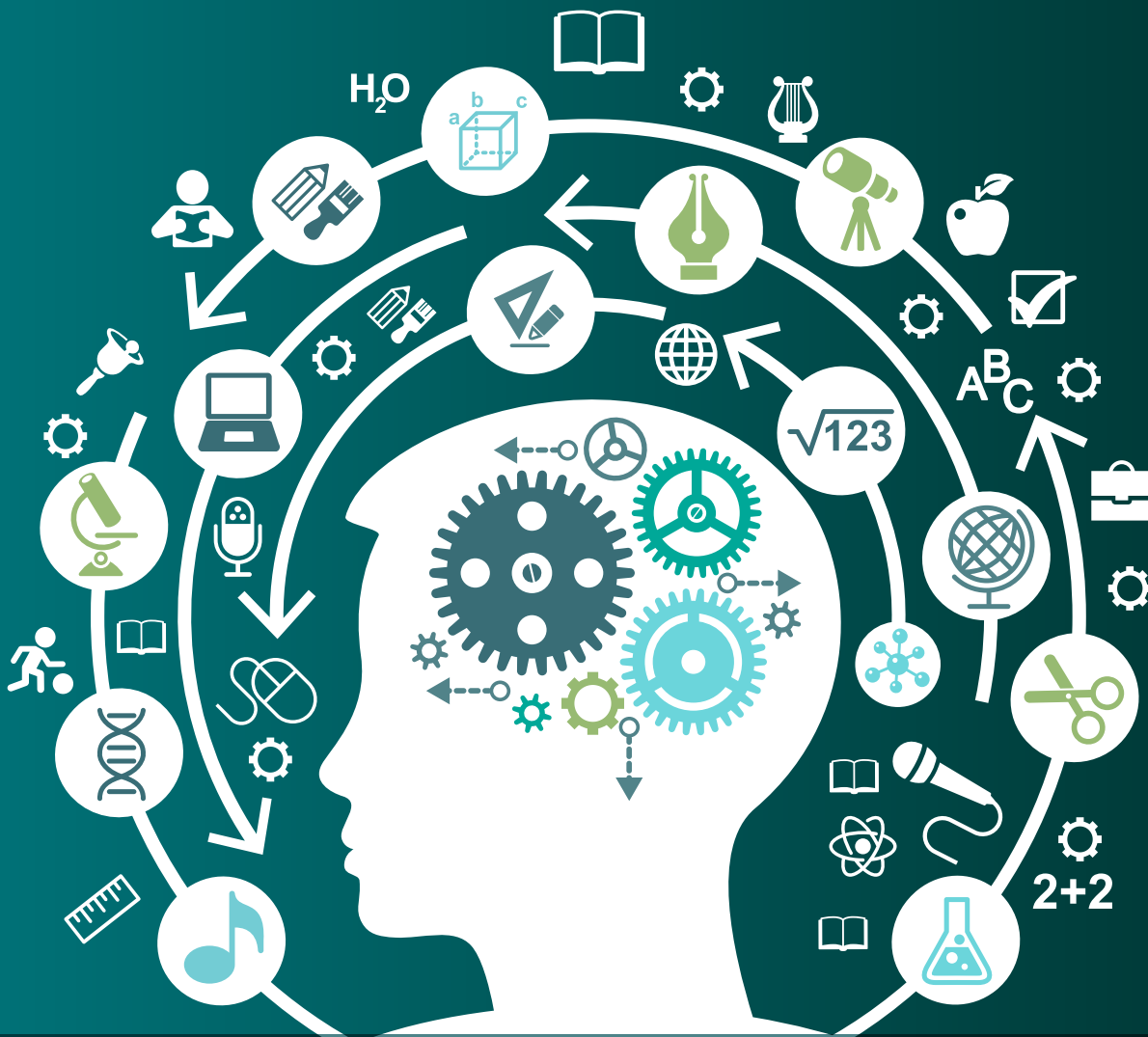# National Qualifications Frameworks

Reflections and Trajectories

QUALIFICATIONS
POLICY **INSIGHTS**

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JANUARY 2017

QUALIFICATIONS POLICY **INSIGHTS**

FOREWORD

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has become a prominent feature of our qualifications system. Governed by statute, the NFQ was launched in 2003 as a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. Since then, the NFQ has become embedded in how we think and speak about qualifications in Ireland.

Based on a ten-level system of knowledge, skill and competence, the NFQ was reformist with the intention of becoming:

> *The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.*

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 maintained the centrality of the NFQ as a mechanism for promoting the transparency and trustworthiness of qualifications in Ireland. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for promoting, maintaining, further developing, implementing and reviewing the NFQ. Working in collaboration and partnership with our stakeholders, QQI is committed to ensuring that the NFQ continues to be fit for purpose.

The original aim of the NFQ was to improve the transparency and coherence of our national qualifications system. Today, the NFQ is used in many different ways, such as to give value to and recognise learning achievements; to develop new qualifications; to offer advice and guidance about learning pathways; to report on qualifications attainment; to better match skills and jobs; to regulate access to occupations; to approve courses and qualifications for public funding; and to facilitate the international portability of qualifications.

The regulatory use of the NFQ has increased. When the NFQ is used to confer an advantage or to ration access to a public benefit, it may stress the original aspirations of the NFQ to promote transparency and coherence. Policymakers and practitioners must be alert to how the NFQ is used and the effects, opportunities and risks that such usage presents[1].

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1   For a synthesis of development in qualifications frameworks, see Michael Young and Stephanie Allais (Eds) Implementing National Qualifications Frameworks Across Five Continents 2013.

