



MONASH UNIVERSITY – ACER

CENTRE FOR THE ECONOMICS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

8th National Conference

The Policy Context for Education & Training

29 October 2004

Ascot House, Melbourne

The Role of Qualifications in Improving Pathways

Dennis Gunning

Director, Victorian Qualifications Authority

The policy backdrop

Rightly or wrongly, qualifications play a very important role in the world of education, training and employment. It's hard to remember, therefore, that the current scope and scale of qualifications activity is a relatively recent feature of this world. Qualifications have proved useful in a number of ways in education, training and employment, beyond the obvious one of providing recognition and reward for the efforts of students in completing programs of learning. Qualifications also provide a basis for the planning of learning programs by teachers and trainers and by employers; they form information which contributes to selection and recruitment decisions; and they provide an authoritative statement of what a student knows and can do at a moment in time.

Qualifications have also played an important role in recent years as drivers of educational change, as agents of economic reform and, particularly in southern Africa, as part of the social reform and reconciliation agenda. The design of qualifications has also been transformed in the last twenty years or so, moving from a process by which an elite was identified (and, some would argue, reinforced) to a means by which the vast majority of students can receive recognition for the knowledge and skills they have acquired. This move from an elite purpose to an entitlement can be likened to the award of sporting medals for personal bests, rather than only for those who come first, second and third in a race. One implication of this change is an acceptance that all individuals have talents that can be nurtured and given recognition and that not all individuals develop their talents at the same pace or in the same way.

Over that same twenty year period, governments have become more interested in qualifications, too. In England, for example, the reform of vocational qualifications in the late 1980s and early 1990s was driven by a political energy based on a belief that a workforce in which a greater proportion held formal qualifications would make the country more economically competitive. That particular reform program, which introduced a particular, and perhaps narrow, view of competence-based qualifications

called National Vocational Qualifications, has had a profound impact around the world – training packages are the Australian manifestation of it.

Governments have also used the achievement of qualifications as a target against which to measure the performance of the education and training system – that, too, was a feature in both England and Scotland in the 1990s and seems to be a fixture of the Australian system too now. Qualifications outcomes can, of course, also be used to create accountability measures for individual providers, although the early use of raw data probably said a lot more about the provider's raw material than about the quality of teaching and learning. Now, of course, the search for a simple yet accurate measure of "added value" has become a search for an educational holy grail. In the UK, too, the linking of training providers' funding to the success of their students in achieving national qualifications had some unfortunate unexpected consequences.

The increased interest in qualifications, and the inevitably more complex world of the new type of qualifications system based on entitlement, has led to challenges in the management of qualifications and in the communication of the options and pathways available. One outcome of this increased management and communication challenge has been the creation of qualifications frameworks and the creation of qualifications authorities to manage those frameworks.

There are three ways in which such qualifications frameworks can help. First, a qualifications framework can provide a route map to help learners, employers and other users deal with the range of qualifications, the relationships between them and the planned pathways from one to another. Second, a qualifications framework should be a means by which credit relationships between qualifications are agreed. Third, a qualifications framework should provide a template for future qualifications initiatives and for better qualification design.

This type of qualifications framework goes beyond those which simply seek to *describe* qualifications – the aim is to both describe *and* establish inter-relationships. Typically, this is done by adopting a common currency (such as levels and credits) for all qualifications used in secondary school, college, university and the workplace. That type of credit *and* qualifications framework is becoming increasingly common in countries around the world and is also becoming of interest to transnational organisations such as the European Union, the OECD and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Qualifications design issues

The new world of qualifications as "statements of personal bests" required a new approach to the specification of qualifications. Qualifications based on assessment driven by population ranking or by normal distribution curves do not fit well with the "personal best" model. The change is reflected in the development of publicly-available achievement targets for qualifications (usually expressed as outcomes and performance criteria) and in the development of quality assurance systems which ensure that qualifications are fit for purpose and delivered in schools, TAFE and other providers through quality learning programs and assessment regimes. The ultimate expression of this public domain of qualifications is seen in New Zealand, where a huge amount of

information on qualifications is available in the KiwiQuals website, and where the New Zealand Qualifications Authority also releases a huge amount of detail on unit-by-unit performance by providers.

