

Qualifications Systems and National Qualifications Frameworks.

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Qualifications and qualifications systems

Qualifications have been designed to discriminate. They concentrate upon individuals and they testify to knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences that are not shared by all. They do have social attributes. However the collective attributes are essentially communal where qualifications play the role of gatekeeper for entry into occupations or alumni.

The most prominent sets of academic qualifications in the form of degrees and baccalaureates were established before the creation of nation states from the late 19th century. Although vocational and technical qualifications do have the stamp of state intervention they were formed upon the basis of occupational practices and expectations that preceded any state role (Bourdon et al, 2000).

Only in recent decades has the concept of national qualifications system become prominent. There are various definitions of qualifications systems (see OECD, 2005). However, these definitions have limited relevance as qualifications systems are empirically derived. That is they are not the outcomes of design and engineering but the outcomes of the intersections of qualifications, their institutional and occupational owners, and the experience of graduates.

These received qualifications systems now face a new set of demands. In Australia the Commonwealth Government has articulated a strong human capital agenda, part of which is a threshold level of certificate level III or its equivalent for the national workforce. The Council of Australian Governments has set a goal of 90% of 19 year olds achieving year 12 or its equivalent by 2020. More broadly governments, business and unions and prominent non-government organisations support the objectives of strong and accessible qualifications pathways, a transparent qualifications system, and one that facilitates lifelong learning.

The governance of qualifications continues to and needs to reside with their owner institutions and user communities. The alternative to these arrangements is to locate their ownership and management in a central agency. The consequences of this approach are likely to be the weakening of the 'communities of trust' (Young, 2007) upon which qualifications depend for their currency. The experience of South Africa where the South African National Qualifications Authority attempted to centralise the development and management of qualifications through the development of an inventory of unit standards is instructive. This national system, which was driven by

powerful national social and economic purposes of the post apartheid era, has all but been ignored and by passed by providers and users (Allias, 2007).

There is a natural tension between the new national demands upon qualifications systems and the more localised and sectional aspects of the ownership of qualifications that provide the value that the national objectives seek to exploit. It appears that the evolution and remarkable proliferation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are outcomes of this tension.

The AQF was amongst the first of the NQFs, and until recently appears to have been regarded at the international level as one of the benchmark NQFs.¹ Its development followed the sets of changes that led to the establishment of a national VET system in Australia. As a framework it does have a role in some ordering and identification of VET qualifications. However, its role in the national qualifications system is less clear.

Constructing a national qualifications system.

Qualifications like qualifications systems have various definitions (OECD, 2005). In a formative sense, however, they appear to have two sets of traditions.

In modern terms one is human capital. Qualifications that meet this purpose have occupational and industry foci and are designed to control occupational entry and standards and to support industry productivity. Typically their currency is in the form of standards based knowledge and skills. They may or may not be expressed as competencies. The currency is derived from occupational and industrial recognition, trust and use. Recognition can be localised geographically or more widely distributed. A qualification can have a monopoly of this recognition or share it with other qualifications.

The second is more cultural. Qualifications that meet these purposes are more abstract and based upon recognised disciplines in their construct. Learning is more sequenced and the core elements contain what Durkheim (1964) described as 'sacred knowledge'. This is the areas of learning that have been historically built through cultural activities and scholarship and is passed on through the core constructs of the subject disciplines. The purpose of these qualifications are located dually in the passing on and development of the disciplines and in broader social purpose associated with social structures and interactions, and beliefs and understandings, including citizenship. The currency of these qualifications is located more in institutional practice and status, and the degree of this status tends to influence the distribution of the currency.

More recently a third purpose has emerged. This is associated with the strong links between education and social and economic participation and inclusion. Broadly it might be called a pathways or lifelong learning purpose. This purpose requires generalist or platform qualities of qualifications as well as linkages between qualifications. Qualifications that meet this purpose need to have broad recognition and links with other qualifications at the entry levels and as a bonus through credit. They gain their currency through their platform of general learning or through their capacity to discriminate or create hierarchies, depending upon the nature of and their relationship with their users. There is an obvious tension here.

¹ Correspondence from Mike Coles the main author of the OECD 2005 report on 'Bridges to the Future'.

All three sets of purposes are important for contemporary societies, which in most cases in regards to education and training systems are nations. The three sets of purposes have individual and social dimensions. Single qualifications can represent all of these purposes. However, they are unlikely to do so perfectly as there are sets of tensions between these purposes. Individual qualifications and sets of qualifications are likely to more strongly reflect some of these purposes at the expense of others.