Qualifications frameworks operate within complex and dynamic qualification systems. They are shaped by broader developments, including the internationalisation of education, changing models of regulation and accountability, demands for greater transparency in educational standards and outcomes, and advances in technology and digitalisation. Policymakers need to be able to interpret and make sense of the contexts in which qualifications frameworks operate. Often, context is shaped by global and pervasive developments. Almost always, it is the local and domestic contexts that determine the role and relevance of qualifications frameworks.

A major re-settlement of the post-school education and training landscape in Ireland, has been underway since 2008. The reform programme has involved significant structural and institutional re-configuration, the establishment of new agencies, new national policies for skills development and apprenticeships in Ireland, and strategic blueprints for the future development of our further and higher education sectors. It is not always clear how the NFQ is expected to relate to and support such reforms.

NFQ progress to date has been promoted by legislation, political support, professional practice and advocacy. Findings about the effects or impact of the NFQ remain anecdotal, partial and inconclusive. We need relevant and robust evidence capable of generating powerful insights about the contribution of the NFQ.

As part of the current review of the NFQ, QQI invited Dr. Mike Coles, an international expert on qualifications and qualifications systems, to prepare this independent paper. *National Qualifications Frameworks – Reflections and Trajectories* is the first in a series of policy insights on qualifications in Ireland. In foregrounding qualifications frameworks against their international and historical setting, this paper attempts to zoom in and zoom out from the Irish NFQ, revealing some of its effects, possibilities and limitations.

It is hoped that this paper will stimulate readers to think critically about what might have been lost if we did not have the NFQ and what a new national mandate for the NFQ might look like.

John O'Connor
Head of Qualifications and Skills Policy
Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

National Qualifications Frameworks

Reflections and Trajectories

by Dr. Mike Coles

1 Supporting a Review of the NFQ

This paper aims to inform discussion amongst Irish stakeholders in the NFQ in their thinking about the kind of NFQ they want in the future. It draws on international experience in working with qualifications frameworks, quality assurance frameworks and recognition systems.

QUESTIONING THE NFQ

The paper does not attempt to evaluate the NFQ – evidence of what has worked and what has not worked will not be analysed. The paper does not consider any evidence that is Irish in origin, it simply provides some observations from an independent, international position that can be used to ask questions about the structure of the NFQ and what might be the options and priorities for developing the NFQ in a new phase of its life.

WHAT IS THE NFQ?

It is a classification of qualifications: national qualifications achieved in schools, further education and higher education are included in the ten NFQ levels. The aim of the NFQ structure is to enhance transparency and trust in qualifications.

Transparency and trust in qualifications are essential pre-conditions for the portability, progression and recognition of qualifications nationally and internationally. Most if not all countries seek to optimise trust and transparency so that qualifications can better support economic and social policies such as skills supply to the labour market, lifelong learning and social inclusion[2].

Generally speaking, qualifications frameworks (QFs) are used to help with the trust and transparency of individual qualifications and the qualifications systems to which they belong. QFs do this in three main ways.

1. They classify qualifications according to type and/or level so that the whole qualifications system can be **communicated** well to a wide range of users.

2. They **set down quality measures** for qualifications admitted to the QF.

3. They act as an official **bridge to international users** of domestic qualifications and holders of international qualifications.

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2   Cedefop 2010, Changing Qualifications - a review of policies and practices, Cedefop Reference series; 84 Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

In Ireland all three ways of building trust and increasing transparency have been used. The question arises whether changes should be made to improve the NFQ in these three domains, for example:

A
- » *Is the NFQ helping to raise aspirations to learn?*
- » *Do citizens use the NFQ to see progression opportunities?*
- » *Does the NFQ help overcome barriers to qualifications?*
- » *Are valuable qualifications sitting outside the NFQ that could be brought in?*

B
- » *Is the NFQ raising the standard of qualifications in terms of content, assessment and certification processes?*
- » *Is the NFQ applying the right kinds of pressures to qualification owners to describe and operate their qualifications appropriately?*
- » *Is the NFQ helping to increase the potential of qualifications to provide social and economic returns to holders?*

C
- » *Do people from abroad use the NFQ to appreciate the elements of specific Irish qualifications?*
- » *Is it easy to make comparisons between Irish qualifications and EU qualifications?*
- » *Are the links to international (stateless) qualifications clear?*
- » *Is the quality assurance function of the NFQ inspiring confidence among international applicants to Irish education and training programmes?*

2 A Changing World

The world of work and qualifications is changing and questions about the effectiveness of the NFQ have to be answered not just in terms of today's circumstances but also in terms of the future environment in which Ireland will find itself. To help define how things are likely to be it is sometimes helpful to look at trends in the use of qualifications and how learning is recognised. Some examples of important trends follow.

INCREASING INTERNATIONALISATION

Starting from the broadest perspective, countries are increasingly looking outward to other countries or regions for good practice in developing qualifications systems. There is now a greater awareness of the need for qualifications systems to have high international credibility, as governments accept that qualifications play a part in facilitating competitiveness and economic growth. At the same time international companies and international organisations, including owners of international qualifications, are increasingly asking for transparency of national systems so that transnational business can be facilitated through the recruitment of employees with the requisite qualifications.

These pressures for international standards have resulted in the creation of international quality assurance frameworks and networks and processes for the recognition and evaluation of foreign qualifications. Often based on higher education, the frameworks have been adapted to a vocational setting and some have been designed specifically for TVET. The most significant developments in this area have been in Europe and East Asia, for example, higher education in Europe has worked towards European Standards and Guidance for Quality Assurance of Higher Education since 2005 and the East Asia Summit produced an overarching (both HE and TVET) framework of quality assurance in 2012.

