

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS: GETTING ORGANISED

DON'T AGONISE, ORGANISE

1. Getting organised: rationale and concept

In order to make effective system-wide and system-deep reform there needs to be a clear understanding of the distinction between the term 'national qualifications framework' and the qualification system as a whole. Qualification systems are effective if the organisational arrangements which comprise them work together to ensure that more individuals have access to, and can choose and obtain qualifications that are fit for purpose, meet the needs of society, and offer opportunities for employment, recognition, career development, and lifelong learning. These organisational arrangements are not usually implemented systemically or in a linear fashion, but rather organically over time. They have strong interdependencies and should be viewed as part of a common system of governance (or, organisation) of qualification systems. The factors that are explored here are legislation, stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements,

New understanding of qualifications

In order to make effective system-wide and system-deep reform there needs to be a clear understanding of the distinction between the term 'national qualifications framework' and the qualification system as a whole. Consider the following definitions:

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are tools which classify qualifications according to a hierarchy of levels, typically in a grid structure. Each level is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes applicable at that level. Levels vary in number as determined by national need. Qualifications are allocated to NQF levels based on learning outcomes. An NQF helps thus to classify the qualifications in order to distinguish and to link them. NQFs can have additional functions in terms of criteria for describing qualifications (e.g. by type, purpose, pathways, unit structures, or credit values) and for adopting qualifications to the NQF register. An NQF brings order to the landscape of qualifications. A national qualifications framework is thus a specific policy instrument that functions as a tool within an overall qualification system. A qualification system is everything in a country's education and training system which leads to the issuing of a qualification; schools, authorities, stakeholder bodies, laws, institutions, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks. All countries have qualifications, so all have qualification systems. Qualification systems are the set of organisational arrangements in a country that work together to ensure that individuals have access to, and can choose and obtain qualifications that are fit for purpose, meet the needs of society, and offer opportunities for employment, recognition, career development and lifelong learning

New versus old ways of getting organised

In many countries the whole set of necessary arrangements to qualify learners can perhaps best be characterised as being in flux. There is innovation taking place, and there are new laws, strategies, and regulations being adopted that embrace modern concepts of qualification. There are pilot projects and experiments in developing occupational standards, qualifications, and curricula. But

most vocational qualifications are not yet based on learning outcomes and remain weak on assessment, and they have not been developed with systematic input from the world of work. Where stakeholders from the world of work have started to engage, and are cooperating in developing standards and qualifications, capacities and resources are inevitably limited. Some countries get stuck at the legislative level. And countries cannot advance on the basis of voluntary cooperation between stakeholders alone; they need systemic approaches, in both the software (concepts) and hardware (operational arrangements) of qualification systems. They also need to review existing qualifications and develop hundreds of new ones. They need to establish repositories in the form of databases that are available to users, along with methodologies, guidelines, rules and regulations, procedures, resources, and institutions – and to build capacities in all of these components.

Competing ministerial agendas

Qualifications are an important topic in both education and labour market policies. While education ministries have been focusing on curriculum reform, and in particular widening existing programmes, labour ministries (or skill ministries) have been trying to ensure that occupational descriptors reflect changing labour market needs. It is often the labour ministries that started to work with employers' representatives or social partners on training programmes for job seekers and certificating adult learning. This must be seen against the background of growing unemployment and economic restructuring, requiring the development of better adult learning to support retraining and career change. These initial competency-based programmes and qualifications have also had some impact in curriculum reform in secondary vocational education, under the influence of donor projects. But although curricula have changed, qualifications have not always been affected. Qualifications are still defined by state educational standards, and remain the outcome of the same or similar development processes.

The new NQFs promote relevant, quality-assured, learning outcomes-based qualifications that can facilitate lifelong learning, career development, and labour mobility. But apart from regulated professions, qualifications are not generally seen as an instrument for labour market regulation. On the contrary, qualifications should be passports to a wide range of career, learning, and personal development opportunities. This is appropriate for people who are expected to change their job role more frequently, with traditional wage employment much less common. The NQF allows the attribution of levels to qualifications issued by different organisations. Based on their outcomes, qualifications can receive a level. The learning outcomes make it easier to compare different qualifications for the same occupational area or field of learning, issued by different institutions. Learning outcomes make it possible to compare the results of learning in different contexts. This challenges the monopoly of education ministries as providers and issuers of qualifications. Employers and labour ministries are particularly attracted to the idea of learning outcomes-based qualifications that are responsive to labour market needs. The debate is about qualifications and what you can do with them, rather than educational programmes

Recommendations

- Promote a common understanding of qualifications.
- Don't stop at developing an NQF – they are a necessary but not sufficient condition for systemic reform.
- Different systems need to be fit for purpose, that's why they are different.
- To learn from others, look at the commonalities rather than the differences.
- Review existing qualifications before you develop new ones.
- Consider whether all qualifications are fit for lifelong learning.

