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National Qualifications Frameworks: what's the evidence of success?

by Stephanie Allais

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The popularity of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) has grown dramatically in the last five years. Over 100 countries are now implementing, developing, or considering NQFs, or involved in regional qualifications frameworks. Qualifications frameworks have been widely endorsed by influential international organizations and bilateral agencies, often supported by aid money and even loans. But what evidence is there about the impacts, strengths, and weaknesses of NQFs, particularly for developing countries? Have they solved the 'mismatch' between education and training systems and labour markets? This Briefing presents some highlights from the International Labour Organization's comparison of qualifications frameworks in 16 countries.

- The research found little evidence that NQFs have improved communication between education and training systems and labour markets.
- All countries found it difficult to involve employers in designing qualifications, and even more difficult to involve trade unions. Employers tended to see the frameworks as something coming from educational institutions, and educational institutions to see frameworks as coming from industry.
- In nearly all of the countries with older qualifications frameworks, many qualifications had been developed, but never used.
- Less ambitious frameworks seemed to achieve more. Building capacity of educational institutions, and building the capacity of institutions which conduct research into labour market needs, are important areas for policy.
- Qualifications policies are not enough to help countries break out of particular skills and labour market paths. Coordinated skills, labour market, and socioeconomic policies are needed. Focusing on particular sectors may be a useful first step.

Introduction

There is much enthusiasm for the introduction of qualifications frameworks around the world, but little available evidence of their successes and failures. Against this background, the International Labour Organization (ILO) commissioned a comparative study of qualifications frameworks in 16 countries around the world to investigate what NQFs have actually achieved, and what the difficulties with implementing them have been. The study aimed to understand the role that qualifications frameworks can play in raising skills levels, reforming education and training systems, and improving qualifications systems, and to understand which kinds of NQFs have been successful in which contexts. An issue of particular interest to the ILO and in the study is how qualifications frameworks can improve the relationships between education and training systems on the one hand, and labour markets on the other.

The study produced 16 case studies: five focused on the 'early starters' (Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa) and were based on a review of available literature while the other 11 case studies were based on fieldwork in Bangladesh, Botswana, Chile, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Russia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, and Turkey.

Little evidence of success

The project had considerable limitations and the conclusions can only be tentative and to some extent raise more questions than they answered. More was learnt about the design and implementation of qualifications frameworks than about impact. Nonetheless, the research provides important information and analysis about a policy mechanism which is largely untested, and yet is being adopted with increasing enthusiasm.

In general our research found little evidence that NQFs are achieving their goals. In many instances this was because NQFs are a recent intervention, and it may be simply too early to tell. It could also have been the failure of our researchers to locate

available evidence. Nonetheless, the absence of clearly available evidence of successes, particularly for the older frameworks, is an important finding for a policy that has been so widely accepted internationally. While evidence of success was not available, there was some specific evidence of qualifications frameworks having failed to achieve their goals as well as considerable evidence of difficulties associated with implementation. The framework which emerges from this study as the most successful, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, had relatively limited ambitions. It may also be the most difficult to replicate, especially in developing countries, because of the very long term incremental policy reform process of which it was a part, and the relatively strong educational institutions in Scotland.

Solving the 'mismatch'?

The research found little evidence that NQFs have improved communication between education and training systems and labour markets. In Scotland, there are some indications of success — for example, the framework is used by the national career guidance service. Most of the case studies, however, did not provide evidence demonstrating that employers found qualifications easier to use than they had been prior to the introduction of an NQF, nor were data found to demonstrate that qualifications frameworks have improved the match of supply and demand between educational and training institutions and the labour market. We were unable to obtain information or evidence from qualifications authorities, government agencies, and industry bodies to show that there had been achievements in this regard.

NQFs had had some success in specific sectors, particularly in industries with strong human resource development policies and practices.

The study suggested that there may in fact be an unfortunate polarization being created between industry and educational institutions. It seems to be widely accepted that educators are not in a position to develop curricula for

technical and vocational education and training (TVET), as they do not understand what workplaces require. This leads to the idea that industry must provide the specifications for the 'product' that educational institutions should produce. But what was striking in all the case studies was how little success was achieved in involving employers, with patchy involvement, usually driven by a few major employer associations nationally or in specific sectors. Moreover, in most instances trade union participation was weak. If employees' interests are going to be addressed in NQFs (or indeed other education and training policies) there needs to be more public concern for building and supporting the involvement of trade unions.

