

The National Qualifications Framework

by Alan Smithers

New Zealand has gone further than any other country in seeking to reform its education and training system. The hope was that by using the common format of 'unit standard' for all qualifications from the senior secondary school onwards it could create a seamless framework. Under the new arrangements, qualifications were to be fairer, more consistent and for everyone.



Unfortunately, it has not worked out quite like that. All kinds of difficulties have been surfacing. Relatively few qualifications are being obtained. Many schools and all the universities have been reluctant to take part. Even much of industry has been hesitant.

Are these just teething troubles? After all, it seems such a good idea. First organise all qualifications into units, then set down what needs to be done as standards, and then log the units so they can be flexibly combined to tailor-make qualifications.

Or is there some fundamental flaw? Earlier this year I was invited by the Education Forum to visit New Zealand to see if I could fathom why the qualifications framework was attracting so many complaints. Is it indeed unfamiliarity with a novel concept, or something else?

I had the opportunity of meeting a wide range of people in the education and employment sectors. Although I found the qualifications framework was having a positive impact in some areas, in the motor industry and forestry for example, it was clear that there was also much disquiet. Teachers reported difficulties with school subjects specified as unit standards,

inconsistencies in assessment and heavy extra workload. Universities expressed the view that breaking everything into pass-fail little bits was incompatible with their mission. Industry was concerned about the time and costs involved.

The recurring theme of much of what I was told was the sheer difficulty of expressing a qualification in unit standard form. It was not so much the separation into components that gave concern, as attempting to clearly and unambiguously convey what a qualification is about through standards alone. Even in the motor industry where the approach has been favourably received, the standards only make sense when fleshed out as training manuals.

It does look as if 'standards' may be the crucial weakness. There are two aspects to 'standard' as applied to human performance – the activity and the level of performance required. Consider fitness. Jumping could be taken as an indicator. One might settle on the height of one metre. It is not difficult to devise a test which anyone with suitable training could administer. It is possible, therefore, to arrive at an assessable standard.

But codifying and judging education is altogether more complex. In the attempt to get history into unit standard form, for example, one element is specified as "locate and gather historical information". The stated criteria are "sources located are appropriate to the topic of the investigation" and "gathered information is in accordance with the topic of the investigation". If this is the only information to pass to teachers and assessors, it leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Although teachers can be brought together to agree what it actually means, there are bound to be differences from place to place. Layer upon layer of 'moderation' will never fully iron out the inconsistencies, but will greatly increase the workload.

Even the NZ Qualifications Authority now accepts that

standards are as much in people's heads as on paper. But if the written standards do not pin the qualification down then the whole structure is unsound. It is a bit like Lego with deformable shapes, and just think how frustrating that would be.

The government has recognised that all is not well and has issued two Green Papers, one dealing specifically with qualifications, and the other with tertiary education including qualifications. From them it is possible to discern the drift of its thinking. It is evident that the government would still like to see a qualifications framework but is now less confident that the 'unit standard' is the key. The Green Papers reveal that it is hoping that another central unifying concept – that of a 'quality threshold' – will do the trick.

It is doubtful whether this 'quality' concept would be any more successful than 'unit standard' has been, and it may be that it is this hunt for a magic formula which is at the heart of New Zealand's qualification difficulties. Instead of searching for a philosopher's stone which at a stroke will transform the whole of the education and training system, it would be better to address, from first principles, the issues and problems relating to particular areas.

In my report for the Education Forum, *The New Zealand Qualifications Framework*, released on 24 November, I identify three:

- the failure of schools' qualifications to keep pace with the raising of the school-leaving age and the wider range of abilities and aspirations now represented in the senior secondary school;
- the need to have a first-class system of employment-related qualifications covering both preparation for work and upskilling in work; and
- the desirability of opening up tertiary education by allowing degrees to be offered by providers other than universities.

Instead of searching for a philosopher's stone which at a stroke will transform the whole of the education and training system, it would be better to address, from first principles, the issues and problems relating to particular areas.

Attempting to impose one all-embracing solution is to misunderstand the nature of a qualification. Qualifications differ in their purposes, content and assessment. They should be set out in these terms, more systematically than in the past, but under all three headings. Sectors that are happy with unit standards could still use them as a way of describing purposes, but information would be expected also on content and assessment.

New Zealand is right to want to improve its education and training so that people can get more out of their lives and the country is better able to compete on world markets. It is, however, the learning which matters rather than the recording of it. It follows, therefore, that qualification issues in schools, employment and tertiary education should start from content, followed by agreement on the appropriate method of assessment, and only then looking to see what linkages are feasible.

The result would be more of a 'network' or a 'map' – with many interconnections – than a rigid framework. It would be less tidy than the comprehensive, seamless qualifications structure that New Zealand has been vainly seeking. But it would be educationally sound, flexible, open to innovation – and hence more authentic.

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