Learning pathways have become more complex in this new world of qualifications – the traditional linear routes are now less common. Therefore qualifications design has to take account of the need to be inclusive, in the range of ways in which students can gather and present evidence of achievement – the dominance of external examinations as the prime basis for qualifications success is less strong now and assessment evidence is able to be drawn from the workplace, from prior experience and achievement and from informal learning..

One issue that is seldom addressed, however, is the use to which qualifications information is put. Qualifications are usually designed as a summative statement of the knowledge and skills that a student can demonstrate at the end of a course – they are, therefore, statements of *current* achievement. But users of qualifications, such as higher education and employers, often want to use qualifications achievement as a predictive, rather than summative, instrument and to make predictions about *future* achievement. Higher education, for example, will readily admit that success in senior secondary school may not be a great predictor of how well a student will do in a higher education course – but it’s the best predictor available.

That does beg a question as to whether a course or qualification that is going to be used as a predictor, especially in a bulk selection instrument such as the Australian tertiary entrance system, should be enhanced by the inclusion of learning that develops, and assessment that tests, the skills to succeed in the next level of learning – that is, it deals with the qualities required for success, as well as access. Whether such an approach would reduce the drop-out rates from higher education and from apprenticeships would be interesting to research; the development and assessment of “deep understanding as one of the features of the new ”Framework of Essential Learning for schools in Victoria might accommodate such an approach – and it will be interesting to see if there is any difference in drop-out rates in apprenticeships and traineeships among students who first completed the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

Current developments

The setting up of the VQA in Victoria was a very direct response to the need, identified in the review of post-compulsory education led by Peter Kirby in 1999, for the management of qualifications to be more responsive to students’ learning needs and trends. The VQA was established as a cross-sectoral body because Kirby believed that smooth pathways across sectoral boundaries would continue to be problematic as long as the management of the qualifications system remained locked in sectoral silos. In the work it has done in its first three years, the VQA Board has put a strong emphasis on pathways and linkages, with projects such as the development of the VCAL and the credit matrix reflecting that commitment. That emphasis is a response to the objectives set by the Government for the VQA – two of the three of which have a “pathways” flavour.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was mentioned in the previous section. It was created in response to the poor year 12 retention rates of a significant number of young people in Victoria and to the poorer long-term learning and employment prospects that flowed from such poor retention. VCAL built on the good practice of a number of schools, which had identified a vocationally-focussed course as proving attractive to young people who did not feel that the VCE was relevant for their needs. VCAL has become well established as the “hands-on alternative”, offering a pathway into apprenticeship, traineeship, employment or further vocational education.

VCAL’s growth has been rapid, with 5,000 enrolments in its first year of implementation and 8,000 in this, its second year. Its implementation was backed by nearly \$50m of government funding spread over four years to ensure good coordination and management of students VCAL programs. Piloting of VCAL and its subsequent implementation was also supported by VQA-led professional development and support materials, including the appointment of a team of regional consultants to assist schools and other providers to get VCAL up and running successfully. Anecdotal feedback and the evidence presented to the independent evaluators of the VCAL pilots strongly suggested that VCAL is making a difference and is re-engaging young people who would otherwise have dropped out or continued to struggle along.

VCAL was designed to provide vocationally-relevant pathways – that intention was seen as a distinguishing feature when it was compared to the VCE. It was vital, therefore, that the pathway reality for VCAL students matched the design rhetoric. The data for students in the pilot year was extremely encouraging, with the vast majority of students finding a pathway in the following year. The results of an investigation of pathways for VCAL students involved in the first year of implementation were also very encouraging – they showed that 90% of the young people who studied VCAL in 2003 are in a pathway this year, either educational or employment-based.

However, there is a significant difference between the proportion of young people who achieved a full VCAL certificate at the end of 2003 (which was around 60%) and the proportion who have established a pathway; that difference needs further investigation but anecdotal evidence suggests that the difference be for valid reasons. For example, some students plan to complete VCAL in more than one year, reflecting an appropriate level and pace of learning for them as individuals – VCAL was designed to be flexible enough to accommodate such variations in pace and hence traditional pass-rate calculations which assume a fixed academic year timeline may not be appropriate for VCAL. As well, some young people may have taken up pathways options such as employment or apprenticeships at the time they were offered, and not waited to complete VCAL. In such cases, the re-engagement in learning that VCAL delivered may have been directly responsible for the offer of a pathway, even if the VCAL course itself was not completed. One consequence of this data, and a reason why it needs further investigated, is that it may suggest “pathway rate” as a more appropriate measure of success of a course like VCAL than the traditional “pass rate”.

