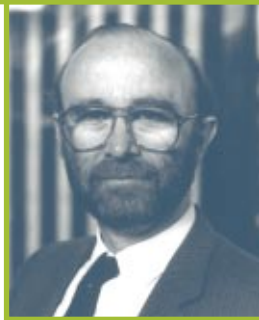


The National Qualifications Framework – a solid edifice or Faulty Towers?

Michael Irwin

The ambitious goals of the new National Qualifications Framework (NQF) are unlikely to be achieved because this elaborate edifice is being constructed on what might best be described as an ‘educational faultline’ – the unit standard.



Some of the aims of the NQF-related reforms are laudable, for example the clarification of educational objectives, the removal of artificial ‘divides’ in education, and the promotion of cross-crediting and learning pathways where appropriate. But the overall framework is flawed and should be overhauled.

The NQF is an enormous and expensive undertaking, involving both the development of unit standards and extensive quality controls. Nobody knows how many unit standards will eventually be developed – perhaps over 10,000. They will be set at eight levels from Form 5 to post-graduate and cover all forms of education and training. National qualifications will consist of combinations of unit standards. The educational soundness of the unit standard, as the basic building block, is critical to the design of the whole edifice. A recently published paper* by Professor Warwick Elley, Dr Cedric Hall and myself concludes that it is unsound and that we can expect major problems.

The NQF reflects the minister of education’s legitimate concern for greater clarity about the outcomes of courses and programmes. But unit standards go further, and “will be succinct statements of the standards required of students as

they build a qualification”. If unit standards do, in fact, define “the knowledge, understanding and skills” acquired by students, it should, the argument goes, be possible to allow students to be internally assessed at any time against the “transparent” standards.

Two key components in the unit standard design are the expected outcomes and the performance criteria against which the achievement of the outcomes are to be assessed. In some cases these can be provided with little difficulty. In a vehicles trades unit standard an outcome is “Identify the layout and components and systems for motor vehicles”. A related performance criterion is “the engine is located and its major components [which are separately listed] are identified” and is simply the outcome restated in the passive voice with further details added. In this case, that procedure may be enough – assessing whether or not certain components are correctly located and identified is a relatively straightforward task.

Problems abound when the same procedure is applied in general education. A draft history unit standard has as an outcome “Analyse causes and consequences of the civil war” and a related performance criterion is “An awareness is demonstrated of different historians’ interpretations in analysing the issues that caused the civil war”. The problem here is that the criterion is open to different interpretations by different assessors regarding how “awareness” should be demonstrated, how many and which “interpretations” should be used, and much else. Further, no criteria are provided by which to measure performance in terms of accuracy, logic, presentation and the ability to evaluate historical evidence. The ‘standards’ in such

cases will be buried somewhere in moderation processes, and students, employers, teachers, tertiary institutions and other users may find it hard to determine exactly what has been achieved. Unit standards would be more accurately described as sets of learning outcomes.

The assumption that transparent performance 'standards' can always be readily identified and specified in advance can lead to the equally dubious assumption that many different providers, even when using different assessment tasks in different contexts and applying different rules about the conduct of the assessment, will make consistent judgments about student performance. This assumption underlies the framework and explains its heavy reliance on internal assessment. But we cannot make these assumptions in most general education or in much of vocational education. If we cannot rely on consistency of marking between providers and over time, qualifications will tend to be disregarded and students selected on the basis of where they were educated – to the disadvantage of students from less favoured institutions. The appropriate use of rigorous external examinations helps avoid this trap.

The NZQA is emphasising quality controls aimed largely at meeting the need for consistency in assessment. But these controls may well not be sufficiently flexible to allow assessment at any time against the 'standards' – an advantage claimed for the NQF. Moreover, this activity has all the appearance of an attempt to shore-up a shaky edifice in the face of clear structural weaknesses. Further, the quality controls impose heavy administrative and financial burdens on users of unit standards.

The unit standard concept is a pass/fail one, reflecting the mistaken assumption that transparent standards can always be readily defined – the student either does or does not reach the requisite 'standard'. But in most contexts assessment is not about pass/fail but about how much knowledge has been acquired, how well concepts have been understood, how much originality has been displayed, and so on. These are not 'all-or-nothing' concepts but relative ones with which the unit standard concept cannot deal effectively, and a major loss of information about qualitative aspects of student performance will result.

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Similarly, the concept cannot readily promote and recognise excellence – surely a terrible loss to education.

The minister has some valid aims but he has been furnished with the wrong instruments and techniques. The vast and growing range of knowledge and skills cannot fit into one monolithic, bureaucratic framework incorporating one set of levels and one building block – nor will the widely

varying aspirations and abilities of students be met by it. At present we are forcing all knowledge into one preconceived framework with a limited range of assessment methods and then trying to sort out the problems when bits don't fit. Instead, we should determine what learning should be the subject of national qualifications, how it should be structured, which assessment methods should be adopted, and what linkages are possible. From that starting point, we could develop a system of national qualifications that will endure because it recognises the diversity of knowledge and reflects the need for flexibility and the range of qualifications required.

*Copies of *Unit Standards in the National Qualifications Framework* by M Irwin, W B Elley and C Hall are available at \$12-50 (inc. GST) from Saunders Unsworth, PO Box 10-200, Wellington, and Whitcoulls (including Bennetts) bookshops.

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