- Make all qualifications available publically through an online database.
- Stakeholders from the world of work must have a role, as a prerequisite for systemic change.
- Recognise the inter-dependencies between actors in the system. No single actor can achieve change alone.
- Identify appropriate progress indicators and monitor them.

2. Legislation for better qualifications: support or obstacle?

To put it simply, countries use legislation to regulate things they want to change. The primary aim of legislation is then to specify what is going to be changed, who is in charge, what resources are available, and how responsible bodies are held accountable for what they are doing through monitoring and reporting. Legislation in eleven countries showed a wide range of qualification-related laws and by-laws. Many start with developing and regulating a national qualifications framework; others start with establishing a qualifications institute; and then there are countries that create a new qualification system outside the education system.

Legislation is a fundamental enabler of the production of better qualifications. There are eight key parts of legislation for a systemic approach towards better qualifications, starting with the basic purpose and principles involved, and covering the main components that laws are designed to regulate. Examining the legislative process reveals the importance of aligning old and new legislation and highlights key differences between primary and secondary legislation. Different legal and cultural traditions inform the way countries strike a balance between tight and loose legislation, and influence accepted ways of involving stakeholders. Critically, the discussion turns to how to ensure that legislation can be implemented. In very general terms laws addressing institutions and new types of qualifications have more direct impact than a law on the NQF. But our main lesson learned is that reform processes aimed at better qualifications require eight key parts of legislation that cannot be isolated from each other.

Key part 1 : Regulating purposes and principles

Key part 2 : Regulating institutional arrangements

Key part 3 : Regulating stakeholders involvement

Key part 4 : Regulating the development of qualifications

Key part 5 : Regulating the qualifications framework

Key part 6 : Regulating the quality assurance of qualification

Key part 7 : Regulating the validation of informal and non-formal learning

Key part 8 : Regulating RPL

Striking a balance between tight and loose legislation

Striking a balance between tight and loose legislation is not easy. There are examples of very tight or rigid legislation, and examples of loose or even no legislation. Most legal systems are mixed systems, with some elements of both tight and loose arrangements. Which way the scales tip depends largely upon the balance of powers and the division of responsibilities between stakeholders in a country, and on its cultural heritage.

Typical examples of loose legislation are found in the English-speaking world, where governments have been less inclined to legislate (prescribe) what qualifications should look like. Initiatives to develop qualifications come from private actors based on the principle that 'everything is allowed unless it is forbidden'. The market regulates the number and quality of qualifications. High value qualifications are the result of actors in the market acting in freedom and looking for the optimal

way of defining qualifications. Qualifications compete with each other, and consumers will choose those that offer the best value for money .

Not surprisingly, the construct of qualifications frameworks originated in Anglo-Saxon countries to regulate this free market of qualifications. The UK introduced qualifications frameworks to help employers compare the many hundreds of qualifications available. Currently the UK has five qualifications frameworks that together accommodate the majority of qualifications in use in the various education, training, and lifelong learning sectors. A typical example of loose legislation is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which uses common principles set out in a handbook. Although its constituent parts include regulatory frameworks, the SCQF is a voluntary framework. It uses two measures, SCQF Level and Credit Points, to help with understanding and comparing qualifications and learning programmes.

Another example of loose legislation is the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as the external quality assurance body. In the FHEQ, universities are responsible for developing their own qualifications and may use their own approaches as long as they can justify them. Loose legislation fits in the Anglo-Saxon Common Law tradition. Legislation is built incrementally around individual cases that are generalized to a larger area, creating precedence.