There are also more direct and more tangible forces for the internationalisation of qualifications systems. For instance, information and communication technologies (ICT) have opened up the education and certification market to many more users, including people in other countries. Internationalisation of trade generally has led to the need for international standards for both processes and products.

The scale of international migration continues to rise as people seek to progress in work or study, or to escape from economic or social deprivation and conflict. Often migrants have little opportunity to provide evidence of their knowledge, skills and other competencies[3]. This large-scale migration poses a serious challenge to recognition systems[4].

How well is the NFQ set up to work in an international environment?

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3   ETF, 2014, Migration and skills development agenda in ETF partner countries, ETF position paper, Torino

4   See the EU work on labour market integration of refugees - http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578956/IPOL_
     STU(2016)578956_EN.pdf

EXPANSION OF QUALIFICATION SYSTEMS

The need for formal recognition is driving a growth in the scope of qualifications systems. The experience of international qualifications bodies indicates that demand for qualifications is escalating, and the growth is probably independent of economic cycles and labour market demand. People want qualifications in order to gain competitive advantage during times of plenty, and want them in order to better compete during times of financial stress.

Whilst broader ways of recognising achievements are developing (see later), qualifications remain a cornerstone of recognition of learning and advancement in study and work. This is particularly true of qualifications issued after schooling, after initial work-based learning and after higher education. It is also the case that regulation by the professions is strengthening and professional qualifications are effectively becoming gateways for higher professional positions.

Is the NFQ accommodating a full range of formal national qualifications, including Irish professional qualifications?

THE GROWTH IN INTERNATIONAL SECTORAL QUALIFICATIONS

To a large extent trade depends on coordination and compatibility of products and services. International bodies collaborate to establish standards of work in a sector concerned with the making of artefacts and the delivery of services. These standards form the basis of qualifications that are used in the sector and to enter the sector. This field is vast and include a diverse range of organisations working in this area, for example:

» International education centres, for example the American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute has more than ninety licensed affiliates in fifty-four countries;

» International corporations such as Microsoft and Cisco

» International public institutions such as the United Nations, with sub-groups such as the International Maritime Organisation;

» International private sectoral associations, for example the European Welding Federation

» International bodies offering qualifications in a vast range of voluntary activities covering leisure and humanitarian aid.

These qualifications have existed for a long time and are now more numerous and more important than previously, acting as gatekeepers to work and operations in their specific sectors. These qualifications have often informed national provision, but they also stand separately as a result of the use of specific delivery processes and qualification arrangements. Many NQFs have yet to incorporate international sectoral qualifications. A consequence

of this is that the quality assurance processes that apply to international qualifications remain almost invisible to many national qualifications authorities.

Is it possible to see the NFQ as an inclusive framework accommodating international sectoral qualifications?

THE USE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning outcomes are increasingly used in describing curricula, qualifications specifications, assessment processes and NQF levels[5]. Internationally the use of different forms of level descriptors shows diverse and contemporary learning outcomes-based developments from across education, training and work. Qualifications specifications are now often based on expected learning outcomes and their assessment regimes assess these learning outcomes.

The impact of learning outcomes on quality assurance processes is significant. In general terms, the object of quality assurance shifts from the curriculum and the teaching to the quality assurance of the learning that is achieved as a result of the curriculum and the teaching. Whilst there are detracting voices in the discussion of the greater use of learning outcomes, generally speaking the objectivity and transparency that learning outcomes bring is welcomed.

Should the NFQ do more to encourage the use of learning outcomes in curriculum specification, qualification specification and quality assurance processes?

THE EXPANSION OF REMOTE CERTIFICATION OF LEARNING

Many learning institutions are opening up to learners from other countries; such provision is now a commercial reality[6]. These learning institutions have created mass open learning resources, largely made possible through ICTs. The certification of learning is commonly an important part of the offer of learning providers. These often well-known institutions gain kudos for the remote provision by virtue of the values associated with traditional provision. There are concerns that learners seeking certification need assurance that the issuing body is a genuine provider of certificates with proper guarantees of quality in place. The number of cases of bogus organisations issuing fraudulent certificates from (apparently) reputable provider organisations is growing. Thus the quality assurance of

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5   See Cedefop, 2016, Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe – a comparative study, Cedefop Reference series 106; Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

6   For example see: https://www.mooc-list.com/

these relatively new mass education and certification systems is extremely important for the protection of learners and to the provider institutions.

How does the NFQ interface with new learning environments?

RECOGNISING A BROADER SCOPE OF LEARNING

There is now a steady trend, at least at policy level, towards recognising (and certifying) learning from more varied sources, including distance learning, learning in work, learning in communities and homes. Learning of all kinds and from all settings and all times can contribute to the self-worth, fulfilment, employability, pay, position and social status of a person. To make the learning visible so that it can be recognised (possibly through formal qualification) and then begin to make these contributions is a major challenge[7].

How strongly does the NFQ encourage the validation of non-formal and informal learning?

7   See the EU Recommendation on validation for an idea of the scale of the challenge - http://www.eaea.org/media/policy-advocacy/validation/2012_council_recommendation.pdf

3 Important Current Policy Developments

Education, training and qualifications systems are receiving attention from international bodies with an interest in developing international measures for learning achievements, international standards for enabling trade, facilitating international mobility and mitigating problems created by migrant flows. For example, UNESCO leads a group of powerful international bodies looking into world reference levels for TVET. Working with, *inter alia*, the European Commission, the OECD, the ILO and the World Bank, UNESCO is exploring the robustness of quality assurance systems for qualification and how the breadth of learning which might be recognised can be expanded.

