
**The National Qualifications Framework:
A discussion on its inception and implementation**

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“To go boldly where no one has gone before”

(Tuck, B. 1994) on the mission of the
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Introduction

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has been heralded by some as the most momentous change that has occurred in New Zealand education in the last two decades. It has been likened to a tsunami in comparison to the mere flash floods of the 1985 abolition of the university entrance exam; liberalisation and the rise of students rights; Tomorrow’s Schools; bulk funding; the student loans scheme and tertiary funding cuts; to name a few.

Set up by a Labour Government under section 253 of the July 1990 Education Amendment Act, the NQF has its immediate origins in a series of educational reviews and reports dating back to the 1980s, and in particular to the Hawke Report on the reform of post-compulsory education and training (Hawke, 1988). But its philosophical roots go further back into constructivist educational theory of the 1970s.

It was the result of extensive public consultation and response during 1990 and 1991. Over 30,000 copies of *Designing the Framework* were distributed during that period, with 1600 written responses being received. The responses contributed to final policy recommendations.

There was general agreement that the existing qualifications system, mostly based around external, norm-referenced national examinations and an uncoordinated mix of higher education and vocational qualifications, needed comprehensive reform. It was clear that this situation had caused serious inflexibilities, inefficiencies and inequities and had developed a failure mentality for many learners, particularly those who did not belong in an academic environment.

The body that was set up to establish the framework and oversee the setting of standards for those qualifications was the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). It was a Board of ten responsible to the Minister of Education. It also took over the functions of the Department of Education (schools qualifications), University Entrance Board (entrance to university qualifications), Trades Certification Board (trades qualifications) and Authority for Advanced Vocational Awards (advanced vocational qualifications).

The brief of the NZQA in establishing the NQF, was to have a consistent approach to the recognition of qualifications in academic and vocational areas; to encourage greater participation in tertiary education and training; and to promote excellence in tertiary education, training and research. The model was adapted from a Scottish vocational education system (Scotvec) which the Minister of Education at the time, Lockwood Smith, had seen gain some credibility in the Scottish industrial scene. The difference in the New Zealand model however was that the NZQA sought to extend the scheme into academic and university subjects as well (a world first), arguing that there was no difference between academic and vocational courses.

The Framework

The NQF is a system designed to recognise the attainment of knowledge, understanding and skills by all people in New Zealand. Framework qualifications are quality assured and nationally recognised.

Before explaining the framework, perhaps it is timely to explain some of the “framework jargon” that also appeared at the time of its implementation. “Pass or fail” is “achieve” or “not achieve” or “competence” or “non-competence”. Students are “learners”. Teachers, school and training organisations are “providers”. The person who decides if the learner has “achieved” the unit standard is an “assessor”. The person who assesses the assessors to see if their assessing is satisfactory is a “moderator”.

“Learners” who “hook-on” to the Framework are able to accumulate credits over time and at their own pace as they work towards a qualification. Learners are assessed against unit standards which tell them specifically what is required of them. Because the unit standards are nationally agreed, learners’ achievements can be recognised in a number of contexts. Their knowledge and skills are transferable.

All qualifications of the Framework are composed of registered unit standards — statements that describe what a learner knows or can do. The unit standard specifies learning outcomes (elements) and criteria (performance criteria) against which achievement is judged.

The concept of assessing and measuring against standards is not new. A metre ruler is accepted as being a metre in length because it is benchmarked to a ‘standard’ resting in Paris. A manufactured product carrying a national Standards mark is considered to be of high quality because it has been assessed as having met a rigorous set of specifications created by experts in that particular field. In a similar way, unit standards on the NQF are the accepted benchmarks. One of the great bones of contention is that the student/learner does not get a mark, grade or percentage for their efforts. Students are assessed as being competent or not. If a student doesn’t achieve a standard first time round, they can go back and do it again. And again. And again. The no-mark, no-grade aspect of unit standards means a student who is particularly clever at say algebra, will get exactly the same number of credits for attaining a unit standard in it as a student who may find maths a bit of a struggle.

At first glance that’s wonderfully non-threatening, liberating and empowering to the struggler but constitutes a decided lack of challenge for the bright maths student. Strangely, this eradication of competitiveness between individuals is in direct conflict with one of the NZQA’s clear imperatives which is to ‘equip and educate coming generations of New Zealanders so they can help New Zealand compete in an increasingly combative, dog-eat-dog global economy’. What about New Zealand’s passion for sport? Will a nation which encourages competition on the sportsfield ban it in the classroom?

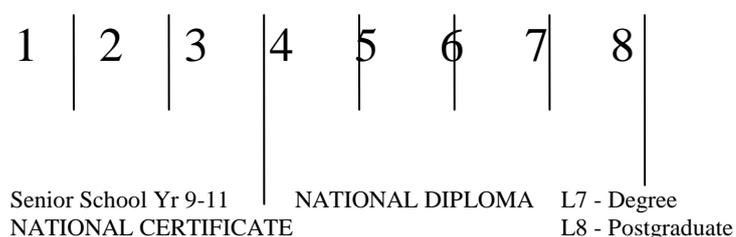
Unit standards express learning outcomes. Having qualifications based on learning outcomes is what makes framework qualifications different from other qualifications systems (which are often focused more on outputs such as courses, or inputs such as curricula or teaching hours). Outcomes models have been endorsed by international bodies involved with funding education systems (e.g. the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the OECD).

The framework is built on a process of consensus. Unit standards are drafted by expert groups (engineers for engineering unit standards, geographers for geography unit standards and so on). The draft unit standards are then circulated to stakeholders for comment and contribution. Once unit standards are agreed to and registered, they

are subject to review by stakeholders and experts on a regular basis. This allows for unit standards to be refined and updated over time.