Besides the practical problem of getting employers to be involved, employers may not always be able to articulate what it is that they require. Certainly in many instances they are not able to predict what skills and knowledge will be required in the future. Some interviewees argued that the problem is not so much lack of input from employers as lack of research into present and future skills needs.

The value of qualifications

In considering the role and potential contribution of NQFs, the case is sometimes made that recognising workers' skills, and giving them qualifications will help them move to better jobs. There is considerable focus in NQF policies on awarding workers with certificates for skills that they have, in the hope that this will increase their prospects, and encourage further study.

Our study found that this is a costly and expensive endeavour (even relative to training), and that numbers of certificates awarded were generally relatively low. The value of such certificates in the labour market was not always clear, with little evidence of increased prospects in the workplace or encouragement/enhanced ability to further studies. An issue is that in many countries there are not necessarily good jobs to which workers can move, as the economy is dominated by informal employment. Many other policy interventions would be required in order to build the formal economies of countries.

Further, it seems that students, parents, and employers, and governments value university qualifications, and therefore by extension qualifications which can potentially lead to university. Even employers do not always seem to value the qualifications which emanate from industry-led qualifications processes. In nearly all of the countries with older qualifications frameworks, many qualifications had been developed, but never used.

Role of educational and training institutions

The role of educational and training institutions was a point of concern in the study. The countries in which providers seem to be the most supportive are Malaysia and Scotland, where the NQFs are driven by either providers or educational agencies such as awarding bodies and quality assurance agencies. But in many of the case studies education and training providers were described as 'offering resistance' to NQFs. There is an interesting irony where employers see the frameworks as something coming from educational institutions, and dominated by educational thinking, but educational institutions see frameworks as something alien, coming from industry.

Discussion

Governments and donors do not want to waste money, and are concerned about investing in education and training systems which do not seem to be working. This concern makes policies like qualifications frameworks appealing. Our research, though, suggests it is questionable whether NQFs can actually play the roles claimed for them. A simple, one-size-fits-all approach to education/labour market relations may be permanently elusive.

NQFs are more likely to be successful if they draw on the strengths of established institutions. In some instances, the specification of occupational standards may help qualifications to fit better with labour market requirements. In other instances, research-based curricula may be more successful, as industry itself may not know what it will require in years to come. In other instances, professional bodies may play crucial roles.

Countries that have been most successful have been those which have treated the development of frameworks as complementary to improving institutional capability. Successful use of learning outcomes seems also to be based in strong professional associations and strong educational institutions. The relatively successful Scottish framework has been led by educational institutions and awarding bodies. It has a flexible approach to how learning outcomes are created and used, and includes considerations of 'inputs'.

The sequencing of policy priorities is also important. NQFs tend to lead to a focus on developing qualifications. But ensuring coordinated skills, labour market and socioeconomic policies in particular sectors may be more important first steps. Working in particular sectors, focusing on their needs and possibilities, as well as institutional strengths, may have the best chance of success.

Building the capacity of education and training providers should be a focus for governments and industry. In some countries, NQFs and similar reforms are introduced with the aim of promoting the 'autonomy' and 'empowerment' of TVET institutions. However 'autonomy' without increased capacity, without increased financial support, and with a series of new 'accountability' requirements may be rather less empowering for institutions than is claimed, and countries may not get the desired results. Ensuring that learners can afford to access education and training, not just in terms of fees, but in terms of lost income in the case of poorer people, may be another policy priority.

This issue may be most stark in TVET: considerable infrastructure of workshops and other facilities is required in order to ensure quality. Improving TVET in most of the countries will require clear investments in institutions — not just policies which expect them to do more

with less, or believe that simple competition will drive up quality. Models which narrowly link funding to learner enrolments and outcomes-based qualifications may not enable institutions to take a long-term perspective.

New policies for qualifications seldom succeed in enabling a particular country to break out of a particular path, as education, training, and labour market relations are deeply embedded in institutional, social, and economic relationships and realities. But qualifications will be more likely to be of appropriate quality if the needs and conditions of specific sectors and industries are considered, if funding for education and training is ensured, if education and training institutions are built and sustained over time and not only forced into short-term responsiveness, and if broader conditions in labour markets are addressed. They are also more likely to succeed in the presence of strong professional bodies, strong labour market research, and with the strong involvement of trade unions.

About this study

This study was conducted by the International Labour Organization in association with the European Training Foundation. The views expressed in this Briefing are those of the author.

The full report has been published by the ILO (The Implementation and Impact of Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries, Allais 2010), and is also available at www.ilo.org/skills.

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