World reference levels might act as sets of global benchmarks for TVET to which regional frameworks and international qualifications might relate[8]. This would create global coherence in outcomes of work-related learning. It is also possible that, through the global convention on higher education, the reference levels might relate through the Bologna cycles to higher education levels of learning.

With respect to expanding the breadth of learning that can be recognised, in one sense it is already possible to represent a person's full capability through a curriculum vitae (CV). Whilst steps have been taken to formalise the format of CVs and what is entered into them[9], CVs remain a symbol of 'self-certification': they might be considered to map out a person's view of the broad trajectory of their learning and career. However, they inevitably lack detail and mostly require authentication of one form or another. The authentication of the content of a CV is an issue for users since different parts of a CV may need to carry evidence of verification from different bodies. Currently most CVs lack third party verification and it is not possible to conceive of a CV being verified by a single body. Information technology and the use of expert data management systems holds some promise of authenticating certain features of a completed CV, for example through credential verification[10]. These expert systems may also allow CVs to be prepared so that they match certain job requirements and for recruiters to search for CVs that hold promise of their owner matching a job specification. The role that formal qualifications play in these new forms of personal representation could change, perhaps focusing on the central knowledge disciplines or sectors, more than the transferrable skills that can be appraised through life and work situations.

MAKING THE MOST OF BADGES OF ACHIEVEMENT

Digital badges are a kind of mini-qualification that testifies to achievement in a small but significant area of learning. Their use is expanding rapidly in many settings[11]. The motivation for people seeking badges includes the

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8   See UNESCO, 2015, Levelling and recognizing learning outcomes - the use of level descriptors in the twenty-first century, Paris

9   For example see the Europass CV (http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/documents/curriculum-vitae)

10   For example Digitary (http://www.digitary.net/)

11   For some examples see Credly (https://credly.com/)

aim to stand out to recruiters whilst employers use badges to get the right people and to ensure recruits have the right skills. Tutors in colleges aim to use badges to recruit good students and to improve graduate employability. There is also a broader use of badges in communities and volunteering where badges give recognition for achievements. The expansion in the use of badges also brings challenges of interoperability between different badging systems and between badging and the range of emerging skills passports.

Because badges are small and are not subject to the paraphernalia that surrounds larger qualifications, they can be tailored to specific areas of competence and experience and be more flexible in their operation. They can also be cheaper and easier to set up by providers and easier to access by learners. The standards on which they are based and the quality assurance processes associated with them are in the hands of the provider and so quality and status are inevitably variable from one badge to another. Some badging organisations bring some conformity to the quality assurance process in order to increase trust in the value of badges. These organisations pay attention to training the badge providers, guiding the design and use of badges and optimising their visibility. The Mozilla Open Badges Infrastructure[12] is a set of open-source technical standards and software for badging. Other badging organisations offer 'ready-made' customisable badges, facilities to check the identity of earners, promote issuing organisations, and offer more streamlined certification processes and qualification verification support.

One scenario for the future is that there is a common international system where all aspects of a person's learning are electronically documented and authenticated. It can be accessed at any time and anywhere and amended by the owner. It always remains the property of the owner even though other bodies such as learning institutions, professional bodies or hosting data management bodies may contribute to it. More than that the documented learning is in a format that can be linked (with the owner's permission) to other databases where job applications are described and a matching process can take place.

THE NEW FORM OF THE NFQ

Accepting these observations, the next model of the NFQ might be expected to have some new dimensions in its design. For example, Irish citizens might value the following.

1.   More explicit references to significant regional qualifications frameworks. This might include references to sources of information, comparison tools, and information on the level of trust that might be afforded these regional frameworks.

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12   See http://openbadges.org/

2. References to endorsements of the NFQ (and the Irish qualifications system) to quality assurance frameworks operating internationally. Information about these frameworks such as who supports them and what they mean.

3. An electronic register of NFQ qualifications and ensuring that they link to mainstream qualifications elsewhere in the world.

4. Clear methods for linking to international or stateless qualifications so that information and status becomes available. This linking could include admission of well-proven stateless qualifications to the NFQ or a kind of official shadow part of NFQ that is reserved for international qualifications.

5. Specific NFQ negotiated positions for levels of professional qualifications that are, *de facto,* world standards.

6. Statements that show the NFQ has made explicit links to models that allow for wider scope of recognition. This could include the Europass, badges and the various skills passports that are operational around the world.

7. Electronic means of access to a database of skills achievements and reporting for individuals that is linked to NFQ levels and is quality assured.

8. Electronic means of access to a database of information for employers and investors from Ireland and offshore that is linked to NFQ levels and is quality assured.

9. A statement that the NFQ is being used and promoted for the establishment of bilateral links with qualifications systems that are cutting edge and of immediate value to mobile Irish citizens.

How could the NFQ be revised to incorporate any of these dimensions?

Moving on from the changing world of qualifications and future scenarios for recognition to a general look at the QFs of today and how they have worked, it is possible to paint a picture of the development of NQFs in four stages[13].

Stage 1: The use of qualifications as a policy instrument occurred before the worldwide movement towards NQFs — in the 1970s, governments were driven by economic and social objectives that invariably called for higher levels of participation and stronger patterns of outcomes of education and training as well as greater relevance of education provision.

Stage 2a: The first phase of NQF developments took place in the 1990s and was concentrated in the Anglophone countries and France. This was linked to a move towards more outcomes-based vocational education and training systems in these countries. These reforms involved the transfer of the control of training programmes and qualifications from providers to their users, including employers and individuals. They also demanded, at least in vocational education and training, the establishment of independently agreed standards for the content of programmes. The idea that learning occurs in work and social life grew in importance and new routes to qualification were required for non-programme-based learners.