At the other end of the scale we see examples of tight legislation that come from the other main legal tradition, Civil Code, a system of state regulation built on general principles that are logically extended into a systematic collection of laws. Tight arrangements are aimed at developing high quality qualifications and making these compulsory for users. High value qualifications are the outcome of consensus and cooperation between actors, rather than competition. Qualifications frameworks in countries with tight arrangements are not intended for regulating the free market of qualifications, but for establishing principles for high value qualifications, such as ensuring conditions for equity and access to quality for all. France established an NQF as part of the Social Modernization Law of 2002. The purpose of the law is to create social mobility for citizens by enabling reforms in the fields of health protection, social security, employment, and vocational education and training. The law regulates the French national system of qualifications and its main instrument, the National Repertory of Qualifications (France's national qualifications framework). The law also introduces instruments for the validation of non-formal and experiential learning. According to the law, each person active in the labour market has a right to have his or her skills and competences validated, whether acquired through experience in professional, non-professional, or voluntary activities. Validation can be total or partial, and successful candidates receive the corresponding certificate or diploma that is included in the list of qualifications established by the commissions of sectors of economy and registered in the National Repertory. The law regulates that employees have a right to paid leave designated for validation of experiential learning outcomes

Recommendations

- Don't delay any necessary legislative process.
- Ensure legislation covers the key functions identified
- Ensure new legislation is based on an agreed strategy for reform
- Map existing legislation to identify what needs to be done.
- Make sure new and existing education and labour market legislation is aligned.
- Enact regulation that empowers actors, rather than seeks to control them.
- Use primary legislation to establish principles, and secondary legislation for operational functions.
- Consult stakeholders when drafting legislation.

- Regulate stakeholders' involvement in policy, design, and implementation, and remove legislative obstacles to that involvement.
- Don't design laws that cannot be implemented

3. Stakeholder involvement: in or out?

Stakeholder dialogue should articulate labour market actors' and other stakeholders' needs to contribute to qualifications that are relevant to the labour market and attractive to the learner. Finding the right balance between top-down and bottom-up in the direction of stakeholder communication will depend on which group or groups initiate and develop the process. With the identification and inclusion of stakeholders, new partnerships can be built to produce better qualifications, and decisions made at policy level can obtain the necessary credibility to see them through the design and implementation stages. There are many different forms of dialogue between stakeholders, and existing methodologies and best practices can be adapted to fit the environment of qualification system reform. Distinguishing between stakeholders with differing levels of interest in, and power to affect reforms is vital, as is differentiating between dialogue platforms and implementing bodies. Stakeholder engagement is a marathon, not a sprint. You have to be in it for the long-run.

The importance of stakeholder involvement

There is a lack of confidence in qualifications in many. Qualifications are often seen as not relevant, or not understandable, and do not adequately capture people's competences. Some think qualifications do not matter; 'people need skills, not diplomas' is a frequently heard view. Mobilising the relevant stakeholders to support the reform of qualifications and the VET system should lead to better qualifications, more engagement with vocational education and the VET system, and better outcomes for individuals. But it is not only a matter of more stakeholder input in the process. Stakeholders can gain as well, as they extend their influence on education and training systems, making sure these meet their needs and those of the groups they represent. While Ministries of Education represent core public interests and basic educational requirements, the involvement of different stakeholders can enrich the outcomes of education bringing them in closer contact with changing social, economic and technological demands. The mobilisation of stakeholders can thus support the development of a 'zone of mutual trust'. This is described as a stakeholder agreement covering "the delivery, recognition and evaluation of vocational learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences).

It is worth noting the difference between 'stakeholders' and 'actors'. Stakeholders are people, groups, or entities that have a role and either a specific, or a general, interest in the objectives and implementation of qualification policies. Actors, on the other hand, are authorised agents for particular interests – autonomous entities who can exercise agency (the ability to effect change) in a given situation; in this case, the development and implementation of qualification policies. Not all stakeholders are actors, but all actors are stakeholders.

The value to qualifications of engaging stakeholders

Different types of engagement can lead to different outcomes. It is more difficult to reach agreement on the outcomes when different stakeholder groups are involved, but a more inclusive approach to stakeholders, can produce better outcomes. A European study of bricklayer qualifications shows lower levels of qualification among English-trained bricklayers, in contrast to higher levels among their French, German, and Dutch counterparts. In France, Germany, and the Netherlands, bricklayer qualifications draw on a broad knowledge base, and their development is a

product of dialogue among social partners. In England, qualifications are more on-the job based and narrower in focus. Their development is not driven by social dialogue but rather by employers seeking quicker, less costly solutions, reducing the role of stakeholders whose involvement would otherwise lend credibility to the qualifications in question. As the study says, “Any occupational qualification depends for its validity on the involvement and agreement of all stakeholders; the less the agreement and involvement of all those concerned, the weaker its currency and status in the labour

