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Labour market outcomes of national qualifications frameworks in six countries

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the major findings of an international study that attempted to investigate the labour market outcomes of qualifications frameworks in six countries – Belize, France, Ireland, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia, as well as the regional framework in the Caribbean. It finds limited evidence of success, but fairly strong support for the frameworks. The continued popularity of qualifications frameworks as a reform mechanism seems to be symptomatic of the ways in which transitions from education to work are in flux in many countries, coupled with the fragmented and complex systems of vocational provision in some of the countries. Even where such systems are not overly complex they have weak and possibly weakening relationships with work. Insufficient differentiation of different types of frameworks by policy makers obscures these factors, leading to misleading ideas about what frameworks can do in general. Extending existing typologies for the analysis of qualifications frameworks the paper argues that the French framework, where labour markets were the most regulated and collective bargaining had the widest reach, had the clearest relationships between qualifications and work. However, the qualifications framework did not seem to be the cause, but rather the effect of such relationships.

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Introduction

Policy makers and donors continue to support national qualifications frameworks and competence-based training systems, with the hope that they will improve the ways in which education and training programmes prepare people for work, help them to obtain jobs, and enable them to perform well at work. At least 142 countries are developing a framework and six major world regions are developing regional qualifications frameworks, with a view to supporting labour market mobility (ETF, Cedefop, and Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning 2013). A recent report from UNESCO (Keevy and Chakroun 2015) proposes the development of world reference levels for qualifications, with similar aims.

According to Cedefop (2015, 6) such frameworks can be 'a force for social equity' and 'are able to add value to a learning process and support access to employment'. Michael Graham and Arjen Deij (2013, 26) suggest that '[d]eveloping an NQF also deepens institutional capacity, especially in transition or developing countries'. Policy makers hope that frameworks will make qualifications systems more understandable, at the same time as making education systems more flexible, making education better related to the needs of the economy, and facilitating workforce mobility (Thorsen 2014).

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But research findings to date, as briefly reviewed below, suggest very limited achievements for qualifications frameworks.

This article presents the major findings of a new international study that investigated the labour market outcomes of qualifications frameworks in six countries (reasons for the selection of the particular countries is discussed under methodology). In terms of substantive achievements of qualifications frameworks, there are not significantly different findings to earlier research, although some interesting specifics of each national case were uncovered, some of which are discussed below. The focus of the article, however, is not the policy questions – does this policy work, in what forms could it work, what would it take to make it work? Rather, it attempts to understand the underpinning issues, and reflect on why policy makers and international organisations continue to push this policy that continues not to work.

A twofold commentary is offered, derived from an analysis of the differences among the countries and the frameworks in the study. First, qualifications frameworks can be seen as a symptom of the very real and more-or-less unresolvable problems that faces policy makers with regard to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) qualifications, which by their nature tend to proliferate and fragment, particularly in English-speaking countries or countries which have adopted British. In all countries qualification inflation is likely to be weakening links with labour markets, leading to inevitable difficulties for those aspects of education systems aimed at preparing people for mid-level work. Second, advocates and policy makers conflate different types of systems or interventions under the single term 'qualifications framework'. This point is explained by exploring the differences of frameworks in the current study. The (limited) effectiveness of one type of system, whether currently or in the past, is used to justify the implementation of another substantially different system, because both go by the name 'qualifications framework'. These two factors together may contribute to the continued enthusiasm of policymakers.

The next section provides a review of the available literature on qualifications frameworks, including typologies for categorising frameworks.

What is known about the labour market impact of qualifications frameworks?

There is very little published research on the labour market outcomes of qualifications frameworks.

A body of research on qualifications frameworks has slowly started to grow, most of it either very critical or cautious (Allais 2014; Bohlinger 2007, 2012; Bouder 2003; Brown 2011; Ensor 2003; Gössling 2015; Granville 2003; Hupfer and Spöttl 2014; Keating 2003; Lassnigg 2012; Lester 2011; Méhaut and Winch 2012; Phillips 2003; Pilcher, Fernie, and Smith 2015; Raffe 2003, 2011, 2012; Young 2003, 2005). In a comprehensive overview of qualifications frameworks internationally up to 2005, Young (2005) argues that all countries implementing frameworks have faced problems. Raffe (2012), in a more recent overview, argues that the evidence, while still inconclusive, shows that the impacts of qualifications frameworks have been less than expected, have often taken many years to appear, and have been negative as well as positive.

