

NATIONAL QUALIFICATION “SYSTEMS” AND “FRAMEWORKS”: HOW THEY ARE DIFFERENT AND HOW THEY ARE RELATED

Since, the Department of Labour of the United Kingdom in the early nineteen-eighties formulated and promoted the development of a new approach to the always-difficult link between employment and training, processes related to this new approach have been progressively developed and implemented.

The most significant of these have to do with the processes for creating Professional Qualifications (originally called National Vocational Qualifications or NVQs), along with the processes for creating training programmes based on qualifications or groupings of professional competences (competency-based training, CBT); and with the processes of recognition and validation of competences or qualifications acquired through non-formal or informal learning and/or work experience, etc.

In their respective treatment of the link between training and employment, the first to incorporate this approach were Anglo-Saxon countries (Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc.), followed by Spain and some Latin American countries (Mexico and Colombia), and later, by a growing number of countries that accept that training for employment should be structured based on prior identification of job requirements.

As an obvious result, both the adoption of this new approach and the development of the aforementioned processes, generated abundant literature on the subject, which contributed to consolidating the nature of the approach, as well as to disseminating knowledge of it among the institutions and agents most concerned with and involved in its establishment and implementation. And to this literature produced in the respective national contexts of the countries that were adopting this approach, must be added the literature produced by the principal research centres related to vocational training and qualifications, which were not long in adopting the conceptual meaning of this new approach: particularly the CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, of the European Union) and the CINTERFOR (Inter-American Centre for Knowledge Development in Vocational Training, of the ILO).

Obviously, the literature on any subject—as an expression of the research being done and as an instrument for disseminating knowledge of it—is essential. Nevertheless, in the case of the subject of “qualifications and vocational training” (which is what we are discussing), an effort must be made to ensure maximum rigour and to avoid increasing the complexity and/or confusion over terminology or concepts that the field has suffered from for a long time. In effect, the traditional jungle of concepts and terms that illustrate the world of qualifications and vocational training is sometimes a not-insignificant obstacle when it comes to obtaining—from the responsible parties and political decision-makers—flexible

and comprehensible information about this world and, particularly, about what in this world needs to be improved and strengthened.

Along with other possible issues, one that not infrequently causes a certain amount of confusion in the literature on qualifications and vocational training is precisely the issue of the relationship between the term/concept National Professional Qualification System (NPQS) and the term/concept National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Are these different concepts or synonyms? When defined formally, they seem to involve two concepts that refer to clearly differentiated entities; however, at times their treatment in the literature on the subject, as well as the respective functions attributed to them, give the impression that they are practically the same thing.

For the purpose of attempting to clear up confusion and misconceptions in the way the two terms/concepts are described and/or used (and therefore regarding the entities to which they refer), the following comments are provided¹.

To start with, a simple graphic argument. The National (or international as the case may be) Qualifications Framework (NQF) is simply a “structure for ordering or classifying qualifications by levels”; in other words, it is a scale of qualification levels (which may be made up of five, eight, ten or some other number of steps or levels... as established by a particular country, or a group of countries, for example, the European Union), in which these levels are ordered hierarchically; to put it another way, a “framework” is a structure... and therefore the NQF is a structure that frames the different qualification levels established by a country or group of countries. Finally, and consistent with the above definitions, the Qualifications Framework (whether national or international) is a formal construct that is limited to characterising the different qualification levels (which make up this formal structure) through a series of descriptors (types of knowledge, skills, abilities, responsibility and autonomy corresponding to each level).

This is what a Qualifications Framework is (whether national or international): “nothing less” (later on in this document its effective functions will be identified), but also “nothing more” (i.e. it is not an NPQS, nor does it share its functions).

1. Despite the fact that these terms/concepts continue to be surrounded by confusion and misconceptions in the literature on the subject, both have already been defined with sufficient clarity in, for example, the excellent glossary published in 2008 by the CEDEFOP, the second edition of which was published last year (*Terminology of European education and training policy. Second Edition. A selection of 130 key terms*, CEDEFOP, Luxembourg, 2014).