The ideal scenario is to identify and involve all groups of stakeholders, and to put in place cooperation mechanisms to maximise the focus on good qualifications and wider lifelong learning policies. It is important to recognise the ‘entry point’ of the process; that is, the current state of play with stakeholders in a given policy context – including identifying those who are drivers of change – and start, or continue, building from there. The holistic approach of involving stakeholders in the full VET cycle, not only in qualifications development, would necessitate their participation at all stages – policy, design, and implementation. An important transversal factor is the capacity of stakeholder organisations, and the technical competence of their representatives, in the different stages of cooperation mechanisms. Too much dominance by government might negatively affect the full engagement of other stakeholders. Stakeholder representatives’ power in the decision-making context is another issue to consider, for example in Algeria, which has seen a fragmentation of organisations representing employers. Allocating a specific function to stakeholders such as responsibility for developing occupational standards, as seen in Estonia and the Netherlands, can facilitate stakeholders in acquiring expertise and a permanent role in qualification systems. Finally, the impact of policy and capacity learning via international cooperation projects, usually sponsored by donors, can be beneficial to engaging stakeholders on a more permanent basis. Such projects can also be a starting point for labour market stakeholders to organise themselves to become established long-term actors, speaking with a stronger voice and influencing national policy.

Stakeholder mapping

The value of stakeholder mapping, for most of the stakeholder groups and particularly for employers, is separate to their involvement in the qualification system. It is a strategic management function that should be encouraged as generic good practice. It is also a dynamic process, not something to be done once and then filed away. Groups change over time, and their relative influence and interest in a particular issue changes too. Stakeholder mapping is therefore an on-going need. It is important to have a lead or coordinating body for qualification system reform. It is likely that this body will take responsibility for overall stakeholder mapping. That does not reduce the need, or indeed the benefit, for all parties to undertake their own mapping process. Moreover, our purpose in relation to qualifications is to encourage systemic change, and this cannot be achieved by one institution. You need to have allies, you need to build networks, whatever your position in the qualification system, so you need to know who the other stakeholders are that you can engage with to bring about change. There is a vast literature on stakeholder mapping within the VET sector, and from other sectors and professional areas. Stakeholder mapping is a central plank of strategic communication, and since the purpose of mapping within qualification system reform is to promote dialogue and engagement – both arguably forms of strategic communication – the mapping process will be very similar across all sectors. Sooner or later you will need to communicate systematically with other stakeholders. When developing targeted stakeholder communications, the broad typologies identified below need to be examined in more detail. Types must be further analysed into specific groups and organisations, and even individuals where appropriate (e.g. a particular government minister, or academic, or philanthropist, and so on).

VET reform efforts around the world have yielded useful guidance on stakeholder mapping. A South African project on workplace training recommends that “a rigorous ‘stakeholder mapping’ exercise

should be carried out at the outset". However, it goes on to say that "'stakeholder mapping' exercise should be carried out at the outset". However, it goes on to say that "it is also important to acknowledge that the balance, timing and extent of stakeholder involvement should be carefully considered, to avoid creating a stakeholder management process that is unnecessarily bureaucratic and cumbersome." Once the mapping stage is complete, any subsequent consultation process must recognise the need for trust among stakeholders. As we saw in the case of the English bricklayers, a top-down-only approach can inhibit trust, so there is much to be gained from combining top-down direction with consultative, bottom-up approaches. Transparency and participation confer legitimacy on a consultative approach, and therefore levels of trust will be higher. However, it is not the case that all stakeholders must be assigned the same priority. Apart from anything else, it would be impractical.

Moreover, it is not usually necessary to engage all stakeholder groups with the same level of intensity all the time. Developing a strategic plan about who you are engaging with, when, and why, offers a more sustainable path. The choice of priority will depend on the relative levels of interest and influence that are attributed to stakeholders, and to a process of assessing the issues that are most pertinent for the high priority groups. Questions to ask might include which issues stakeholders most frequently raise, and whether these issues are relevant to the engagement objectives.

The materials available from online resource *Stakeholdermap.com* offer a useful starting point. The site provides models, templates, and techniques for gathering and analysing information about stakeholders in business communication and project management processes, most of which can be easily transferred to the area of qualification system reform. The Stakeholdermap.com e-book *4 Steps to Successful Stakeholder Management* includes stakeholder identification methods such as mind-mapping, brainstorming, analysing previous projects, and reviewing organisation charts and directories.