Stage 2b: At the same time, high skills policies led to an expansion of higher education participation and the associated goal of greater flexibility that manifested itself in modularisation of programmes, use of learning outcomes and experimentation with credit arrangements. It is also arguable that employability of graduates became a stronger policy objective of higher education institutions.

Stage 3: Around the time of the millennium, there were political, social and economic drivers for the formation of international or regional qualifications frameworks (common reference frameworks). These aimed to support free trade agreements, the enhanced mobility of learners and workers and provide support for business generally. These new frameworks were tools to make foreign qualifications systems more understandable.

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13 Based on the Author's experience

Stage 4: The existence of the regional frameworks and the focus of international visibility of national qualifications stimulated the development of further NQFs that were adapted to the architecture of the regional frameworks. The emergence of comprehensive frameworks (including school, vocational and higher education qualifications) in 2005 onwards enabled a more consistent and transparent view of qualifications systems to develop. The new qualifications frameworks are not simply national models of the regional archetype – they are seen as steps in a process of reform of qualifications systems to make the systems more responsive to a range of needs, including those of a range of individuals and the labour market.

The number of NQFs in the world continues to grow and may now be more that 160 in number[14]. There are seven regional frameworks, some of these are growing and include the EQF, the Caribbean Framework, the Pacific Register of Qualifications and the Framework for the Virtual Community of Small States. The Association of South East Asian Nations Qualifications Reference Framework is just becoming operational.

WHAT COULD A STAGE FIVE NQF LOOK LIKE?

Future national qualifications frameworks will probably all be associated to some geo-political reference point and possibly more than one. These could lead to a more generalised form of NQFs that may be defined as simple level hierarchies but with these levels defined offshore. The 'QF level' of a qualification could become the simplest reference to qualifications nationally and internationally, but this does not necessarily imply conformity of NQFs across countries.

The Stage Five NQFs could have a conformity of levels but will be more diverse in terms of the ways they are linked to national policy priorities, for example funding arrangements, recognition/validation policy, quality assurance of education and training. In other words, it is the *associated functions* of qualifications frameworks that could be diverse and reflect the national identity rather that the NQF level structure. NQFs themselves will probably be less hard-nosed as instruments of education and training policy than currently is the case and more useful as tools supporting a more diverse range of policy that is linked to education and training, such as social inclusion or labour market priority areas.

If the associated functions take centre stage in NQFs, it is possible that the governance of frameworks will become more remote from national governments; mature frameworks in such a Stage Five are likely to be managed by

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14   UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), ETF and CEDEFOP. 2015. Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks. http://uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/keydocuments/LifelongLearning/en/Global%20Inventory%20of%20Regional%20and%20 National%20Qualifications_v1.pdf

agencies which have links to government but are independent structures and capable of independent consultation with main stakeholder groups.

What are the associated functions of the NFQ that could be imagined in a Stage Five NFQ?

LOOKING AT CURRENT NQFs

What do we know about how well NQFs have worked? It is very difficult to be sure of the effects (positive or negative) of NQFs[15]. The roles of NQFS – political, technical and social – are difficult to measure in any objective way. The main reason for this is the way NQFs interact with other aspects of policy and education provision. NQFs are simply one aspect of a spectrum of qualifications-based tools and it is not possible to distinguish effects due to the specific role of an NQF from the effects of associated activities. For example, if NQFs require a specification of learning outcomes in a qualification, how is it possible to measure the effects of these learning outcomes (for example on teaching, learning, assessment, certification, on individuals, on institutions) and would it possible to attribute these effects to the NQF?

What we can say is that the NQF construct has proven to be attractive to policymakers in about 80% of countries in the world. It is possible to see NQFs as attractive for the following reasons[16].

1. A tool for bringing transparency of the qualifications system

2. A way of communicating the qualifications offer in a country

3. A means of raising the quality of the qualification process

4. A way of bringing consistency and coherence to the forms of qualifications

5. A means of raising the status of qualifications

6. A way of bringing about greater use of learning outcomes

7. A description of the levels of learning that can be recognised and defined by learning outcomes rather than specific qualifications

8. A means of clarifying learning pathways and progression

9. A platform for stakeholders for strengthening cooperation and commitment across education and training sectors

10. A basis for international co-operation, understanding and comparison

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15   There have been efforts to evaluate NQFs and these have been documented already as part of the NFQ revision process.

16   This list is drawn from the aims of many NQFs and builds upon the analysis in: European Commission, 2010, Added Value of National Qualifications Frameworks in Implementing the EQF, EQF Note 2, Luxembourg

The extent to which these points might be capitalised upon in a country depends on the form of the NQF that the country adopts. This can vary enormously - differences include the following[17].

» Coverage: NQFs have generally been designed as comprehensive and address all levels and types of qualifications, although a significant number of countries have begun this process by designing sectoral frameworks, for example an NQF that is reserved for qualifications in VET or for higher education.

» Reflecting or reforming: NQFs are generally broad and flexible structures that accommodate existing levels and traditions in countries. It is also possible, however less common, for an NQF to be designed to be independent of existing structures and require that qualifications adapt to the new level structure.

» Policy instruments: NQFs are generally associated with broad policy positions, for example economic policy (e.g. linking qualifications more strongly to the labour market), social policy (e.g. encouraging participation in raising educational achievement) and lifelong learning strategies (e.g. bridging the educational sectors and developing more diverse learning pathways). However, an NQF can also be invisible in policy positions.

» Purpose: generally, NQFs are associated with qualifications but some countries use the level descriptors alone as a means of supporting recruitment and selection processes or in-house training, for example.

