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The shift to outcomes based frameworks: key problems from a critical perspective

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Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen

„Castle in the Cyberspace“ oder Förderung der Erwachsenenbildung?

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Abstract

This paper takes a step back from the discussions and debates about qualifications frameworks per se, to think more broadly about the role of „qualifications" in educational reform. The aims of the paper are to locate the reform of qualifications in its broader social and institutional context, to propose a way of conceptualizing the change from qualification systems as they have emerged historically to qualifications frameworks and outcomes-based qualifications and to explore the tensions involved in the different goals that the introduction of a (National) Qualfications Framework – (N)QF will achieve. We argue that what is at stake in current reforms is the role of educational institutions in the education and training of the next generation, the balance between institution-based education and informal (in some cases work-based) learning, and the ways in which trust in qualifications is established and maintained. Our two-model analysis explores the balance between an emphasis on institutions and outcomes. This paper was written to provoke debate, and help all involved in researching qualifications frameworks to think more clearly about the issues.

The shift to outcomes based frameworks

Key problems from a critical perspective

Michael Young and Stephanie Allais

This paper sets out to offer a way of thinking about the reform of qualifications and in particular to provide a basis for analyzing the introduction of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. We have suggested that this change is best seen in terms of the shift from "institution-based" to "outcomes-based" models of qualifications. Our two models highlight the emphasis in qualifications frameworks that is placed on "written outcomes" and that qualifications should not be dependent on any specific institutions or learning pathways that may lead to them.

Introduction

This paper tries to take a step back from the discussions and debates about qualifications frameworks *per se* and to think more broadly about the role of *"qualifications"* in educational reform. We aim to develop insights into qualifications frameworks as policy mechanisms and the likelihood of achieving their goals. The possible consequences of moving from the qualification systems that have emerged historically and often in largely *ad hoc* ways, to qualifications frameworks and the outcomes-based (or competency-based) approaches that usually are part of qualifications frameworks, have been assumed rather than proven or made explicit.

The aims of this paper therefore are to:

- locate the reform of *qualifications* in its broader social and institutional context
- propose a way of conceptualizing the change from qualification systems as they have emerged historically to qualifications frameworks and outcomes-based qualifications
- explore the tensions involved in the different goals that the introduction of an (N)QF will achieve.

The arguments presented here are discussed in more depth in Young/Allais (2009) and Young/Allais (2011).

Qualifications reform in context

Over the past 30 years, governments have increasingly promoted policies that increase the role of the market in all aspects of life, including education (Harvey 2000; Bond 2005; Duménil and Lévy 2005). Cedefop has referred in a recent report to *"the shift to learning outcomes"* (Cedefop 2008) that is expressed in, among other ways, the emergence of NQFs. We suggest that the emergence of outcomes-based qualifications has been linked to the marketization of education. A common thread through reforms over the past decades, which will be explored later, is that they all seek to increase the "efficiency" and "effectiveness" (usually defined in terms of market outcomes) of providing

institutions such as colleges and universities by having to compete with each other, subject to government regulation. Learning outcomes or competency statements have come to prominence as a policy tool in this context. They have been seen by policy formulators as a way of driving the required change by playing the role of performance statements in contractual arrangements for educational provision. It is claimed by advocates that once qualification outcomes are "freed" from the institutions through which the outcomes are achieved, education systems will become more flexible, qualifications will become more portable and transparent, and recognition and accreditation can be given to informal- and work-based learning. As a consequence, institution-based learning comes to be seen as merely one of many ways of becoming qualified. We argue that what is at stake is the role of educational institutions in the education and training of the next generation, the balance between institution-based education and informal (in some cases work-based) learning, and the ways in which trust in qualifications is established and maintained.

Conceptualizing the shift from traditional qualification systems to outcomes-based frameworks

We can identify two models (or "ideal types") of how qualifications operate at the user/provider interface. One is the traditional or "institutional" (Young 2007, Ch. 8) model in which the professions and educational providers have considerable autonomy and control over qualifications. The "outcomes" (and "competency") model refers to a specific set of policy interventions which first appeared in the 1980s in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In both countries, this model emerged as part of a broader set of neoliberal reforms. By defining qualifications in terms of written outcomes alone, an attempt was made to shift the balance of power away from provider-defined qualifications and curricula (which in many instances incorporated professional associations in various ways) towards a broader group of users – government, employers and learners. The logic of this trend is the emergence of a "qualifications market" in which qualifications increasingly take the form of commodities, divorced from any direct relationship with either the learning programmes which lead to them or the skills and knowledge for which they act as "proxies". It is also the manifestation of a particular type of instrumentalism, where knowledge is valued only in so far as it is seen as leading to "useful" skills or competencies, or what has come to be seen as "human capital".