Qualifications, civil society and the state

These three sets of purposes are all present in the Australian qualifications market, and a robust national qualifications system would be one that maximised and achieved an appropriate balance between these purposes. It would also be one that facilitated relationships between qualifications and their institutional owners and managers that allow and facilitate linkages between qualifications.

The ownership and management of qualifications within a national system also is distributed. The key actors here are the state, occupational and industry groups, and institutions such as universities. Broadly the key relationship is that between the state and civil society. Institutions can range from state directed schools or colleges to autonomous universities in the Newman tradition.

This relationship is important for the enlightenment objective of a healthy and robust civil society that has a degree of independence from the state (and the church) and where education is a key ingredient in this independence (e.g. see Mill, 1865). It also is important because the ownership and management of qualifications increasingly are conditioned by relationships between elements of civil society and the state. Broadly there are three agents in the ownership and management of qualifications: providers (universities, colleges, institutes, schools), the state and civil society in the form of professional, occupational and industrial communities and organisations.

There has been a broad tendency for greater state involvement in the management of qualifications over the past half century. This varies from the apparent direct state control of school qualifications, to semi-corporatist relationships between the state and industry groups for VET qualifications, to relative independence of universities to issue their own qualifications.

Much of the discussion about qualifications systems and NQFs has tended to ignore the variations in this relationship across the sectors and qualification sets. There also is an observable tendency for some state established qualifications agencies to ignore the distributed nature of the ownership of qualifications. In the cases of the New Zealand (Strathdee, 2003) and South Africa (Allias, 2007) qualifications authorities this has led to considerable tension.

On the other hand it is not tenable to leave the management of qualifications in the hands of occupation and industry groups and agencies and in education and training institutions acting autonomously. Governments provide the bulk of funding for schooling, which continues to have significant public or social purposes. They provide most of the funds for undergraduate university education, and this funding is premised upon social and economic objectives. Their intervention in VET is premised upon market failure in skills formation, which has recently been reasserted by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments.

Therefore a national qualifications system can be seen as composed of several sets of variables:

- Sets of purposes, that have a degree of tension, and a balance between them that has changed over time;
- Distributed ownership and management of qualifications, that also is dynamic;
- Variable role of the state and its relationship with stakeholder groups and agencies, but with an increased role of the state over recent decades.

National qualifications systems are less closed than in the past. The mobility of labour, the export of educational services and the influx of vendor and international qualifications have increased their international exposure. The emergence of the European Qualifications Framework is the most obvious expression of these developments.

The idea of a national qualifications system has been the basis for the innovation and growth of NQFs. The evolution of NQFs has progressed apace, and there must be doubts about whether they have been built upon a foundation of a clear understanding of the nature of national qualifications systems, and what should be fashioned and protected within these systems.

It is suggested that there are two issues in regards to the governance of qualifications and qualifications systems:

- The purpose of qualifications and how these purposes can be reconciled within a qualifications system; and
- The question of the construct of knowledge and learning within qualifications and the abstraction of the recognition of learning from qualifications.

Issue 1: Qualifications and their purposes

In Australia and most other countries education and training is constructed as sectors, which in turn are identifiable by their relative distinct sets of qualifications. Qualifications both influence the practices of education and training and act as currency for the outcomes of the learning. In recent years qualifications also have been asked to carry the currency of learning that has been gained outside of formal education and training.

With the complexity of the sets of variables that shape the nature and behaviour of national qualifications systems NQFs have emerged as a means of achieving some consistency and transparency across systems and of linking qualifications. Some questions for the AQF are:

- Is there a need for a framework as a means of better understanding the behaviours and impact of qualifications and to influence the characteristics and management of qualifications?
- Are there weaknesses in the current structures and behaviours of Australian qualifications, given the three sets of purposes?
- Can these weaknesses be reduced through an NQF?
- Does the AQF represent the best option for an NQF in the Australian context?
- If not, how can it be enhanced?

Given the complexities of the Australian qualifications system, it is impossible to answer any of these questions with precision. Nevertheless given the levels of public and private investments in qualifications and their influence upon education and training systems and the employment market they need to be addressed.

One means of considering these questions is to compare the roles of the three sectors against the three sets of purpose as outlined above, and to consider the potential for their synthesis as an optimally cohesive national qualifications system. A rough outline of this is attempted below. To an extent the table represents 'ideal types' as in reality there will be considerable variation within the sectors, especially higher education. It also is ideal in that it represents a balance between the purposes:

- The three sets of purposes are prioritised across the three sectors to achieve a balance across the national qualifications system.
- The governance arrangements then reflect these purposes.
- The sectors reflect different constructs and sources of knowledge and skills.