» Credit: most NQFs are not associated with credit arrangements but it is increasingly the case that they support a credit system.

» Broader achievement: more countries are using NQFs to open up qualifications to learning achievements gained outside the formal education system. However, for most NQFs the focus is limited to mainstream national qualifications.

» Numbers of levels: NQFs have different numbers of levels of learning; the number of levels depends on the scope of the NQF and can range from 4 to 12.

» Learning outcomes: most countries define levels using descriptors based on learning outcomes but many countries, *de facto,* define qualifications levels in terms of the hierarchy of existing qualifications. It is also common to see a combination of existing hierarchies and learning outcomes.

» Regulatory power: Most NQFs have no regulatory instruments associated with them, however a few countries regulate the qualification offer by setting up the NQF as a quality assurance tool.

» Specificity: most NQFs are high-level generalisations of qualifications levels, however examples exist of NQFs that make this general approach much more specific by using sub-frameworks, for example generic level descriptors can be accompanied by more specific ones for a sector.

What is the desired direction of travel for the revision of the NFQ against each of these points, where the options include retaining the status quo and changing particular aspects?

17   This draws on Cedefop's annual inventory of NQFs: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/6127

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT NQFs?

Again it is difficult to argue on the basis of statistical evidence for the effectiveness of NQFs but what is possible to argue is the following[18].

» NQFs are now part of the language of qualifications systems. The amorphous, complex and idiosyncratic systems of the past are now discussed, nationally and internationally, in ways that allow analysis, policy learning and reform.

» The emergence of comprehensive frameworks has made it possible to approach the shift to learning outcomes in a more systematic, more consistent way. This is not to say that the use of learning outcomes has been embedded overnight – the road to the full use of learning outcomes is a long one and only in VET can we say that use of learning outcomes is the norm.

» NQFs have made an impact on qualifications governance arrangements. They have raised the profile of qualifications policies and have influenced the creation of bodies to manage frameworks and qualifications. This has sometimes been seen through mergers of existing bodies, sometimes by drawing the qualifications management process into a ministerial department. The level of use of private (as opposed to public) provision remains small.

» Where NQFs cover more than one sector it is the case that stakeholder involvement in qualifications processes has increased. NQFs have helped bring together stakeholders from different subsystems in education and have strengthened the links between these subsystems making them (in theory) more permeable.

» NQFs have created level hierarchies that have highlighted gaps in existing qualifications provision.

» Frameworks may have helped with issues of coherence and dealing with diversity in federal systems

And possibly NQFs have had less impact in the following areas.

» Teaching and learning generally remains separated from these frameworks even when learning outcomes are used across the board. However, quality assurance processes and regulations (sometimes associated with NQFs), have had some influence on provision – in that qualifications have changed and, by implication, what is taught, learnt and assessed may change.

» There is no evidence for raised standards directly attributable to frameworks.

» NQFs, by and large, have not created the seamless whole for the education and training systems that many expected. They have not removed inconsistencies, such as the way credit is used across VET and higher education.

» NQFs are often cited as lifelong learning instruments – it is argued for lifelong learning there must be multiple access points to different pathways and linkages between qualifications that exist in different education and training settings, for example in higher education and VET. There is no evidence of an increased use of access points and pathways attributable to NQFs.

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18 Bateman, A., Coles M., Keating J., Keevy J., 2014, *Flying blind: Policy rationales for national qualifications frameworks and how they tend to evolve*, International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Volume 7, Issue 1

» Most NQFs have failed to make improvements to qualifications that can accommodate learning from education and training that has taken place in the non-formal and private sectors.

» Qualifications systems remain confusing, although the introduction of qualifications types has made systems more transparent.

» The effect of the qualifications frameworks on mobility of learners and workers is still uncertain, although there are great expectations that qualifications frameworks will support mobility though better recognition of qualifications.

Notwithstanding the lack of impact, or evidence of impact, can we imagine a qualifications landscape without NQFs? The answer is probably no. NQFs provide the best response we have to the increasingly complex qualifications systems and the challenges of globalisation.

SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE REVIEW OF THE NFQ?

The analysis, questions and evaluations outlined so far in this paper can be used to both open up the scope of possibilities for the NFQ, and offer ways of setting limits to what the NFQ might try to achieve. It will help ask questions about what the Irish framework can do for Ireland in the future rather than what the NFQ has done already. That is not to say evaluation of the NFQ is pointless, it is saying that being clear about the future roles of the NFQ and the shape it will need is likely to be just as informative.

5 The NFQ and the European Qualifications Framework

The European Union has developed tools to make the different national qualifications systems more understandable to people in other countries[19]. The main tool is the eight level, learning outcomes-based, European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). In 2009 Ireland became one of the first countries to reference its own NFQ levels to the EQF, thus making Irish levels more understandable to other Europeans. The Irish referencing report fashioned the referencing process itself and the report, seven years on, still reads well and is trusted. 26 countries have now referenced their NQFs to the EQF and many countries outside Europe wish to officially reference their NQFs to the EQF (for example, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong (SAR), India, United Arab Emirates). There is also interest from owners of international sectoral qualifications in having qualifications referenced to an EQF level.

Irish experience of the NFQ has been a strong influence on the evolution of the EQF and Irish experts have been active contributors to a great many policy discussions and peer learning events in Europe.

The question has to be asked whether the investment in time in the EQF and the linking of the NFQ is adding value for Irish citizens. A follow up question might be whether sufficient investment has now been made and it is possibly time to scale back involvement. To help answer these questions it is useful to look at what the EQF currently offers in terms of added value. Some examples follow.