A 16 country study commissioned by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) argued that qualifications frameworks have not provided quick-fix or simple solutions to the complex problems facing countries in relation to education, skills development, and employment (Allais 2010). It showed some, albeit minor, positive impacts, particularly in Scotland (Raffe 2011) and to a lesser extent Malaysia (Keating 2011).

The disconnect between empirical evidence and policy-maker aspiration could partly be the result of the nebulous nature of frameworks; as a recent paper by Nick Pilcher, Fernie, and Smith (2015) argues, it is almost impossible to evaluate them because there is no way of developing a clear yardstick for measurement. A cynic may point to the enormous amount of consultancy opportunities around the development and implementation of such frameworks, especially given that much of the positive documentation comes from organisations involved in their development (for example, Cedefop 2013, 2015; ETF, Cedefop, and Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning 2013). Research with a positive take tends to

describe policies and policy goals without substantial evaluation of impact or use of frameworks (e.g. Misko 2015; OECD 2015).

A key aspect of qualifications frameworks is learning outcomes, and this issue has also been the subject of much critique and debate (Allais 2011a, 2012; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2008; Hupfer and Spöttl 2014; Méhaut and Winch 2012; Muller 2000; Wheelahan 2010; Young 2008). Lassnigg (2012), in an overview of developments in Europe, argues that claims made about learning outcomes are simplistic both in terms of education systems and in terms of how education relates to labour markets. In line with Manual Souto-Otero (2012) he also argues that critics overstate the problems, as learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks are unlikely to have a dramatic impact on education systems. In apparent confirmation of this, Gössling (2015) suggests that in Germany the language of learning outcomes has been officially adopted, but it contradicts existing systems and policies, and in many instances is merely invoked while the older practices remain in place. Lassnigg (2012) makes a similar point about the Austrian framework.

The research literature makes it clear that qualifications frameworks are not a single policy intervention; qualifications frameworks in different countries differ dramatically from each other (Allais 2011b). Some researchers have developed typologies and classification systems, in attempts to bring out the key differences (e.g. Allais 2007a, 2011b; Raffe 2003, 2009; Tuck, Hart, and Keevy 2004; Young 2005). In Allais (2010) these various typologies are synthesised into a set of three main goals and the key design features of frameworks associated with these goals. Frameworks are seen as predominantly one of the following:

> … an attempt to make the relationships between existing qualifications more explicit.
>
> … an attempt to make the relationships between occupational entry regulations and qualifications more explicit.
>
> … an attempt to use independently specified outcomes or competency statements to drive a range of different educational reforms. (Allais 2010, 122, 123)

Below I analyse the frameworks in the study using this typology, although I also suggest some modification of it. For ease of reference, in this paper I will refer to the three types as *descriptive frameworks*, *occupational frameworks*, and 'employer-led' *outcomes-based frameworks* respectively; 'employer-led' is in inverted commas in the last type because it is an aspiration more than a practice in reality.

Overview of the study

This section provides an overview of the current study, including the methodology and some of the key findings are briefly discussed. One of the key aims for qualifications frameworks is a desire to bring order to TVET systems, and another is to improve relationships between education and work. Both seem to work fairly well in France, but the framework there is substantially different to the other frameworks.

Aims and methodology

The aim of the study was to understand the extent to which and ways in which employers use qualification frameworks in hiring and promotion decisions, as well as the employment outcomes of graduates of national vocational qualifications. The research also attempted to gain insight into the extent to which qualifications frameworks have contributed to improving policies on training and employment and if they have had an impact on social dialogue in training systems.

The study was commissioned by the ILO as a follow up to an earlier and larger ILO study conducted in 2009, which found little evidence that qualifications frameworks were achieving their goals (Allais 2010). One possible reason for the lack of positive evidence in research into qualifications frameworks is that it was conducted prematurely. The new research, therefore, aimed to revisit two of the countries in the earlier study – Sri Lanka and Tunisia – to assess achievements five years later. It also aimed to build insight into the labour market outcomes of qualifications frameworks in countries that were not

included in the previous study, but which have well established frameworks or systems of organising qualifications – France, Ireland. As the Caribbean region has a regional framework which is seen as well-established, Belize and Jamaica were included in the study, to explore their national frameworks and their relationships to the regional framework.

