

National Qualifications Frameworks between Education and Employment: Engaging the world of employment

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*ASEM TVET Symposium
Berlin, 27-28 February 2012*

NQFs are ‘between education and employment’ in two senses:

- **They are expected to mediate between these two worlds**
- **They have to find a balance between their (sometimes competing) demands**

NQFs’ mediating role is reflected in several (but not all) of their possible objectives ...

Possible objectives of NQFs

- Make education more responsive to demand (incl. from labour market)
- Update and extend standards
- Enhance quality of learning
- Recognise existing skills (incl. in-/non-formal learning)
- Promote international mobility of workers and learners
- Reference qualifications to trans-national framework
- Promote parity of esteem for vocational learning
- Make education system more transparent
- Provide instrument of accountability and control
- Promote access, transfer and progression
- Increase coherence/coordination of education system

FINDING A BALANCE

The worlds of education and employment make different demands on the purposes, design and implementation of NQFs:

- *Use qualifications in different ways*
- *Engage with NQFs in different ways*
- *Different stakeholders, needs and expectations*
- *Etc*

So far, the balance for many NQFs has favoured education more than employment

- *Most success with meeting ‘educational’ objectives*
- *More knowledge, awareness and engagement with NQF from education than from employment*
- *Many ‘successful’ NQFs are (higher) education-led*
- *Indicators of weak demand from employment: unused qualifications, unrealised potential, use driven by public policy or funding*

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

Impact takes time ... but that is not the only issue

Six generalisations about NQFs help us to understand their position ‘between education and employment’:

1. *NQFs are diverse*
2. *The world of employment is diverse*
3. *Effective engagement with the world of employment is essential but difficult*
4. *NQFs need clear, consistent governance arrangements*
5. *Small is (sometimes) beautiful; slow is (always) inevitable*
6. *NQFs are not the only policy*

1. NQFs are diverse

Reflecting diverse contexts, labour markets, educational institutions, goals

They differ in

- *Scope: sector, comprehensive*
- *Status of sub-frameworks: bridging, integrated*
- *Aims: communication, reform, transformation*
- *Governance: regulatory, voluntary*
- *Design: tight, loose*
- *'Associated functions' and policies*

A European model? An Asian model?

NQFs' impacts and processes are diverse

“The most important finding of this review of evidence is not that the impacts of NQFs are often weak, smaller than expected and sometimes negative. It is rather that they are complex and variable. Not only have some frameworks or sub-frameworks been more successful than others; frameworks and sub-frameworks have varied with respect to the objectives achieved (or not achieved) and the ways they achieve them.”

NQFs try to achieve their objectives in a variety of different ways:

By ...

- *Providing a common 'language'*
- *Stimulating stakeholder engagement and coordination*
- *Regulating*
- *Extending or improving quality assurance*
- *Modularisation and/or unitisation*
- *Making individual qualifications more transparent*
- *Promoting cultural change*

2. The 'world of employment' is diverse

It includes

- *Employers, workers, professional bodies, etc*
- *Occupations and sectors*
- *Public and private*
- *Formal and informal employment*
- *High-skill and low-skill sectors*
- *National and international*

It uses qualifications in a variety of ways – or not at all

This contrasts with the world of education

3. Effective engagement with the ‘world of employment’ is essential but difficult

Engagement with employment is always a challenge

It is even more of a challenge for NQFs:

- *Technical language*
- *Need for expertise*
- *Uses only become apparent with experience*
- *International dimension*
- *Linking with sector frameworks*

This contrasts with the world of education

From ILO study: number of NQFs where social partners were “actively” involved in ...

	Government	Employers	Workers	No. of NQFs
... design	16	7	4	16
... implementation	9	1	1	9
... evaluation	5	1	1	5

Source: ILO

From ETF implementation study:

“In Chile, Turkey, Australia, France and to some extent Tajikistan, social partners have had a clear role in developing and managing the framework. In England, Morocco, Malaysia, Namibia and Kosovo, this is not (yet) the case. ...

“No models were found where the NQF is driven by social partners, employers or chambers, although outside the scope of this study examples from Estonia, Russia and Ukraine demonstrate that employers can be the driving force in nascent developments.”

4. NQFs need clear and consistent governance arrangements

- *Clear and consistent roles of different ministries and public authorities*
- *Clear and agreed role for ‘Qualifications Authority’*
- *Clear relationships with social partners, NGOs, private sector*
- *No conflicting parallel structures – regulatory frameworks, classifications, bureaucracies*
- *Sustained and consistent political leadership*

5. Small is (sometimes) beautiful; slow is (always) inevitable

Qualifications are social constructs

Developing an NQF is a slow, incremental, iterative process ...

... which may involve developing or linking 'sub-frameworks'

Many NQF success stories are within sectors or niches ...

- ... where demands/needs are strongest
- ... and less diverse than across all employment
- ... and scarce expertise can be used most effectively

However, an NQF may need to balance:

... demands to develop or renew qualifications within a sector, with

... demands to make the qualifications system as a whole more coherent and transparent

Possible solutions include:

- *Start with particular sectors/niches*

- *Treat NQF as a 'multilevel' framework which develops over time:*

... changing balance of development within and across sectors

... changing relation between sub-frameworks and over-arching framework

6. NQFs are not the only policy

There are other ways of achieving the same objectives

They can only work as part of a broader policy strategy

But they create their own political and organisational momentum, with their own pressures for change ...

Make sure that NQFs meet the needs of education and employment, not the other way round