The shift from an "institutional" to an "outcomes" model of qualifications represents a change in the way in which qualifications make claims for a society's trust. In the "institutional" model, qualifications are knowledge domain-based and embedded in institutions. Trust is located in those with specialist knowledge, the professional associations, in the links between teachers and the producers of specialist knowledge in different domains, and in the institutions in which the programmes of study leading to qualifications are located. In this model, we argue that there is far greater possibility for an emancipative approach to education, although it does not necessarily follow from it.

The alternative which has emerged is the "outcomes-based" model in which qualifications are specified in terms of "outcomes" or "competencies" that impose no constraints on how or where learners become qualified and lay down no rules for appropriate content, and only the criteria specified through the outcomes must be met. The outcomes-model approach is designed to shift power away from educational institutions and domain specialists by relying on generic outcome statements or criteria to define what a qualification is (usually in terms of various types of competence or capability) and the levels at which a qualification may be achieved. The latter criteria, known in qualifications framework documentation as "level descriptors", rank cognitive and social abilities across knowledge disciplines and occupational fields. While it is described in emancipatory or progressive language, and outcomes are contrasted with institutions which are described as elitist and conservative, we argue below that this approach is inherently part of a rational-choice "human capital" approach to education, which works against the possibility of education playing an emancipatory role in society.

However, although many countries are shifting towards outcomes-based qualifications frameworks (Cedefop 2008), the concept of a "learning outcome" is extremely general and can be interpreted in many different ways. The fact that a country states that it is using learning outcomes, does not necessarily mean it is completely disembedding qualifications from institutions, or completely subordinating differences between knowledge domains to generic outcome statements. So, on the one hand, there seems to be a global shift towards learning outcomes as an approach for changing the ways in which qualifications operate, and on the other, there are important differences in the ways in which outcomes and competencies are understood and used in different countries. What seems to be common (beyond the use of the same term) are attempts to shift power away from educational institutions. What differs is the extent and nature of this shift, the strength and nature of institutions in different countries, and how far outcomes are treated as literally not dependent on any specific learning programme, or as merely a way of expressing the goals of such programmes.

Implications of the shift to outcomes-based qualifications frameworks

The introduction of qualifications frameworks can be conceptualized in terms of the shift from a model relying on domain-specific knowledge and programmes offered by specific institutions to a criterion- or outcome-based model. This raises a number of issues that countries introducing qualifications frameworks are likely to face. Here we will discuss the following:

- establishing the necessary trust in qualifications by different users
- resolving the tensions between governments seeking to use qualifications as "drivers of reform"; employers wanting to use them as "proxies" in recruitment, learners using them to progress in employment and education and providers using them as guides to developing their course programmes
- the implications of the shift from basing qualifications on domain-specific to generic criteria
- the extent to which outcomes-based qualifications can be used to promote both skill development and equity as well as access.

All these issues will be expressed differently in different national contexts, and in different models of qualifications frameworks.

Qualifications and trust

Qualifications emerged in most countries with at least a tacit consensus concerning what they were for. Defining qualifications through learning outcomes and creating qualifications frameworks are explicit attempts to challenge this consensus and in particular to challenge the powerful role of established institutions – especially the educational providers and professional associations. However, the process of shifting trust to qualifications and away from institutions may remove the *basis* for the trust placed by users in qualifications. A qualification is always, in some sense, a proxy for what a learner knows and can do. By virtue of being a "currency" which the holders can take beyond the educational institution where they acquired it and where teachers and trainers have a good sense of what it is that learners know and can do, a qualification is a token which mediates between educational institutions, and between educational institutions and the labour market.

In general, the more mobile people become – both within and between nation states – and the more complex the society becomes, the less people can rely on face-to-face contacts and on their familiarity with particular institutions as a basis for trust. It follows that establishing an alternative basis for trust becomes a crucial factor in the credibility of new qualifications. Qualifications that are not trusted by key users will not be used or will be bypassed, as we see from examples such as the United Kingdom's National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

Qualifications frameworks present precisely-expressed statements of outcomes as an alternative basis for trust – the claim is that because the qualification is outcomes-based, it will provide a good description of what it is that the bearer is qualified to do. This raises two questions:

- To what extent can outcome statements that do not relate to learning programmes be trusted (or actually mean anything on their own)?
- What will be the new basis of trust, if the traditional sources of trust are seen by governments as too powerful and distorting qualifications away from the "real needs" of modern economies?