The EQF is undoubtedly an international benchmark, possibly the leading regional framework, in terms of use and reputation. From an international perspective, through the EQF and its structures and processes, the qualifications system in Ireland is now more prominent than previously. It is more understandable, and is more accessible to people from overseas (including those outside Europe). Similarly, Irish citizens can now compare Irish levels of qualifications and Irish qualifications types to those of other European countries[20].

There does not appear to be a body of evidence that demonstrates how widely the EQF is used or understood in Ireland. However, if it is used by employers or universities when considering an application from a person who holds a qualification from a country that has referenced its qualifications framework to the EQF, it will help them understand how that qualification relates in terms of levels of demand to an Irish qualification with which they will be more familiar. Likewise, the holder of an Irish qualification who is seeking to work/study in another EU country can explain the level of their qualification with reference to the EQF and, in turn, to the levels of the country they

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19   See the UK's summary of the tools on: http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/european

20   This is how users of the main EU website on qualifications see Irish Qualifications: https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare?field_location_selection_tid%5B%5D=452, each of the qualifications and levels can be expanded to reveal more information.

wish to work in. As Ireland is a nation with significant inward and outward migration, in theory at least, the EQF should facilitate mobility. We know that levels of mobility are predominantly determined by factors such as business decisions, language and personal costs; qualifications comparison is probably not as big a factor. If we consider the mobility of learners and apprentices through the Erasmus+ programme, the EQF supports mobility because there is a need for partners across Europe to identify the level at which students/apprentices are working in order to identify suitable work placements/training programmes.

In addition to establishing qualification levels, the EQF has also played a part in the need for ongoing, effective and explicit quality assurance of qualifications systems, although again estimating the added value of this effect is not possible.

The EQF does not stand alone as it interacts with other European level tools, for example, Europass and ECVET. These tools will also be used in Ireland, and EQF levels and principles underpin their use.

Finally, the experiences of other European countries are shared with Irish experts via the EQF, for example the ways of enhancing validation of non-formal and informal learning and the ways that international qualifications can be better understood in terms of level and quality[21]. Ireland will have used the policies and practices of other countries to inform its own policies.

Current revision of the EQF aims to bring it even more closely into a package of tools that facilitate better transparency of qualifications, better quality assurance, better linkages with labour market information and job opportunities and better links across the education and training landscape including private qualifications provision. Most importantly it is hoped that the EQF will be part of a mechanism for citizens to use to make recognition of all of their skills easier. It is possible to argue that whilst the EQF is successful in its own right, it has not yet revealed its true potential for supporting these wider reforms.

In summary it is arguable that so far the EQF has been useful in informing Irish policy, useful to Irish qualifications professionals and is increasingly useful, directly or indirectly, to Irish citizens. It is the case that the Irish qualifications system is now better understood abroad due the widening use of the EQF. The future development of the EQF and its associated tools will benefit from Irish experience and has the potential to be much more effective at local level with citizens themselves, than currently is the case.

Is this a reasonable summary of the current and future added value of the EQF?

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21 EU countries are collaborating intensively currently on developing their systems for recognising the skills and competences of the refugee population.

6 Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks

Evidence from the oldest frameworks suggest that it is the link with quality assurance processes (regulatory arrangements) that make NQFs effective in driving towards transparency of the qualification systems[22]. It is the admission of a qualification to the framework that is seen as the highest benchmark of quality: awarding organisations that seek this position aim to meet the criteria laid down for admission to the framework.

However, it is possible to see these quality assurance processes and their governance as independent of the national framework. The role of the NQF can be seen simply as establishing the levels and level descriptors which qualifications must meet. The ways in which these qualifications are designed, assessed and certified are all independent of the NQF and can be quality assured independently of an NQF.

If we assume that the quality assurance processes (in whatever form) must be present, then it is possible to look at the added value that an NQF can bring. The table that follows assumes a distinct quality assurance process and a distinct NQF in order to identify what the latter does for the former[23].

Aspect of QA of qualifications systems	Example of Practice	Added value from an NQF
The strategic role of Government	Government will drive transformation of the qualification system to achieve policy goals. Government may also have a legal/regulatory commitment to provide quality assurance. There is a need to coordinate quality assurance across responsible bodies that may be public, may be autonomous or may be in the private sector.	Not necessarily central and therefore no added value. Potential value as a tool to bring stakeholder groups together.
Developing a quality culture	The building of a community of practice in the QA field, promotion of concepts of high discipline assessment, self-assessment and continuous improvement. Developing incentives for good QA.	Peripheral and limited added value.
Policies and procedures for QA	Instruments for implementing QA in institutions, governance structures and certification arrangements. Registration system for qualifications.	Admission of qualifications to a framework according to criteria can be a quality step.

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22   Bateman, A., Coles M., Keating J., Keevy J., 2014, *Flying blind: Policy rationales for national qualifications frameworks and how they tend to evolve*, International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning Volume 7, Issue 1