According to same, a Qualification System is understood to be “*all activities related to the recognition of learning outcomes and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. These activities include: definition of qualification policy, training design and implementation, institutional arrangements, funding, quality assurance; assessment and certification of learning outcomes*”.

While a qualifications framework is defined as an “*reference tool for describing and comparing qualification levels in qualifications systems developed at national, international or sectoral levels*”. **Comment:** the reference levels are described in terms of learning outcomes (a combination of knowledge, skills and/or competences)... and cover the entire span of qualifications from those recognising basic knowledge, skills and competences to those awarded at the highest level of academic, professional and vocational education and training.

Definitively, the purpose of a Qualifications Framework is to formally establish and characterise the different qualification levels (professional and academic) so that when a qualification is established or defined, one of the levels that figure in this formal structure or scale can be attributed to it.

But the Qualifications Framework does not promote the establishment or creation of qualifications, or of the tools for acquiring them, or the processes for validating or certifying them, or the tools for obtaining information or guidance on them, etc. (all of these being functions corresponding to the NPQS). In addition, the other feature that distinguishes the two terms/concepts is that the Qualifications Framework represents a formal structure or scale that orders and classifies both professional and academic qualifications (while the NPQS only considers processes and outcomes related to professional qualifications).

Ordinarily, agreement on or establishment of a particular Qualifications Framework (national or international) tends to be supported by a standard that upholds its legal validity.

For its part, the National Professional Qualification System (NPQS) is certainly also a structure, as is any “system” consisting of a structured interrelationship between components... but it is much more than just a formal structure. It is a structure whose main components consist of guidance processes for obtaining outcomes using methodological tools and instruments that make them possible, and which is provided with a set of standards that regulate its activities and interrelationships.

In other words, the NPQS is an interrelated set of processes, outcomes, instruments and standards that define, promote and establish how the professional qualifications required for undertaking productive processes (for products and services) are created; how these can be acquired; how they can be accredited and validated; and, lastly, how to obtain information and guidance for pursuing a professional career through them.



Graph 1. Components of a National Professional Qualification System

Curiously, it was not the United Kingdom that first formally defined the NPQS term/concept, although it was the first country to promote the development of the processes that constitute its components. What's more, currently the United Kingdom—at least in its official documents—still has not systematically formulated this set of processes (although some countries in its sphere of influence, like Australia and South Africa, have started to do so). Spain was possibly the first country to formally (and legally, as established by Law 5/2002 on Qualifications and Vocational Training) propose this systematic conception of the aforementioned processes, due to their clear interrelationship... a systematic conception and formulation that is already being adopted by numerous countries.

In any case, whether or not this set of processes is systematically formulated is merely a formal matter and one of secondary importance. What is relevant—for the purposes of these comments—is the link that exists between the NPQS (or the processes that make it up) and the National Qualifications Framework.

In this regard, the links between the two terms/concepts having already been in some way anticipated in the above considerations, the following substantial differences between them can be identified:

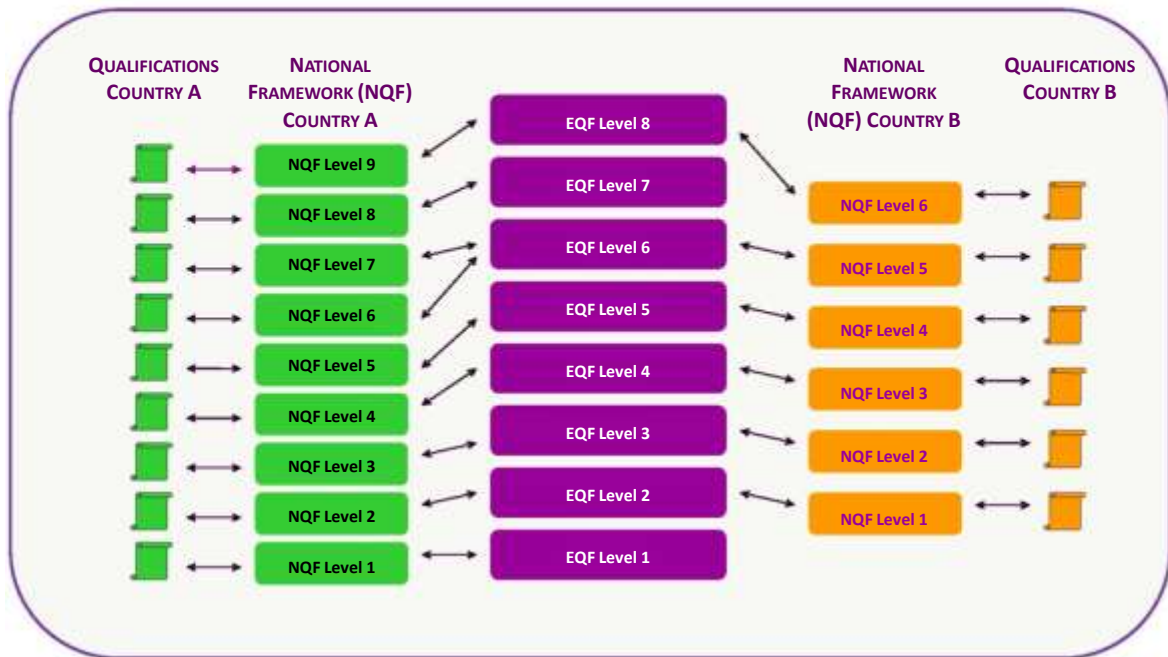
- the NQF is a mere outcome, resulting from a formal structure or scale that hierarchically orders qualifications through a series of descriptors (type of knowledge, type of competences or skills, and degree of autonomy or

responsibility corresponding to each level) which makes it possible to attribute a level on said scale to each qualification established; while the NPQS is made up of a set of processes, outcomes, standards, methodological tools, instruments, etc. oriented towards improving the links between training and employment;

- the NPQS focuses on processes specifically related to professional qualifications (how they are established, how they are acquired, how they are validated, how to obtain information and guidance on them, etc.); while the levels established in an NQF are assigned or attributed to both professional qualifications and academic ones.

And, besides attributing a level on the formal scale to each qualification established, what else does a NQF do? Another three, at least, functions of a NQF can be identified:

- in the first place, to facilitate equivalences, comparisons and/or co-validations of professional and academic qualifications (in terms of their recognition and/or of promoting the acquisition of higher-level qualifications);
- in addition, to facilitate international equivalences, comparisons and/or co-validations (between different countries) of professional and academic qualifications;
- lastly, to make the links between qualifications (both professional and academic) more transparent and thereby making it easier to see the different pathways for progressing in the professional and/or academic qualification.



Graph 2. Example of the link between the qualifications of two countries through the European Qualification Framework (EQF)

On the other hand, the functions of the NPQS—in part already covered in the above considerations—are derived from the essential objective of improving the link between employment and training so that this simultaneously benefits the productivity and competitiveness of the country's productive system and the employability and professional promotion of the active population. In synthesis, the main functions of the NPQS are:

- to create a homogeneous catalogue of professional qualifications that serves as a single reference for the creation of training programmes for employment,
- to create competency-based training programmes (i.e. based on the constituent competence units of a qualification) that help their beneficiaries acquire the qualifications in the catalogue,
- to develop processes for recognition and accreditation (i.e. validation) of competences acquired through non-formal and informal training and/or, especially, through work experience,
- to promote the development of lifelong learning through information on the meaning of the NPQS, and guidance processes that facilitate the active population's access to the benefits of same.

Once the differences in the nature and function of the entities to which the two terms/concepts refer have been identified, and these would seem to be substantial enough, it is reasonable to ask whether there is any specific link between the two. And it is obvious that one does in fact exist.