	Schools	VET	Higher Education
Purposes	1. Pathways - platforms. 2. Social/cultural purposes - common foundations of knowledge and skills for citizenship & further learning 3. Economic purpose - generic skills and platforms for skills formation	1. Human capital – occupational and workplace knowledge and skills. 2. Pathways – through linkages and access 3. Lifelong learning through generic skills as platforms	1. Social/cultural purposes of the advancement of knowledge and learning 2. Occupational knowledge and skills 3. Pathways through linkages – mostly linear, with some platform role
Governance	Formal state control, mediated by: - main users (universities) - subject networks (culturally linked) - providers - public exposure.	Industry leadership mediated by: - state directions and structures. - providers. - markets	Providers mediated by: - state funding and agencies; - occupational bodies - market –
Knowledge and skills	Relatively detailed subject descriptions for <i>accredited</i> courses derived from <i>discipline traditions</i> .	Detailed units of competency that are <i>empirically derived</i> from occupational and workplace practices.	Broadly described subject descriptions. Content located in the faculties and schools – the <i>academy</i> .

These ideal types are confronted by two sets of demands. One is internal, where each set of qualifications is subject to sets of pressure that may not be able to be completely resolved. This is obvious within the senior secondary certificates where there is a tension between the platform role of the certificates and their use as instruments to differentiate students for university entrance.

The second is external. In the global era pressures for greater homogeneity have emerged:

- The pathway concept or what the British call progression routes;

- Mutations in occupations and the impact of technology change on occupational skills;
- The demand for generic skills;
- The greater mobility of labour and the need for portability of qualifications;
- The emergence of education and training as an export industry and the need for a wider recognition of qualifications.

As a consequence the ideal types of the sets of qualifications are substantially compromised, and this also has come in two forms. One is the market or user pressure upon qualifications – which is apparent within the higher education sector. The other is in the form of state intervention. This is most apparent in the schools and the VET sector. One manifestation of this has been the emergence of the policy motif of lifelong learning which has come largely from governments (including governments meeting through the OECD). Together these developments have created a demand for:

- More common platforms of learning in order to maximise pathway options and as a basis for further learning;
- Clarity about the standard of learning as a basis for user trust in the qualification;
- Transparency about the area of learning.

Across and within the sectors these demands create tensions. Some of them are:

- The tension between the generalist platform of the senior secondary certificates of education (SSCEs) and the need to differentiate students;
- The different genres of learning across the sectors and within the sector, especially the VET sector with its common mode of units of competency;
- The nature of underpinning knowledge and its relationship with generic skills;
- The tension between ‘outcomes based’ learning and qualifications and the concept of learning disciplines that assume hierarchies of knowledge;
- The question of what knowledge is delivered through formal education compared with learning gained through working and social life.
- The place of learning disciplines in both qualifications and within formal learning.

These tensions can be associated with some of the observable issues within the Australian qualifications system, including:

- The standard or levels of the SSCEs;
- The location of vocational and applied learning within the subject choice model of the SSCEs (Polesel, 2008);
- Differences in the amount of learning across VET qualifications;
- The question of and consistency of levels within VET qualifications (VRQA, 2007);

- The absence of any objective benchmarking for higher education qualifications, especially for those outside university sector;
- Disputation the diploma level qualifications – both as territory and as learning constructs and outcomes;
- The continuing question of underpinning and its relationship with competence; and
- The fluidity of the concept and constructs of generic skills.

These issues are amongst those related to the question of the effectiveness of the AQF. However, before considering the AQF there are some questions related to the nature of intrinsic quality of qualifications that should be considered.

Issue 2: Qualifications: the issue of knowledge and the problem of recognition?

These sets of tension all lead to the central issue of knowledge and learning – including their role in the educated citizen (a role that was once played by religion – and perhaps is being asserted again). The broad purposes of qualifications outlined above might be considered from the perspective of value. All qualifications carry value – for the graduates and for the users. The emergence of the policy goals of lifelong learning and the establishment of educational attainment targets have elevated the social value of qualifications.

This value can be seen as intrinsic or as exchange value. The intrinsic value is the personal benefit and status that a qualification gives to the learner, the platform and motivation it gives for further learning, and the wider social value of an educated citizenry. The exchange value is realised in the employment market and in access to further formal learning. Both intrinsic and exchange value need to have a base in knowledge.