Case studies were developed based primarily on in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government representatives from ministries responsible for education and for labour; authorities with responsibility for qualifications frameworks and for vocational education; providers; employer representatives; trade union representatives; and experts such as academic researchers or policy advisors. Ten interviews were conducted in Jamaica, 4 in Belize, 11 in France, 10 in Ireland, 22 in Sri Lanka, and 9 in Tunisia. 3 interviews were also conducted in Guyana, with a view to understanding the regional Caribbean framework.

Interview data was supplemented by analysis of publically available policy documents, evaluations, and research. The intention was to source quantitative data pertaining to graduate numbers by qualification level, employment of graduates, occupational area and incomes, labour mobility, level of productivity/ quality of work, job security, and access to training. Almost none of this, except for graduate numbers, could be obtained. There did not seem to be monitoring and evaluation systems in place to measure impact of the qualifications frameworks in the study. A few tracer studies were found in Jamaica, from which some analysis could be extrapolated. There were a few instances of surveys conducted, for example of graduate or employer satisfaction, also in Jamaica.

The data obtained, both from official documentation and interviews, enabled us to build some degree of a picture of the systems in the different countries, from which we could make inferences about potential labour market outcomes. A few key empirical findings are presented below.

A focus on TVET

TVET was the main focus of qualifications framework in all countries, and key imperatives were bringing order to complex and fragmented provision as well as improving relationships with workplaces. Three of the countries (Belize, Jamaica, and Sri Lanka) only have TVET frameworks at this point, with some amount of lower-level professional education included. Two, Ireland and Tunisia, are comprehensive frameworks in the sense that they encompass the entire education and training system. The framework in France is intended to include all education and training except the school system although it has historically not included higher-level professional education. Whereas school and university provision and qualification systems are relatively straightforwardly organised, the educational provision outside of these systems – at colleges, in workplaces, in non-governmental organisations, and so on – is generally complex and sometimes fragmented. In all countries what stands out is concern with TVET qualifications, a desire to reform them and to improve their quality and raise their status, and a desire to reduce complexity and fragmentation.

As an aside it should be noted that most of the countries seem to have made considerable achievements in their TVET systems, and much seems to have been achieved through strong government support for provision, and development of curricula and assessment systems; the role of the qualifications frameworks in this regard is unclear. In Sri Lanka in particular, strong state provision has increased substantially since the 1990s, with many new TVET providers being created, a new University of Vocational Technology being established, and new university colleges planned. Government support for expanding TVET provision is a major factor influencing the nature of the TVET provision system; the other key factor currently is a rapidly growing economy.

Even though the Irish framework is comprehensive, attempting to create coherence in TVET has been a driving force for the framework. TVET in Ireland exists predominantly in what is called in that country further education and training. Over the past century various programmes and interventions had emerged attempting to smooth the transition from school to work and attempting to improve the skills of job applicants. A wide range of different types of programmes, providers, and award systems emerged, as opposed to schooling and higher education which both had a strong tradition of

nationally recognised certificates and award bodies. A series of different organisations to oversee this 'system' emerged, and were merged, reorganised, and reconfigured over the years. In the early 1990s numerous projects emerged attempting to prepare out-of-work young people for the workplace. The qualifications available in the system did not seem appropriate to award credentials for these training programmes. Various processes culminated in the formation of an Awards body for vocational awards – the National Council for Vocational Awards, established in 1991 to provide certification for the further education and training sector. It was this Council which first developed a ladder of qualifications, in an attempt to bring some coherence to the fragmented provision within further education and training. This ladder of qualifications, with its notion of modules that could be accumulated, laid the groundwork for the Irish qualifications framework.

A recent review in Ireland found that FET programmes are weak in terms of helping people to access employment (McGuiness et al. 2014). The report acknowledged a rapid increase in higher education levels and unemployment rates, and suggested that workers both in and out of employment had low skills. This is surprising given the relatively high education levels in Ireland, although these are admittedly a recent phenomenon. Recent reforms, in particular the reorganisation of provision of further education and training as well as the creation of a new body for funding and coordinating provision, were hoped to solve low skill levels, but the reforms are too recent to really evaluate. Ireland seems to have developed a reasonably successful approach to analysing labour market requirements at a national level and ensuring that education provision meets these, through a structure called the Expert Group of Future Skills Needs, which is comprised of representatives of business, employees, education, government departments, and state agencies, and advises the Irish Government on skills needs and labour market issues that impact on enterprise and employment growth; the qualifications framework serves as a reference point for the development of qualifications but it is not clear that it is an enabling or constraining tool for the work of this group.