In effect, in the process of creating a Professional Qualification for incorporation into the Catalogue of Professional Qualifications (a function that corresponds expressly to the NPQS, not to the NQF), once the competence units are defined (the grouping or set of which constitute a Professional Qualification), there remains—to complete the creation process—the task of assigning or attributing a qualification level to this set of competence units or Qualification. This is when the link between the NPQS and the NQF comes into play: the NPQS defines a frame of reference of qualification levels for attributing some level to each Professional Qualification created, and the NQF provides this frame of reference. It is here, and only here, that the functions of the NPQS and the NQF come together (what's more, if there were no NQF, the NPQS would have to establish its own framework or structure of qualification levels to classify and order Professional Qualifications).

This having been said, where is the confusion or misconception between the two terms/concepts manifested? In some texts (articles, speeches, books, etc.), and even in some statements or pronouncements made by public institutions. Let's look at some examples.

A first clear example is section 5e) of ILO Recommendation 195 (2005), which states literally:

“e) develop a national qualifications framework to facilitate lifelong learning, assist enterprises and employment agencies to match skill demand with supply, guide individuals in their choice of training and career and facilitate the recognition of prior learning and previously acquired skills, competencies and experience; this framework should be responsive to changing technology and trends in the labour market and recognize regional and local differences, without losing transparency at the national level”

Contrary to the ILO statement, neither facilitating lifelong learning, nor matching skill demand with supply, nor guiding individuals in their choice of training and career, nor facilitating the recognition of prior learning and previously acquired skills would seem to correspond to the “national qualifications framework”... All of these functions and objectives correspond to the NPQS, not the NQF, and therefore it seems clear that in this case the NQF has been confused with the NPQS.

Another assertion that sometimes figures in the literature on the subject is that which, in these terms or similar, states the following: *“it is necessary to design and implement National Qualifications Frameworks in order to structure educational and training systems and respond to the labour market”*.

In the first place, structuring education and training systems would not seem to correspond to the NQF (is an educational system not a training system in real terms?). The NQF is responsible for identifying the equivalences or

correspondences between professional qualifications and academic qualifications, which constitutes a much less ambitious function than “structuring educational and training systems”. In the second place, the NQF does not seem to serve to respond to the labour market: responding to the labour market requires training programmes based on the competence units for the Professional Qualifications in the catalogue, which is an essential function of the NPQS (and not the NQF).

Lastly, to avoid going on at greater length, it's sufficient to also point out some of the functions attributed to the NQF in the literature on the subject which give rise to confusion over the functions of the NQF and the NPQS. Specifically, some articles and books attribute to the NQF, formulated in these terms or similar, the tasks of “encouraging quality in the provision of training or education”, or “integrating technical professional education with higher education”, or “modernising some aspect of the education and training system”, or even “defining or planning public investment targets in the area of education and training” or serving “as a mechanism for measuring the performance of this system”.

Attributing these or similar objectives to the NQF is to not know its nature and functions, and to basically confuse them with those of the NPQS. The NQF neither encourages nor discourages quality in the provision of training and education; as a scale of qualification levels (which what a NQF is) it has nothing to do with the quality of training or education provision. Even less so is it responsible for integrating professional technical education and higher education, as the NQF is not an integrating mechanism but rather a formal structure for ordering and classifying qualification levels; and even less so is it responsible for modernising any aspect of training or education (the NQF neither modernises education and training nor the contrary; that is an objective outside of its nature and functions). Lastly, attributing to the NQF the capacity to define and plan public investment targets for education and training is to confuse the NQF with a government agency; and, considering it a mechanism for measuring the performance of the system is to confuse it with an evaluation system.

Certainly this confusion between the NPQS and the NQF is still present in some countries, and what is even more serious, in the conception of the two entities that some officials of government agencies responsible for managing the qualifications and vocational training policy have.

Lastly, given that this confusion or misconception is becoming increasingly frequent, perhaps this is a good time to reflect calmly on same, in order to avoid repeating it.

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