The formal act of the award of a qualification is that of recognition of the learning. Recognition is a form of validation that the learning has been achieved. This begs the question of what learning. Within academic qualifications that question has been answered historically by the intrinsic quality of the learning. That is a qualification is recognition of acquisition of a body of knowledge formed around disciplines. So qualifications have a relational quality drawn from the knowledge structures. This is an inherently intrinsic quality or value. It compares with vocational qualifications where the learning is specified from workplace practices. Within the competency model this is an essentially empirical approach where the relational quality is drawn from work practices, and the value of the recognition is its exchange capacity in the workplace or labour market.

These different constructs of academic and vocational qualifications create potential problems in their inter relations. However, the two types qualities, the most important of which is the relational aspect of the learning that they recognise. Recognition outside of a qualification, however, is an abstract construct that does or may have a relational quality. The idea of its recognition outside of a qualification historically has been problematic. However, in recent years there has been a greater atomisation of learning through units and modules. This change also has pedagogical dimensions with ideas such as learning being in ‘bite size chunks’, just in time learning, and the disposing of learning to make way for new learning. These developments have provided a more conducive platform for recognition of learning outside of the formal processes that typically are defined by qualifications. These forms of abstracted

learning are also seen by some NQF developers as potential currency between qualifications and as a means of achieving seamlessness between qualifications.

There is a case to be made that this atomisation is problematic for both intrinsic and exchange value reasons. The case is that knowledge needs to be relational. This is for epistemological reasons, ontological reasons and for pedagogical reasons, and that the relational aspects of knowledge have been the historical driver of the growth of knowledge and the core idea of a qualification in its intrinsic form. It also is argued that the relational aspect of knowledge is essential for the exchange value of qualifications, for both intrinsic and extrinsic purposes. Knowledge that does not relate:

- has no dynamic capacity – which is the essence of the educated and the skilled person; and
- will be meaningless in a work place environment.

This goes to the heart of the relationship between discipline based and empirically derived qualifications. It raises the problem of the different constructs of knowledge within qualifications, but offers potential relationships. Therefore, it also goes to the heart of what an NQF can do?

NQFs

The central argument in this paper is that an NQF is unlikely to be neutral on the two central questions for qualifications – the nature of the knowledge (including skills) that they represent, and the nature of the learning that has led to the knowledge. The reason for this is that it is argued that qualifications must have relational qualities, and it is the nature of the relational aspects of the knowledge that is central to the intrinsic and the exchange value of the knowledge and the qualification.

It is also argued that it is the relational aspect of knowledge that is central to its acquisition and the associated pedagogies. This is the case whether one takes an Aristotelian, dialectical or constructivist approach to learning (although not to knowledge). Furthermore, while the relational aspect of knowledge and of learning can be internal to the knowledge domain and the learner, respectively, it also must be external. Otherwise there is no growth or mutation in knowledge or growth in learning – or knowledge of the learner, apart from waffly notions of self realisation.

The relational aspects of qualifications are drawn from their purposes and constructs. It seems unlikely, if not impossible, that they can be imposed from above. In one sense this is possible through a mix and match of different ‘chunks’ of learning. However, such processes would deny the historical and social processes of the formation of qualifications. As the paper has attempted to outline these processes and as a consequence the relational aspects are different – and this needs to be so. This is the rub – and the central problem for an NQF – and especially a single NQF.

There has been a major growth in NQFs in recent years. Following the first wave of NQFs that were located mainly in Anglophone countries they have spread to most parts of the globe. The current driver is the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework and the associated developments in European and some other neighbouring countries.

There has been an observable tendency for the rhetoric associated with NQFs to run away with itself. Multiple purpose and benefits of NQFs are claimed by their sponsoring agencies (Tuck, 2007; Young, 2005, 2007). Potential benefits include

greater transparency for qualifications sets and systems; greater clarity about competence, skills and qualifications needed by enterprises; links between qualifications across sectors; greater portability of qualifications; better credit transfer and recognition outcomes; more consistent quality assurance; and stronger national and international recognition of qualifications. The evidence at this stage for the realisation of these benefits appears to be relatively thin (Coles, 2006; Raffe et al, 2008).

The history of the development of NQFs has not yet been written, and possibly never will be. However, it appears that there have been three types of developments:

- Extensions of sectoral organisational frameworks that classify qualifications at levels or relate characteristics of qualifications (mostly levels). The AQF and the English and Wales frameworks represented this type;
- Taxonomies of learning outcomes. The second is to abstract learning from its content and describe it through levels and domains. The taxonomies can then be used for the purposes of aligning qualifications or elements of qualifications, and as a basis for developing qualifications.
- National integrated learning frameworks. A third approach is to effectively centralise qualifications through standardised units of learning, which can be transferred between qualifications.