Qualifications as drivers of reform and as mediators

Qualifications emerged in society as mediators; that is why they exist, as proxies or short hands for what someone knows and can do. Once the role of providers of education and training has been reduced, it is questionable whether qualifications will then in fact mediate between them and the labour market effectively.

A qualification can only ever be a proxy; it can never summarize all that the holder knows, all that is required to undertake a task or to be accepted as a "qualified" member of an occupation; the issue of trust and its basis remains. If a qualification refers to the learning that has taken place *in an institution*, the qualification acts as a proxy for that learning. Hence it mediates between the learning that has taken place in that institution and the knowledge and skills needed in the world of work. If the qualification is not embedded in the institution, then the only evidence available to employers or other users is the written learning outcomes in the qualification document, which leads to the problem of over-specification, and hence narrowing.

Employers judge the holders of qualifications on the basis of their past experience of students. Lecturers and teachers draw on their professional expertise and, for occupational and professional programmes, their knowledge of employer needs in designing, teaching, and assessing programmes, as well as the strength of their relationships with professional bodies. It is these sets of processes to which we refer, with the idea that qualifications have a mediating role. In the case of outcome-based qualifications, it is far from clear how the outcomes in practice do mediate the activities of employers, teachers and students and what actual role the outcomes themselves play.

In an outcomes-based framework where there are no explicit links between qualifications and educational institutions, outcomes are supposed to be assessed by an assessor in terms of "performance tasks". However, such an approach assumes that knowledge in specialist domains can be inferred from the evidence of performance. Much of the criticism of outcomes or competence-based models both by academics and employers has focused on just this assumption. One possible consequence of such approaches is that the "powerful knowledge" that takes learners beyond their experience and beyond specific workplaces and which therefore provides them with a basis for progression, will become less and less important in obtaining a qualification. Unless the issue of "powerful knowledge"[1] and access to it is addressed, it is likely that qualifications frameworks will follow the path of the United Kingdom NVQs and will not escape the critique that they do little more than provide low-level qualifications for those in jobs with minimum demands and at the same time provide minimum opportunities for progression.

As discussed above, in using qualifications as instruments of educational reform, governments aim to improve their role as mediators by making more explicit what the holder of a qualification knows and can do, and at the same time to give more emphasis to users rather than providers in defining what is included in a qualification. In the case of vocational qualifications, governments hope that employers will find it easier to influence these qualifications, develop a sense of ownership of them as contributing to profitability, and therefore raise the qualification levels of their employees.

The idea of using learning outcomes or competencies is that instead of employers choosing from people who have qualifications from a range of different educational institutions and programmes, employers

1 "Powerful knowledge" (Young 2009) refers to knowledge that is the basis for reliable explanations and exploring alternatives. It is the power of knowledge such as disciplinary knowledge to understand, describe, analyze, and change the world (physical and social) which makes it emancipatory. This is why, we argue, formal education is important. "Powerful knowledge" is expressed in conceptual rather than practical form and is frequently, but not necessarily, associated with science and technology.

are expected to specify to educational institutions what outcomes their programmes should achieve. However, it is one thing to make sure that learning programmes take into account employers needs. It is quite another to imagine that these demands can be adequately expressed by learning outcomes. Firstly, employers vary widely, there is no one "employer view" of qualifications, even in a specific sector. Secondly, while employers may be clear about their immediate needs, it is unlikely that they will have the knowledge to predict their future needs. Designing and developing qualifications and curricula cannot be based solely on the evidence of current employer needs. Thirdly, when employers are asked to express needs, they will necessarily have long wish-lists, which in many instances are beyond the capacity of educational institutions to deliver, and which take no consideration of (and have no knowledge of) what it actually takes to get people to master the skills and knowledge required in a particular occupation. This does imply, though, that the employers' views should not be seen as the sole drivers of vocational education systems.

