

Research and Policy on NQFs: Impact & Complexity

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Outline

- Methodological challenge of researching NQFs
- Policy borrowing and policy learning
- Employer impact in the formal and informal economies
- EU free movement mobility and international migration
- The case for case studies in skills development
- Some references to Scotland and other setting

Methodological challenge of researching NQFs

- The background paper honestly admits multiple ‘challenges’, ‘risks’ and ‘complexity’ in implementing and researching NQFs –cf.SCQF1
- The very language of ‘impact’, ‘make a difference’ and ‘added value’ is slippery and contested, whilst the technical language (or NQF-speak) remains inaccessible even to regular educated publics. Cf. SCQF2
- The time-frames of 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation NQFs are a challenge to any cross-national comparison, not to mention the substantial changes over time within several national NQFs, whether in India, South Africa, England or Scotland cf SCQF3

Policy borrowing versus policy learning

- Policy borrowing (or policy transfer) of ‘best practice’ in NQFs has been a challenge even when the source of the borrowing has been a good example of policy learning over a long period. Cf SCQF4
- The availability of donor funding in support of NQFs has sometimes encouraged too rapid take-up or policy borrowing without the space and time for national policy learning
- Slow policy learning within the national culture and context are critical to successful policy borrowing (see Grootings in *ETF Yearbooks*, and in *NORRAG News* 38)

Research's influence on policy?

The case of NQFs

- There is a considerable body of critical research on NQFs carried out by individuals especially in the first generation NQF countries
- There is also a good deal of policy research carried out on the NQFs by agencies such as Cedefop, European Commission, ILO, OECD, UNESCO, SAQA, SCQF etc etc. cf. SCQF5
- The great bulk of both these are in English – see biblios of *Background paper* and *Application of learning outcomes* (Cedefop, 2017; 2016)
- The policy research community is aware of the main critical writing on NQFs, c.f. multiple references in the above to Allais, Young, Raffe, Pilcher... 'The research literature identifies several challenges..' *Background paper*
- But has this academic research influenced the policy community? Has research by the policy community influenced the research community? Cf SCQF6

Employers as NQF end-users: Large, medium, small and micro

- Despite the ambition for NQFs to be demand-led through employers' involvement, there still seem to be 'limited visibility and use of NQFs by labour market actors' (Cedefop, 2017). Check this through use of NQF levels etc in staff recruitment (SCQF 7). Cf. Employers not interviewed in the *Application of learning outcomes approaches* (Cedefop, 2016)
- Within Europe, the less regulated the labour market, the less the up-take by employers (Cedefop, 2017)
- In developing economies, where 90% of the employment or work may be in the informal economy (e.g. India), there may be little or no advantage or interest to formalise skill acquisition through RPL where this exists.

NQFs in EU free-movement worker mobility vs international migration flows

- What was the role, if any, of NQFs in the case of the entry of 181,000 EU current residents in Scotland, 80% of working age, and 47% from a single EU country? Or of the total of 3.5 million EU citizens currently in the UK, or 1 million UK citizens currently resident in Europe?
- On the other hand, what role can be anticipated for NQFs in the current mass movements of forced and 'voluntary' migration across the world? Syria is not mentioned as one of the 142 countries with an NQF; nor are the two Sudans or Myanmar, but Eritrea and Afghanistan are. [See role of the Recognition Portal of German Fed Min of Educ and Research in respect of 1 million new migrants in 2016]. The great bulk of all such forced and voluntary migration is **South-South** and not **South-North**.

Research for understanding the impact of NQFs

- Given the methodological challenge of understanding NQF debates, challenges and complexities, is there any research that could 'make a difference' in terms of accessibility in what sometimes appears a highly technicist discussion?
- What appears missing, from a very preliminary scan of the research literature, are case studies of both younger and older people who have experienced the outcomes-based education and training, and those who have experienced earlier forms of longer term craft apprenticeship. E.g. studies of apprenticeship and learnership in South Africa, or traditional vs newer approaches in dual-system states, the Scottish and English artisan.

Researching the beneficiaries of learning

- Although further research on 'World reference levels' may be compelling, it is a world away from understanding more about the beneficiaries of skill development systems in Scotland, Singapore, and South Africa
- The **systems** for skills & qualification development and NQF typologies seem almost to have taken on a life of their own and can be discussed separately from the actual training experience and quality of their graduates.
- The most discussed and most influential NQFs may not be those whose systems produce the highest quality of graduates
- Perhaps it is time for a Skills PISA; though there would need to be one for each of the main trades/skills, like the WorldSkills competition.