Distinguishing between dialogue platforms and implementing bodies

Stakeholders from different organisations come together to share a platform for dialogue in various settings. Dialogue is about agreeing the direction of development; whereas implementation is about the technical work resulting from agreed actions. So, while stakeholders carry out dialogue with each other, institutions have operational and implementing responsibility. But in practice it is not always easy to distinguish between fora for dialogue and implementing bodies. For example, in Estonia the labour market is divided into 16 sectors based on statistical classification of economic fields, and each sector is managed by a sector skills council. Institutions represented in these councils are nominated by government, and include employer organisations, trade unions, professional associations, education and training institutions, and responsible ministries. These councils discuss various proposals and opinions, and achieve a consensus among represented institutions on the development and implementation of the occupational qualification system for each sector.

Among other functions, Estonia's sector skills councils are responsible for developing, updating, and approving occupational standards, and giving rights to awarding bodies to award professional qualifications. They approve procedures for awarding occupational qualifications, and set the fees for awarding and recertifying qualifications. Cooperation between the sector skills councils is coordinated by a Board of Chairmen of Sector Skills Councils. The Board decides on the allocation of initial occupational qualifications in the EstQF, explores the need to develop higher qualification levels, and approves the development of occupational qualification standards. Formal platforms exist in a number of countries: Turkey has sector councils as well as other qualification-related councils; Bosnia has a Council and Intersectoral Committee for QF; and Morocco has a National

Commission for the NQF. In some countries, there are currently only informal platforms, for instance Ukraine, where dialogue is building on previous NQF working group activities.

Engaging with stakeholders

Dialogue provides the primary means for different forms of engagement among stakeholders, directed towards the development and implementation of qualifications, qualifications frameworks, or qualification systems. As a means to an end, dialogue requires effective methods and strategic purposes to achieve a particular goal. Different counterparts with diverse, or indeed shared, interests may pursue this goal from different angles. Formal dialogue is conducted by institutionalised actors who fulfil the preconditions of autonomy and representativeness, and both formal and informal dialogue can occur within and between economic sectors, professional bodies, individual businesses, and other social partners. Informal dialogue is also possible. While the informal nature of these activities is valuable, in that it allows people to express views and to use language that they might not use in a formal setting, they run the risk of remaining exploratory discussions with little or no concrete output. It is important to explain the agenda in an informal dialogue, and ensure an adequate level of productiveness, to maintain the willing involvement of participants. Decision making and influencing are good indicators of productive informal dialogue. These aspects of dialogue will be framed by the value different stakeholders give to skills and qualifications, which is linked to varying cultures in public affairs, the role of the state, and social dialogue. All of which may influence thinking on practices such as consultation, mediation, lobbying, and negotiations on the design, definition, and accreditation of qualifications. Therefore, possible topics for dialogue might include:

- Analysing problems in the existing qualification system
- Developing an implementation plan
- Formulating NQF levels and identifying qualifications that should be included
- Formulating the objectives of reform
- Identifying needs for new qualifications
- Reviewing institutional arrangements and capacities
- Specifying how qualifications should change
- Taking formal decisions on new concepts.

This involves identifying and engaging the appropriate stakeholders in the different topics. In practice, there are four formats of dialogue or stakeholder engagement among the identified groups; informative, consultative, cooperative, and decisional. In informative dialogue the public authorities only inform stakeholders about decisions taken in the field of qualifications (raising the question of whether this can be properly termed 'dialogue'). In the case of consultative dialogue, stakeholders are consulted and their feedback may or may not influence decisions. The cooperative form goes further, and implies that the participating stakeholders are involved in the decision making process as partners. Finally, the decisional form is where the stakeholders themselves make the decisions. The choice of format for stakeholder engagement is of course also linked with the topics for dialogue. Countries in which there is meaningful dialogue between stakeholders produce qualifications that are trusted by stakeholders and beneficiaries. In the case of Ireland, bodies for governance and dialogue are in place under the Quality and Qualifications Ireland banner. Many stakeholders are involved, both in the process of policy development and in the implementation of qualifications. The goals of the various dialogue forms in any given country will determine which stakeholders are involved. Both the form and goals of a particular dialogue then determine the degree of stakeholders' involvement. The different forms of dialogue can also be called 'cooperation mechanisms', whether or not these mechanisms have been confirmed in laws, decrees, or any other form of regulation directing roles, responsibilities, and resources

Recommendations

- The goal of dialogue is to be productive and ensure that qualifications are understood and trusted by all.
- Map all types of stakeholders and support their involvement.
- Formalise dialogue and support it with appropriate resources.
- Develop a shared communication strategy specifically about qualifications for the audiences represented by stakeholders, and tailor messages for the different groups.
- Be specific in dialogue – don't waste each other's time! Dialogue is doing business.
- Accept your share of responsibility for action.
- Remember that providers and end users of qualifications are also stakeholders.