Although the aim of comprehensive frameworks is to create order and coherence across sectors, where one is operational (Ireland) there are tensions between the TVET component of the framework and the rest of the framework. Where comprehensive frameworks are under construction (Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Tunisia), differences between TVET and higher education seem to be sticking points. In all countries the approach to developing qualifications at lower levels was different to higher-level qualifications, with a greater emphasis on competence statements for lower-level and vocational qualifications.

Mixed views from employers

The small sample of employer interviews conducted across the countries revealed a mixed picture of varying perceptions of the role of qualifications frameworks. What was more interesting was that employer support or criticism did not seem linked to any clear evidence for or against qualifications frameworks. Indeed, in the case of Tunisia is almost entirely support in the *hope* of what a framework might do.

In Jamaica the majority of employers interviewed felt that the framework added value, and there were good relationships in certain instances, particularly in terms of employer involvement at the level of boards and councils, as well as in certain areas in the development of curriculum and standards. However, it was also pointed out that the qualification system introduced a fair amount of complexity. For example, the main national training provider, HEART (Human Employment and Resource Training), is a network of providers, but is also the authority responsible for managing the qualifications framework and quality assuring providers. These two areas of responsibility are separated into different components of the organisation. Interviewees criticised the framework, arguing that there are too many programmes offered for a relatively short duration and at lower levels of the framework, and suggested that employers often prefer to use alternate requirements such as the number of senior secondary subjects passed and workplace experience.

Jamaica was the one country with some quantiative evidence from tracer and user satisfaction studies for its national vocational qualifications, albeit with small samples. HEART stated that approximately

65% of their graduates are employed by industry. Feedback from employers obtained by HEART showed a mean of 2.98 on a scale where 4 was the highest rating. Graduates who were employed in Computer Operations, and skilled trades such as Auto Mechanics, Plumbing, Carpentry, etc. received the highest performance ratings by their employers (3.4 and 3.1 respectively, out of 4). However, the role of the qualifications framework in achieving these positive outcomes was not clear; interview data suggests that the role of HEART as a labour market intermediary is a more important factor.

In Belize, an employer interviewee suggested that whilst they value the engagement that they have with the national training provider, they have not yet moved to a point where employers accept all of the qualifications that are on the national vocational qualifications framework. Employers also cite lack of skills as a difficulty in filling positions, and import skilled workers in some instances. Interestingly there were programmes with good labour market outcomes outside of the national vocational qualifications system. For example, in Belize the Tourism Board has a strong focus on ensuring that industry has the requisite human resources in place and in some cases, such as tour guides, they have developed licence to practice systems linked to identified training programmes developed with active involvement of the board, providers, and international partners, but not part of the national vocational qualifications.

The case study on Ireland showed limited employer awareness and understanding of the framework itself, and suggests that a multiplicity of rules and lack of flexibility have created problems in implementation at points. An employer interviewee observed that he did not think the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is well marketed or branded, observing that, 'if you were to survey Irish enterprise and ask them what is the NFQ is – they won't know.' However, public sector employer interviewees in Ireland stated that they have found the framework useful in making their decisions regarding recruitment. Interviewees indicated that they had previously found it difficult to navigate the wide range of qualifications, particularly at the lower levels; now that this wide range of qualifications was on a single framework it is easier for them to understand the level of the qualification and what may be required for particular jobs. A study conducted in 2009 by the then Qualifications Authority suggested that the framework was playing a role in creating understanding across the qualification system, as well as trust, and stability across the education and training system and had considerable potential to be used in recruitment, in developing career pathways, in planning work-based learning and training and in recognising transferable skills (Kelly 2009).

From the sample of employers interviewed in Sri Lanka there was evidence of limited recognition and acceptance of the national vocational qualifications from the private sector.

There continues to be strong donor support as well as support from international organisations for the building and implementation of qualifications frameworks; in Tunisia donors seemed to have played a driving role in the framework, and in Sri Lanka they played a major role in the initial development, to the extent that many qualifications have not been updated since the flow of donor funds for this purpose stopped.