Each registered standard has a defined credit value and sits at a specified level on the framework. Credits may be accumulated from different learning institutions or workplaces towards a single qualification without the cumbersome exemption arrangements required in the past: all organisations accredited to assess against unit standards recognise framework credits awarded by other.

The Framework has eight levels of progression.



Levels 1-3 are of approximately the same standard as senior secondary education and basic trades training. Levels 4-6 approximate to advanced trades, technical and business qualifications. Level 7 and 8 equate with advanced qualifications of graduate and post-graduate standard.

The expert groups which set unit standards and take part in the accreditation of education and training providers are known as unit standards-setting bodies (SSBs), National Standards Bodies (NSBs), or advisory groups. NSBs represent learning areas e.g. science, history, philosophy, while ITPs represent industries e.g. forestry, manufacturing and tourism. The most common generic term is SSB.

Only accredited organisations are able to assess learners against framework unit standards and award credits. Accreditation means an education provider or workplace has sufficient expertise in teaching and assessing, and adequate quality management systems to deliver what is promised to the learner. It is the organisation which is accredited, not its programmes.

The framework system gives education and training providers much freedom to develop their own programmes. The unit standards state the outcomes which

programmes should generate, not how they must be learned or assessed. Education and training programmes can be designed in whatever size and form is appropriate to the learners and the organisation. This flexibility leads to new types of learning and a range of assessment opportunities. These give learners greater access to learning and enable providers to use resources more effectively.

Assessment can be done by the representative of an accredited provider (a school, private training establishment, wananga, government training establishment or a tertiary institution) or by a registered assessor. Registered assessors are individuals registered by an ITO or NSB to assess within their area of responsibility. A wide range of evidence may be used to compare a candidate's performance against a standard as part of the assessment process. As well as traditional tests, projects etc. an assessor can use evidence of prior achievements or evidence from the candidate's workplace to test performance against a standard.

Consistency among assessors is gained through moderation processes which ensure that assessors have a common view on what 'meeting the standard' means. Moderation methods include assessor training, regional panels, moderator visits, examples of learner work and common assessment tasks.

Once a learner is assessed and awarded credit, the learning institution notifies NZQA and the credit is then added to the NZQA database along with other credits achieved by the learner. Once a year, or more often if requested, the learner receives a record of all unit standards and qualifications he or she has achieved in the past year. This is called the Record of Learning and is an official document, useful as a credential to future employers or education providers.

Conclusion

It is difficult, within the limitations of this essay, to widely canvass the arguments for and against standards-based assessment which forms the basis of the qualifications framework. I have attempted to summarise, in the table below, viewpoints expressed by proponents and opponents of this form of assessment - mostly Qualifications Authority staff, university education academics, and Principals.

| <i>Benefits of Standards-based Assessment</i> | <i>Negative effects of standards-based assessment in school learning programmes</i> |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear goals for learners and describe achievements in a meaningful way. • Easily accessible and available in a variety of situations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep and higher order learning approaches will be discouraged. • It will be difficult to recognise excellence, able students will become unmotivated and overall |

| | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage higher standards of achievement and have a positive impact on learning. • Allow learners to proceed at their own pace. • Collect evidence of learners' achievements in a variety of ways. • Do not tie recognition of learning to course completion. | <p>standards will fall.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning will lose integration and coherence, and many of the significant longterm aims of education will disappear. • Teaching and learning will become narrow, restricted and limiting. • Assessment will drive the curriculum. |
|---|---|

Added to this is the opinion expressed by universities nationwide that they are **not** going to “hook” onto the framework for a number of reasons, perhaps the most important being their resistance to losing their “degrees” in their current forms “constraining their initiative, and compromising their academic freedom.”

Getting Chalk Face Opinion

But what of the frontline teachers - those charged with designing assessment tasks, assessing, marking, sending examples to moderators, and so on. I found this group to be sadly missing in the literature that I read. In an effort to get some feedback from teachers, I posted a message on the “Teachers Message Board” on the internet which posed the following question:

“I would be interested in any comments from staff/students about the implementation of the Qualifications Framework in their schools and its effectiveness or otherwise.” (T1)

I was rewarded with six messages from various part of the country with four expressing concern (in various ways!) at their much increased workload, with comments such as:

“I don’t know how I even have time to reply to your message. It is now 1 a.m. and I am marking assessments for my fourth form science class - again!” (T2)

“Where do I start? I am being constantly interrupted by a strange man who I don’t seem to recognise, who tells me he is my husband, wanting dinner, while I attempt again, after another unsuccessful moderator’s report, to devise an acceptable assessment for one of my unit standards.” (T3)

Comical they may seem, but the underlying message from six teachers is “unit standards demand much more work for the teacher”.

I am reminded again of the philosophy of the framework: Implicit in the framework is the principle of accessible, lifelong learning. The system is “seamless” and unit standards are portable. No more barriers. On the framework the doors to learning are many and they are always open.

As an aspiring teacher, I prefer to view the framework in this positive sense. Perhaps I am fortunate in that I am embarking on a teaching career being initiated immediately into the NQF without having experienced the “old system”. I think it appropriate to now recite the following message I received:

“I have been teaching for twenty years and did not relish the thought of learning again methods of teaching and assessment. I am happy to report that the challenge has refocused my teaching, which up until then I thought had been all right, buoyed my students, in that I can attest to a much higher achievement rate, and given me again the renewed inspiration and enthusiasm that I felt as a first-year teacher. I have relished the challenge.” (T4)

I too relish the challenge. However, now they are changing the system again - what will that be, I wonder.

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