23   This table draws on ongoing work of UNESCO in the Asia–Pacific countries on the quality assurance of qualifications

Aspect of QA of qualifications systems	Example of Practice	Added value from an NQF
Training, guidelines and support materials	Train assessors, create a code of practice for QA Handbooks on assessment practice	Of no importance
Ensuring quality assessment	The use of skills standards, occupational standards, competency standards, greater use of learning outcomes, accredited assessors and assessment centres from the private sector. Good consistent moderation of qualifications.	NQFs can be supportive in the setting, management and review of the underpinning standards and criteria. On the other hand, these standards and criteria can exist independently of an NQF.
Improving stakeholder engagement	Industry involvement with quality assurance, promotion of industry sector committees, encouraging industries to use standards and qualifications in recruitment and selection.	NQFs help communication, NQFs can help with cross (education) sector engagement of stakeholders
Funding and resources	Sufficient provision Using a diversity of sources to support QA	No added value unless the accreditation of qualifications is used to raise a levy from users
Access, pathways and currency of qualifications	Assessing non formal and informal learning, creating and promoting pathways from qualification	NQFs are helpful here in providing the language for cross-sectoral pathways to be established. They are also helpful in clarifying the route ahead and the expectations involved in having learning validated. However, they are not central.
Communication with users about quality of qualifications	Ensure transparency of all aspects of qualifications including QA. Publish QA results	NQFs provide a useful medium to communicate about qualifications.
Using feedback on quality	Developing digitised systems to improve assessments, monitoring and processing Improve the use of technology to make efficiencies, reduce discrepancies and monitor provision	NQFs not relevant
Regional cooperation	Developing regional cooperation for developing common standards, certification arrangements and qualifications. Benchmark regional and national standards to facilitate and promote mobility of professionals and academic credit transfer.	NQFs are a useful tool for communication with other countries.

Using this type of analysis, it is possible to conclude that a NQF can work to support quality assurance but is not necessarily central to it. What often brings qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements together is the governance arrangements that are selected. A single body may be created to maintain and promote an NQF and manage quality assurance of qualifications.

The main common area for NQFs and quality assurance is the establishment, maintenance and review of the 'standards' that underpin the basis of qualifications. Here the separation of this role from the application of quality assurance (that uses these standards) is often seen as a solid quality assurance principle. A particular role for an NQF with responsibility for 'standards' arises where there are diverse forms of these standards. The coordination and consistency of these standards, particularly when they are cross sectoral, can be critically important. The NFQ is currently managed within a quality assurance setting (QQI). It also has a reforming and regulatory position in policy terms. The question arises:

> *To what extent should the role of the NFQ, as the guardian of underpinning standards of qualifications, be distinct from the operation of quality assurance policy and processes?*

7 | In Summary

The purpose of this paper is to inform discussions on the future form of the NFQ. It asks questions of the NFQ but does not attempt to evaluate it.

The paper starts with broad international trends and some historical context and through these observations offers opportunities for looking at the NFQ and what it might do in an expansive way. Then turning to the ways that current NQFs are operating it reviews where NQFs are making a contribution and where they may not be doing so. The lack of hard evidence makes this section more discursive and this may not be helpful as the NFQ is reviewed. This section may be useful for finetuning the NFQ.

The NFQ is part of the European landscape of qualifications frameworks thanks to the vision that is embodied in its structure and associated functions. It has informed the EQF developments and has the potential to do more as the EQF becomes a more mature and better known instrument and, most importantly, as it becomes part of a toolbox that might impact more concretely on citizens.

Finally, the paper considers frameworks and quality assurance processes. It explores the boundary between the NFQ's role in setting and regulating the standards that underpin qualifications and its role as a quality assurance tool for qualifications.

The points made in this paper can be used together with local evaluative information. This can enable judgements to be made about the extent to which the NFQ in its current form supports Irish policies and what form it might take in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Coles is an independent consultant working on qualifications systems around the world. Previously he has worked in local and national government in the UK and focused on science and technical education and qualifications. For the 10 years, prior to setting up his consultancy, Mike Coles Ltd., he has been working in the principal UK curriculum, assessment and qualifications agencies – his main interests were the quality of VET curricula and their assessment. He was the leader of research and development in these areas.

In the 1990s he carried out his own research into the ways scientific work is carried out and he made this the subject of his PhD thesis – it showed that the education and training of scientists lags behind leading business practice.

At the turn of the millennium Mike began to work more and more on international projects, first with European Union agencies and later through joint working with the European Commission and the OECD. It was with the OECD that the substantial conceptual work on qualifications frameworks and lifelong learning emerged.

The portfolio of projects that Mike manages is always focused on qualifications and includes substantial work with the Unesco, the Indian Government, the qualifications authority in New Zealand, the Hong Kong Education Bureau, the Humanitarian Action Community and the UK government administrations. His most important work at the moment is with the evolution of two meta frameworks – the European Qualifications Framework and the emergent ASEAN Qualifications Framework. He is currently engaged in working on a coordinated approach to qualifications recognition for APEC.

One aspect of education and training which underpins Mike's work is the need for people to have their learning made visible wherever it is acquired. His projects and publications in this area are significant and the European Inventories of Practice and the Guidelines on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning for Practitioners have been influential. The Hong Kong Education Bureau commissioned Mike to lead a study on the practical ways in which a national system of validation could be developed and operationalised.

It was research work in 2003 that led to the conceptualisation of zones of trust and reference levels for VET. This work, published by Cedefop in 2004, proved to be the basis of the European Qualifications Framework. The latter in turn, with its focus on international transparency, has influenced many developments since and remains a powerful force for international understanding. The need for more transparent tools in this area has been acted upon by UNESCO with the exploratory work it is now doing on international reference levels for TVET.

Mike is the main author of several books on qualifications systems including the OECD's *Qualifications systems: bridges to lifelong learning* and Cedefop's *Changing Qualifications - an international review of policies and practice* and the ETF book *Developing qualifications frameworks in partner countries: a tool for modernising education and training.* He is also author of many reports in the fields of VET and qualifications.

Just recently Mike has returned to evaluative work and has collaborated with others in examining the effectiveness of interventions in education and training. His latest project is working in a small team to evaluate Unesco's work in the area of TVET.

QUALIFICATIONS POLICY **INSIGHTS**

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