No progress in Tunisia

One key finding of this research was there has been almost no progress in the development of a framework in Tunisia since the 2010 research and there is very weak involvement of key government roleplayers as well as social partners. The revolution of January 2011 is obviously a factor in the delays, as following it there was general instability as well as increased unemployment, and other more pressing political matters were prioritised by government. Changes within employer organisations and trade unions and changes in critical positions in the ministries involved also hindered progress. There is also disagreement about the role and implementation of the outcomes-based approach from the side of educational providers. There was very limited awareness of the qualifications framework's existence, not only from employers and workers but even from government officials who are nominally involved

in its implementation. Despite this lack of progress some employers support the framework in principle, particularly in the hospitality sector, where employers believe it could enhance skills level in the sector, which in turn they hope would encourage foreign multinational chains to invest. Representatives of employers in the sector expect the qualifications framework to uplift the social status attached to jobs in this sector and to vocational paths more generally by providing clarity to pupils and to employers as well as by giving pupils the idea that what they enrol for is understood abroad or even in Tunisia by foreign investors.

Very limited funtionality of the regional framework in the Caribbean

The regional framework in the Caribbean was investigated as an example of an ostensibly successful or at least well established regional framework. The framework is substantially different to other regional frameworks. Instead of being a 'meta-framework', or set of levels against which different countries in a given region can benchmark their qualifications, it is based on occupational standards developed by member states, mainly Jamaica. These are submitted to the Standards Committee of the Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies and the Regional Coordinating Mechanism for Technical and Vocational Education and Training for review, and are then forwarded to the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) Council for Social Development for approval as regional occupational standards. In other words, it is an outcomes-based framework, operating for the whole region instead of for an individual country, except that most countries in the region don't actually use it.

While all CARICOM countries officially subscribed to the framework when it was adopted in 2002, only five of the 13 countries have actually implemented the associated training, assessment, and certification systems required in order to have the qualifications awarded. Of these five, two joined only in the last year. The Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies has set requirements that must be met if a country wants to offer the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs). One interviewee commented that this is a particular challenge where countries are smaller and resources are a real constraint. For example, some of the smaller countries have not had the resources to either train or employ the required number of assessors.

In short, although the framework is one of the older regional frameworks, it is in fact not used by most of the countries in the region, and very little evidence of impact in this regard was found. There were also concerns raised that participating in the framework would not achieve the desired goals in terms of labour mobility. For example, an interviewee from Belize stated that,

> the only thing that would change (once Belize can offer the CVQ) is that we would be recognised – the name would be recognised. But Belize people don't move in the Caribbean they only go to the USA, its quicker, its one flight away – so how will it help them?

While Belize intends to persevere with the process of being accredited to offer the CVQs, they are also looking at programmes run by other associations globally, in particular those in the United States, which are sometimes offered in partnership with global partners, with the hope that the graduates can receive additional recognition. There are also particular areas of concern, such as tourism: An interviewee from Belize stated, 'we are adamant that you can't have a non-Belizian showing Belize'. Interviewees from Jamaica indicate that when Jamaicans apply for jobs elsewhere in the region they are met with resistance even if they can show that they have a competence that is recognised regionally; at the point of this research there had just been an incident when 13 Jamaicans did not have their CVQs recognised in Trinidad, which was seen as indicative of the barriers that individuals face when trying to work elsewhere in the region. There is agreement that countries develop new qualifications for the Caribbean framework in areas which are particular to them; for example, Belize has developed qualifications for drum making. What is not clear is how much this qualification is needed at a regional level, given that it is seen as a speciality area of Belize.

The nature of the frameworks in the six countries in relation to labour market outcomes

What is clear from the above discussion is that many positive conclusions about value of qualifications frameworks are based on extremely thin or entirely absent empirical evidence. Below I explore whether this research sheds on qualifications frameworks as a growing policy phenomenon internationally. I use the three main types frameworks discussed in the literature review to present some of the key trends found in the research. What emerges clearly is how different each country is in terms of relationships between education, qualifications, employer attitudes, and the ways in which work is organised and regulated. Qualifications frameworks are presented as a uniform policy framework to improve relationships across these different spheres. The three-way typology brings out how differences manifest despite the attempted implementation of a single policy reform mechanism. I conclude by suggesting that the emergence of qualifications frameworks should be understood as a symptom of underpinning shifts in transition systems; this to some extent explains the popularity of this 'evidence-free policy'.