Governments also hope that by expressing qualifications as outcomes or competencies, they will encourage more employees and those seeking employment to obtain qualifications, especially because it is claimed that using learning outcomes opens up possibilities for credit accumulation and transfer and the accreditation of experiential learning. But there is little evidence that these hopes will be realized – particularly in relation to the accreditation of prior learning, but also to the transfer of learning credits between qualifications. There are situations when accrediting informal learning for qualifications may be important. Of no less significance is that the more learners identify with the possibility of obtaining qualifications by credit accumulation and transfer, the less they are likely to be convinced of the value of sustained learning in a particular domain. One possible consequence of placing less emphasis on what are sometimes referred to as "linear" learning pathways is that alternative routes to qualification via "credit transfer" may *seem* easier and fewer learners will opt for the pathways which provide the most likely basis for them to progress to higher levels. This could mean that in the longer term, employers find themselves worse off than before with regard to finding appropriately-qualified job applicants.

From knowledge domain-based to criteria-based qualifications

Qualifications frameworks reflect a shift in the balance from differences – between domains, between vocational and academic qualifications, and between types of learning (at home, in the workplace or in the school or college) to similarities. This trend towards generic criteria for all qualifications is often presented as fairer and supporting widening participation and lifelong learning. Important though these goals are, it is important to raise questions about how far the quality of learning can be guaranteed without the stipulating content that is specific to different occupational sectors and without recognizing that the learning opportunities in college are different from and cannot be equated with those offered by workplaces and vice versa.

A crucial factor may be how, in a particular education and training system, qualifications and curricula are related. The experience of some "early starter" qualifications frameworks such as the NVQs in the United Kingdom (West 2004) suggests that outcomes-based qualifications derived from a functional analysis of workplace performance cannot be the basis for "deriving" or "designing down" curricula. If this is recognized, then qualification outcomes can take on a more appropriate role as broad guides to curricula which draw on specialist bodies of knowledge and how they are best paced, selected and sequenced for students with different prior levels of attainment.

Tensions in the goals of qualification reform

Most government statements about qualifications frameworks identify two very different types of goals as important: their role in supporting skill development and economic competitiveness on the one hand and their role in promoting equity, social justice, and social inclusion on the other. It is worth probing the possible tension between these two sets of goals more deeply. Furthermore, even if they represent aspects of a common (rhetorical) political agenda that is widely accepted, they

represent very different interpretations of this agenda with very different implications for the reform of education and training.

The issue, as the sociologist Johan Muller (2000) points out, is that qualifications frameworks represent a kind of hybrid mix of two very different ideas about how human beings learn and how the idea of competence is interpreted. One idea that emerged in the child-centred educational policies of the 1960s is expressed in the learner-centred assumptions on which qualifications frameworks are based and the equalizing of opportunities and widening of participation that some argue they will lead to. The alternative interpretation refers to the goals of portability and flexibility of qualifications, linked to the need for employees and those unemployed to be always open to retraining (the economic aspect of lifelong learning). These goals are best seen not as universal entitlements, but as associated with post-Fordist ideas about the economic changes that have been taking place in industrial societies.

These two sets of goals for qualifications frameworks tend to be based on different pedagogic and curricular assumptions. The "psychological" idea of competence implies that all learners can reach their potential if they are freed from the constraints that inhibit their "natural" capacity to learn. In contrast, the notion of competence associated with "post-Fordist" economic developments calls for a flexible learner always willing to take up new training opportunities. Whereas the "learner-centred" goals emphasize participation and the breakdown of barriers between teachers and learners, the post-Fordist interpretation of outcomes-based frameworks point to the need for elaborate and sophisticated "training packages" to support learners in acquiring skills and progressing "from sweeper to engineer" – a popular slogan in South Africa in the early 1990s. Both sets of assumptions make heavy, but quite different, pedagogic demands on teachers and assume very different models of teacher education.

Both visions of competence play down the extent to which progress to higher levels on the framework presupposes access to knowledge which is not made explicit in the framework itself. One of the problems with frameworks based on outcomes that cuts across the claims that they can promote social justice and higher-skilled workforces is that they present themselves as "ladders of opportunity" for learners to "climb". Because outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are presented as "ladders of opportunity", there is a danger that they will lead to neglect of the wider reforms needed to promote opportunities that the levels of a qualifications framework can do no more than point to. This is because they are embedded in reforms which promote market regulation, instead of social provision of education and training.

Conclusions

This paper sets out to offer a way of thinking about the reform of qualifications and in particular to provide a basis for analyzing the introduction of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. We have suggested that this change is best seen in terms of the shift from "institution-based" to "outcomes-based" models of qualifications. Our two models highlight the emphasis in qualifications frameworks that is placed on "written outcomes" and that qualifications should not be dependent on any specific institutions or learning pathways that may lead to them.