NQFs (and the EQF) typically represent mixes of these types. In some cases the second type is used as an instrument for the first type, or it can stand alone as a separate instrument that can be used by qualifications developers and course providers on a voluntary basis for development and alignment.

A significant problem with NQFs is that there appears to have been a lack of thought to the two key issues that this paper has attempted to identify – the different purposes of qualifications and the issues of knowledge and recognition. NQFs need to be built around qualifications systems rather than on top of them – or underneath them. They need to be built in manner that will best establish interactions between the framework and qualifications and between qualifications. Their key purpose should be to challenge qualifications and qualifications systems (and sub systems) to establish clarity about the knowledge that they represent, and the relational aspect of this knowledge.

If this is achieved it should provide a better platform for the range of purposes that have been identified for NQFs – quality assurance and user confidence in qualifications, routes or pathways between qualifications, credit between qualifications, and portability. Qualifications systems are inherent dynamic. This is the developmental engine – not an NQF. So the NQF needs to be fashioned in a way that supports and guides the intrinsic dynamics of qualifications systems.

The AQF

Despite its relative longevity the AQF has been the subject of few critiques. Criticisms about its capacity to link qualifications and provide a basis for standards setting have been included in some studies (Schofield, 2004; Phillips KPA, 2006), and Wheelahan (2003) has questioned its capacity to support cross sectoral articulation.

The main attributes of the AQF are its wide recognition, its acceptance by all stakeholder groups, and some capacity to endorse the quality of Australian qualifications. Its main weakness is in its construct as a set of descriptors for qualifications types. This is because it is essentially constructed as three sets of sector

qualifications descriptors. As a consequence it provides no external referencing for the standards and relativities of qualifications. Nor does it have the capacity to engage the national qualifications system over the balance of purposes across the suite of national qualifications and the relationships between these qualifications.

Qualifications are important for some relatively obvious reasons. From the senior levels of schooling they shape formal learning in Australia. The outcomes for graduates of most types of qualifications are more positive than for non graduates (Lamb and Mason, 2008; Curtis, 2008). Yet there are weaknesses in the Australian qualifications system, and there must be doubts as to whether the current set of senior secondary and VET qualifications separately and in combinations are capable of delivering the outcomes that COAG and several of the states have set for them. As the higher education sector diversifies there must also be doubts whether the current arrangements for accreditation are adequate.

Furthermore there is little capacity within the Australian qualifications system and the more broadly across the education and training to test the integrity of qualifications and to shape the dynamics so that qualifications maintain and build both their intrinsic and their exchange value. These processes are not formulae, and attempts to formulate them will only lead to cultures of compliance and avoidance.

All of this suggests that a framework should have its own intrinsic qualities. Its extrinsic qualities would derive from its relationships with qualifications and the qualifications system and sub systems. So it would seem that a new or enhanced AQF would need to have some construct of knowledge or learning. This construct of necessity has to be abstract – however, it must be relational. In Bernstein's (2000) terms the relations need to be both horizontal and vertical.

Four factors might be considered when looking at the future role and the shape of the AQF.

- One is the nature of the instrument and what it is trying to achieve. At the international level there is a lack of clarity about the link between purpose and methods within NQFs, and a tendency for slogans to replace strategies.
- A second is to confront the issue of knowledge and its relational characteristics. This is because the relational aspect of knowledge is central to its status as knowledge and its growth, to learning and to the nature of a qualification. Therefore, it is central to the relationship between qualifications and parts of qualifications.
- The third is varied patterns of owners, managers and users of qualifications across the nation. This diversity it is argued is a strength. However, it also comes at the cost of some discontinuity and inconsistency.
- Finally there is the point that, arguably, several of the Australian qualifications or sets of qualifications are far from optimal and there is a need for some mean of challenging them.

So what would an enhanced AQF look like? Four features are suggested as base line characteristics:

1. It would retain the current feature of distributed development, accreditation and management.

2. This would be maintained within a qualifications type framework that endeavoured to apply some quality control and guarantee of quality.
3. However, the processes of standard setting and accreditation and quality assurance would need to be against some consistent external benchmark.
4. There is a need for an enhanced AQF to engage qualifications and their owners and constituents about the nature of the knowledge and its relational qualities within the qualifications. If this is achieved it will assist to clarify the relationships between qualifications.

All of this means that an enhanced AQF should confront the question of knowledge and its inter relatedness – which the current AQF conspicuously does not do.

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