Descriptive frameworks in the six countries

All countries have some kind of grid or set of qualifications, and some rules about how these qualifications relate to each other. Such grids are never perfect, and are inevitably complex. Problems can arise, for example, when the rules are not clear enough, when some qualifications are excluded – most countries have nationally recognised TVET qualifications but also many learning programmes which prepare people for work and don't relate clearly to the national TVET qualifications – or when sets of qualifications from different parts of the education system don't relate to each other – many countries have weak relationships between TVET and higher education qualifications. Clearly a descriptive framework has inherently limited possibilities of impact in the labour market, although a clear and well-understood qualification system does assist students, employers, and teachers. The experiences discussed below also suggest that creating a descriptive framework is not as easy as it sounds when provision is complex, and that sometimes policies which aim to clarify seem to have the reverse effect.

As discussed above, in the current study bringing order to TVET qualifications and provision was a major concern. In all the countries except Tunisia there seemed to be some progress in the development of a widely understood set of qualifications, whether for only the TVET system (Jamaica, Belize, Sri Lanka) for the entire education and training system (Ireland), or for mid-level occupational qualifications (France). In other words, all the countries have a framework which is to a fair degree descriptive of their qualification system, and all of them have made some progress in improving how it is understood, or streamlining the qualifications available within it, although not without difficulties.

The Irish framework can be seen as a descriptive framework: it is an attempt to capture all qualifications on offer in the full spectrum of education and training in Ireland, and improve how they relate to each other. The framework has a degree of prominence in the education landscape, which suggests some degree of success. However, the system has not been without difficulties: the framework has undergone many changes, primarily in terms of institutional configuration but to some extent in terms of the rules and organisation of the framework itself. Recent changes in the institutional landscape are seen to have, to some extent, undermined trust that had been built up in previous awarding bodies. This will take some time to re-establish. So while the aim is to create a single framework, in the process changes have been made to qualifications which are known and understood, disrupting some of the trust and understanding that exists for specific qualifications. In this sense the current arrangements could be seen as a (perhaps necessary) backwards step in terms of building a nationally understood qualifications system.

In Sri Lanka one of primary purposes of the national vocational qualifications, which were initiated in 2005, was to ensure that the multiple technical and vocational education and training programmes and certificates relate to each other such that learners, the public, and providers within Sri Lanka can understand them. An interviewee from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development stated

that, 'we have been able to establish a unified qualification framework and achieved one of the main objectives of this framework.' However, there is still a fair amount of TVET provision outside of the framework, and it is not clear whether labour market outcomes are worse or better for such provision. The hope is that the national qualifications framework will lead to more stringent control and regulation of qualifications in general.

In Jamaica and Belize, where TVET provision is small and driven by the national public providers, the frameworks seem well known and accepted; however, comprehensive frameworks are being planned and how this will work is as yet unknown.

The framework in France has wide acceptance in further education and training. Where there is less clarity of is in recent attempts to include higher education and develop correspondence between the French and the European levels; one issue is that in the French grid Master and Doctorate are at the same level, but the European one classifies them respectively at level 7 and 8. A major factor behind its acceptance is the lengthy evolution of the system in a way that brought different stakeholders on board. France has a long history of labour organisation and social dialogue. The qualifications system was developed and used by social partners, valued and accepted over time. In this sense there are some similarities to how the Scottish system was characterised in the previous ILO study – in terms of incrementalism – although there is a clear difference, as the French framework goes beyond merely a descriptive framework, in terms of an explicit relationship with work that was absent in Scotland, as is discussed in the following section.

'Employer-driven' outcomes-based frameworks

The National Vocational Qualifications in England were the first clear example of an attempt to use a qualifications framework in this manner (Young 2011), and the Australian competency-based training reform of vocational education followed in its footsteps, although the national qualifications framework in that country was a much looser arrangement (Wheelahan 2011). In both countries the reforms of TVET qualifications attempted to get employers to specify learning outcomes (called competences in Australia), in order to ensure the relevance of education programmes to work, as well as to support the marketisation of the provision of TVET by using outcomes as the benchmark for all education providers, public and private. Belize, Jamaica, and Sri Lanka, as well as the vocational qualifications within the broader framework in Ireland, have been developed somewhat along these lines. Frameworks in all these countries were modelled on the English and Australian models.