There are two themes of this paper which it is important to make explicit. The first is the emphasis that we have given to the role of employers. This reflects the fact that many NQFs have begun as frameworks for vocational qualifications and also that economic rather than social goals have been paramount for most countries introducing NQFs, and furthermore many of the rationales for expressing qualifications in terms of "written outcomes" stem from the assumption that this will facilitate greater employer involvement. The second feature of the paper is that we have been more explicitly critical of the "outcomes" model, not because we do not recognize the weaknesses of the "institution-based" model that it seeks to replace.

This paper has therefore raised questions about the claims that are so often made for the outcomes model. Unless it is possible to identify a space between the claims for qualifications frameworks

and what they might or might not realistically achieve, starter countries will have no reliable basis for making decisions about implementing an NQF and for realizing not only that there is no "one" NQF model that can be applied in all cases, but that just having written outcomes in a framework offers no panacea. The starting point must always be an analysis of the particular circumstances of a country, and the existing qualifications and what they offer and how new opportunities might be opened by a more explicit reference to outcomes and common levels. Only then will it be possible to see what role the writing of outcomes in a framework might play, together with the no less important complementary policies of strengthening of institutions and the professional development of teachers and trainers, and the building of employer/education partnerships.

Our two-model analysis explores the balance between an emphasis on institutions and outcomes. The emphasis on institutions can, we argue, provide the basis for high quality learning and progression. While it can have a tendency to inflexibility and forms of exclusion, it also provides the basis for education to have an existence independently from the logic of the market. The emphasis on outcomes claims to offer the possibility of portability, transparency, and flexibility in how qualifications are achieved, but is essentially about the goals of learning programmes, not the processes involved, and therefore may undermine the ability of qualifications to mediate between education and the world of work, the possibilities for learners to acquire powerful knowledge and the likelihood of governments expanding access to educational opportunities.

These can only be provisional conclusions, which are intended to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for the analysis of qualifications frameworks.

Qualifications frameworks are taking real forms in an ever growing number of countries, and it is those diverse real forms, that make qualifications frameworks an important policy development that is shaping people's lives in significant, but still largely unknown, ways. This paper was written to provoke debate, and help all of us involved in researching qualifications frameworks to think more clearly about the issues.

Qualifications frameworks and their international counterparts like the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) are not going away; they undoubtedly represent real changes in the world. The world is getting smaller, not bigger, in terms of our dependence on each other, and more, not less, mobility of labour is likely as businesses search for new locations for making profits, and as migration patterns constantly change in response to increasingly unstable economies. National and regional frameworks, despite all their problems, are attempts to take account of these changes. We need to know more about how superficially similar frameworks work out differently in practice.

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Die Verlagerung hin zu ergebnisbasierten Qualifikationsrahmen

Schlüsselprobleme aus kritischer Perspektive

Kurzzusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag versucht, einen Schritt hinter die Diskussionen und Debatten über Qualifikationsrahmen zu treten und in einem breiteren Zusammenhang über die Rolle von „Qualifikationen“ in der Bildungsreform nachzudenken. Der Beitrag hat folgende Punkte zum Ziel: die Qualifikationsreform in ihrem breiteren sozialen und institutionellen Kontext einzugrenzen, einen Weg zur Konzeptionalisierung des Wandels von historisch gewachsenen Qualifikationssystemen hin zu Qualifikationsrahmen und ergebnisorientierten Qualifikationen vorzuschlagen und die Spannungsfelder auszuloten, die die unterschiedlichen Zielsetzungen bei Einführung eines (Nationalen) Qualifikationsrahmens mit sich bringen würden. Die AutorInnen behaupten, dass in den aktuellen Reformen Folgendes auf dem Spiel steht: die Rolle der Bildungsinstitutionen in der Bildung und Ausbildung der nächsten Generation, die Balance zwischen institutionsbasierter Bildung und informellem (in einigen Fällen arbeitsbasiertem) Lernen sowie die Art und Weise, wie Vertrauen in Qualifikationen aufgebaut und erhalten wird. Ihre Zwei-Modell-Analyse untersucht die Balance zwischen Schwerpunktsetzungen auf Institutionen und Ergebnisse. Der vorliegende Beitrag wurde verfasst, um eine Diskussion in Gang zu setzen, die allen an der Forschung über Qualifikationsrahmen Beteiligten helfen soll, die Problemstellung mit mehr Klarheit zu reflektieren.

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