The pathway issue is being further investigated, too, in the most recent VCAL pilots, which focus explicitly on how VCAL might be linked to apprenticeships, to vocational courses at higher level that might also provide a route into higher education, and, lastly,

for adults returning to education and training after a break and needing a broad-based approach to the rebuilding of their employment skills and capacity.

The VQA's other big project is the development of the credit matrix. This is a means of allocating a common currency to all units and modules, based on *level* (a measure of the complexity of the learning outcomes) and *points* (a measure of how much learning it was intended would be needed to achieve the learning outcomes). Because the credit matrix is a currency for units and modules, it can enhance, but not replace, the Australian Qualifications Framework. The level and points currency could, for example, be used to enhance the AQF descriptors by adding a quantitative element to supplement the existing narrative descriptors.

In the initial consultation on the credit matrix in 2003, respondents strongly supported the principle of such a currency. That support provided a mandate for the development by the VQA of a basis for allocation of levels and points to units and modules. Initial testing of that system, involving practitioners in education, training and industry, was encouraging – further extensive testing is going on. There will also be further consultation, this time on the system for levels and points, in November and December. If the consultation outcome is supportive, and the further testing is positive, the VQA Board should be in a position to recommend implementation of the credit matrix at its February 2005 meeting.

Other developments in Victoria such as *OnTrack* have provided a better basis for pathway planning; *OnTrack* generates high-quality data on student pathways as a potent basis for better policy formulation. Other developments have enhanced the capacity of the system to create pathways – the setting up of the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) being the biggest example. The LLENs were a significant factor in the successful implementation of VCAL because of their capacity to tailor implementation, support and information dissemination for students, parents and employers to local needs. The VQA is also carrying out pathway research into the needs of the Koorie community and into learning patterns in rural and regional Victoria, in each case to see whether any qualifications development might be necessary to improve provision and pathways.

A final pathway issue arises from the recent high-level review of training packages by ANTA. Victoria, in its submission to the excellent consultation paper by McDonald and Schofield, recommended that “further research needs to be undertaken on ‘vocational pathway’ courses. This term is used rather than ‘pre-vocational’ to avoid limiting the research to entry levels and with VET in schools. The research should investigate how such courses might respond to the needs of those who wish to develop knowledge and skills in preparation for the workforce, whether for entry to the workplace or for the purposes of a change in career. The research should also investigate how the design of such courses can be linked to training packages standards while still fulfilling their wider purpose.” Despite disappointment that this plea for research was not picked up in ANTA's action plan in response to the McDonald and Schofield paper (instead, there is a reference to an investigation of pre-vocational courses), there is interest in Victoria in such courses.

A particular need identified by the VQA Board at its recent planning meeting is to research the need for qualifications at middle AQF levels such as diploma which serve as a bridge between qualifications such as VCAL and higher-level learning and employment. This might include the need for a “pathway qualification” which is designed with the dual purpose of allowing progression into the workplace or progression into a higher education course; that dual purpose raises interesting questions about the design characteristics of such a qualification and how it could be accommodated within VET, especially in relation to training package design. There is an interesting parallel here with qualifications in the UK, where such a middle-level suite of qualifications already exists and serves as both a pathway (very strongly recognised by employers) for entry into technician and middle-management jobs and for with-credit entry into degree courses.

Conclusion

All of us share the aim of developing an education and training system which is designed to meet the needs of its many users, which allows students to celebrate their successes and which creates pathway opportunities built on each of those successes. A good qualifications system is a major tool in achieving that aim because it provides validated targets for the planning of learning and assessment and forms an incentive and reward system for learners.

It is to the good that qualifications have become more learner-centred and inclusive – and that the standards for achievement of qualifications are now in the public domain. Across Australia, and beyond, governments, education and training agencies and providers are recognising the power of qualifications systems and are engaged in major reforms or specific developments. Victoria is playing its part in the development of new ways to manage qualifications and in the development of initiatives which are intended to use the power of qualifications for the benefit of learners and their pathways.

The need for a simple route map increases as the range and diversity of qualifications and pathways grow more complex – an inevitable growth as the system strives to meet the huge range of learner needs. We need a qualifications route map that is effective in showing both the big picture and the fine detail – a Qualway to make the planning of learning journeys as easy as navigating around Melbourne has become with the Melway.