The official policy documents from Belize, Jamaica, and Sri Lanka all describe systems in line with the English and Australian models, but they are not rigid copies of them. Some differences include that there does not seem to be a strong separation of learning outcomes from curriculum, and privatisation or decentralisation of provision do not seem to be a major factor. Assessment and certification are centralised which seems appropriate, especially where there is considerable public provision and where populations are small.

The role of industry in leading the processes of designing competence statements or occupational standards is aspired to, but limited in practice in Belize, Ireland, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia. In the main, standards and curricula are developed by TVET regulatory authorities, with some consultation with employers in some sectors. There are small pockets of involvement from employers in the qualification system in Sri Lanka, and employer representation on official structures. What seemed to be an important factor, particularly in Jamaica, was the role of the public providers not only in terms of educational provision but also as labour market intermediaries.

There was a feeling from the interviewees in Sri Lanka that, despite the implementation of a competency-based system, the right qualifications were still not being generated. One interviewee observed that there are challenges with respect to the investigation of demand and indicated that, 'students have a difficulty in finding [work] opportunities. We are not matching.' This perspective was further evidenced by the myriad of concerns that were raised pertaining to occupations – particularly non-engineering

trades – for which there are no national vocational qualifications in place, such as retail skills, visual merchandising, and salesmanship.

The current case study corroborates the argument in Allais (2010) that where occupations are *not* regulated in terms of licence to practice or similar requirements, policy makers try to improve education/work relationships by involving employers in developing competence-statements for qualifications, in the hope that the qualifications thus developed can be used to reform curricula and to reform the delivery of education. In other words the implicit idea is that getting employers to specify competences will lead to a policy mechanism which plays a similar role to a framework of regulated occupations. But in reality this often is not the case. One problem seen in all the cases is that in the absence of occupational regulation employers tend not to be involved, or to be involved sporadically or inconsistently. But more fundamentally, the idea is flawed: if the entrance to occupations is not regulated through licences to practice, even where employers do specify competences they are unlikely to value such qualifications in practice as they tend to be low level and narrow; this is aggravated by the ways in which competence-based systems cause problems for providers, as has been well documented elsewhere (Allais 2007b; Wheelahan 2008; Wolf 1995, 2002; Young 2011).

Occupational frameworks

The framework in France is the only example of an occupational framework in the study, where qualification levels are linked to levels of work and pay. However, the qualifications framework did not seem to be the cause, but rather the effect or codification of such relationships.

A regulated occupational labour market and strong collective bargaining has historically enabled the French system to relate qualification levels explicitly to levels in the workforce. What is now recognised as a qualifications framework, the National Register for Professional Certifications (Repertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles, or RNCP) is largely the same qualification system that has been in place in France for further education and training since the early 1970s. In 1969, a grid of 'training levels' was adopted, with the explicit aim of linking the education to the workplace. While duration of education was important, the levels were anchored against definitions of staff in work situations, which were then linked to qualifications. This, as Bouder and Kirsch (2007) point out, was circular: the levels of work were defined according to the levels of education usually required for work at that level. Nonetheless, it seemed to work, in the sense that the relationships are accepted. These levels also formalised what is often seen as one of the important roles of a qualifications framework – comparison across general and vocational education. The implication of Bouder and Kirsch's argument is that the success of the system rests not so much on having the perfect qualification system or perfect occupational standards, but on having a somewhat instrumental or pragmatic approach that has been developed through collective support and understanding, and is constantly being questioned and adapted; a continuing formalisation of practice.

While the individuals interviewed within the French system, who were clearly in support of it, did not have specific empirical evidence of labour market impact, the system does seem to be effective in the sense that training levels are understood and accepted collectively. The system is seen to work better in large companies located in sectors where social dialogue is strong. These sectors include metal, automotive repairs, chemicals, and – to a lesser extent – hospitality.

Interviewees also explained that occupational standards are linked to occupational fields as opposed to specific jobs. The idea is not to create a narrow description of the tasks undertaken by a novice, but to identify the wider professional domain, taking into account processes of adaptation to the job and professional integration. France also has a tradition of centralised curricula. Training has always been compulsory at the level of the workplace and employers have to finance it in a manner that varies on the basis of the size of the enterprise and the number of employees.

There are, of course, problems in France, particularly caused by high and growing unemployment. Policy makers are attempting to counteract this with a focus on training, attempts to reduce the cost of hiring, and reductions of employers' contributions to social security. The introduction and gradual

increase of short-term less protected work contracts may contribute in the long-term to undermining the relationships which exist between education and work. In the European grid, which France is benchmarking its grid against, there are two levels (2 and 1) below the lowest level (5) of the French grid. Because in France the lowest level is the first one protected by collective agreements, adding more levels below it would mean opening room for the 'low skill, low pay' jobs, opposed by trade unions.

There is some tradition of linking qualifications and work levels in Tunisia as well, and it was hoped that the framework would have a regulatory role in the labour market, with the outcome-based descriptors used across the economy in processes of recruitment, promotion, and remuneration. However, the extent to which this actually happens in the labour market seems likely to be limited, based on the limited progress in creating the framework itself.

Policy makers *intend* in Jamaica that the framework could regulate accessing work, if not controlling pay, but there is as yet very little evidence that it is the case.

The Sri Lankan framework is *officially* intended to play this type of role in the civil service through an official requirement for the public administration to hire graduates of national vocational qualifications and to link their employment level and conditions of service to particular qualification levels. The extent to which it happens in practice could not be ascertained, but it would probably only apply to fairly low level civil service jobs, given the low level nature of the qualifications.

Intractable solutions

There are many reasons why graduates with particular qualifications may not get jobs, other than weaknesses of the educational programmes leading to the qualifications, and other than the skills which graduates have as various commentators have pointed out (Collins 1979; Livingstone 2012). This was seen in our study: Tunisia, for example, has invested considerably in higher education, with a notable increase in university graduates, who struggle to find the type of employment that they expect – and this situation is increasingly common in many countries around the world. On the other hand Sri Lanka as a rapidly growing post-war economy is absorbing both qualified and unqualified workers.

The fact that qualifications are a weak proxy for skill is widely acknowledged (for example, Guile 2010), and it seems increasingly apparent that rising education attainment, rising youth unemployment, and the changing nature of work are creating challenges for transitions from education to work in many countries. But there is still little evidence to support qualifications frameworks as a way of improving these transitions. Institutional political economy demonstrates that many different factors, such as labour market regulation, unionisation, the nature and extent of employer organisation and the role of industry peak bodies, the broader political, institutional, and cultural context, the degree of federalism in a country and the relative powers of national governments and states/provinces, and so on, all affect how people are educated for different occupations, and how the relationships between education and training systems and labour markets function (Streeck 2012; Thelen and Busemeyer 2012). And these factors all interact with each other in complex ways; for example, the shape of labour market opportunities structures incentives to learn (Keep 2012, 14). This complexity has to be tackled by governments which want to improve skills levels and productivity, as these cannot be improved through education interventions alone.

Qualifications frameworks seem to continue to derive popularity from the way they promise to offer simple solutions to these very real and complex problems. Unreglated labour markets, the diversity of provision particularly within TVET systems, and qualification inflation, all aggravate the ways in which there are weak relationships between educational provision and labour markets. Qualifications frameworks which have either succeeded in creating some buy-in and understanding of the national system of qualifications as a whole (such as in Scotland and France) are invoked as proof that qualifications frameworks can perform this role; qualifications frameworks which codify relationships between training levels and employment levels are invoked as proof that qualifications frameworks can improve relationships between education provision and the labour market. But the main mechanism which is offered to developing countries in order to create a qualification framework is employer-led competence

statements. This mechanism leads to complexity – undermining the aim of improving understandings of the qualification system – and does not lead to improved labour market outcomes.

There seem to be two options for policy makers: accept that improving the description of your qualification system is a useful although very minor intervention, do it, but don't make extravagent claims about improving labour market relationships. Or, focus on occupational regulation and licence to practice – against the current trend of casualisation and breaking up of even professional work – in order to have clear relationships between education and work. Raffe (2015), reflecting on the reform of vocational qualifications in the UK, suggests that the best line of action may be to stop focusing on qualifications. This study corroborates his argument. Attempts to improve labour market outcomes through employer specification of learning outcomes cannot substitute for broadly supported relationships between training levels and employment levels.

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