

The Challenges of Accommodating CPD activities in the NFQ, outside its current awards paradigm – some thoughts

Jim Murray, Technological Higher
Education Association

DIT Seminar, 27 March 2018

Original Vision for the NFQ

‘The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards’ – *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria* (NQAI, 2002)

The Great Ambition: Comprehensiveness and Inclusivity

- A bold and ambitious, but broad undertaking: the Framework sought to encompass the entire spectrum of learning achievements
- Sought to be inclusive and to recognise all learning achievements, no matter how, when or where achieved – warm, embracing language, symbolised in original branding:



- A rhetoric of hope or perhaps expectation

Rhetoric versus Rigour: the advent of Learning Outcomes

- Notwithstanding the warm and embracing language, NFQ always had a more rigorous dimension
- Structurally, NFQ built upon a Learning Outcomes approach
- One of a number of tools that were then being adopted nationally and internationally to enhance education and training systems
- Part of a new methodological approach for the expression and description of the curriculum and qualifications
- Originated by *educationalists* — accepted and endorsed by politicians
- Fundamental component of the NFQ

Learning Outcomes and the NFQ: Tidy, Transmittable (but highly) Technical

- Identified knowledge, skills and competences that a learner could demonstrate as a result of some learning process
- Described something that was demonstrable
- Described something that was assessable
- Could be used to describe levels/qualifications in national and pan-national frameworks
- Could be used to describe outcomes of formal education programmes/awards or modules/units/courses within those programmes

NFQ Outcomes: Accommodating Characteristics?

- Generic
- Assumed all qualifications can be differentiated by level
- Comprehensive: intended to cover the qualifications referred to regardless of discipline and field of learning
- Assumed all qualifications described hold significant elements in common
- Avoided reference to curriculum, duration or methods of reaching learning outcomes

Intended Beneficiaries

NFQ Outcomes aimed to:

- Guide students in and through their learning
- Help academic staff to design programmes – by thinking precisely about what they want students to learn in terms of both knowledge and skills
- Provide useful guidance to employers about the attainments of holders of particular qualifications
- Help everybody to relate different qualifications to each other

The Other Face of Rigour: the Quality Principle and the NFQ

‘Quality is not only a central issue in relation to the NFQ; it permeates all aspects of learning and awards. Quality needs to underpin the setting of award standards planned and systematic actions are necessary to provide confidence in the system. Quality processes will inform all actions of the [National Qualifications] Authority in establishing and maintaining the framework. These will also need to allow for the achievement of excellence’

- *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications. A Discussion Document*
(NQAI, November 2001) ‘

Although NFQ sought to be inclusive and all-embracing

- Structural and methodological basis for NFQ recognition was firmly rooted in (and arguably more suited to) formal education system
- Though contested in formal education system, was generally accepted and adopted – has gone on to underpin pedagogical practice and research, especially in T & L community in HE
- In contrast, Learning Outcomes, Award Structures and Quality Assurance systems do not sit easily with learning associated with the workplace, whether that is work-based learning, or CPD overseen by professional associations and sectors
- Perceived in some quarters as bureaucratic, unintelligible, unresponsive and expensive to administer
- Hegemony of formal (higher) education (and training) system evident in NFQ Diagram



AWARDING BODIES

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) makes awards in further and higher education and training
- SEC - State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Skills)
- Institutes of Technology
- Universities

AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

There are four classes of award in the National Framework of Qualifications:

- Major Awards: named in the outer rings, are the principal class of awards made at a level
- ▲ Minor Awards: are for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award
- Supplemental Awards: are for learning that is additional to a Major Award
- ◆ Special Purpose Awards: are for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement

A Fifteen Year Old Dilemma

- When it comes to accommodating Work-based qualifications and CPD in the NFQ, should the formal education and training system adapt to meet the needs of the workplace?
- Or does NFQ recognition of work-associated learning and CPD activity require the employer/workplace to master the intricacies of Learning Outcomes, Award-type descriptors and Quality Assurance?
- Unresolved tension/dilemma that has hindered recognition of CPD, work-based certification, non-formal and informal learning

Snapshot in Time: Forum on Alignment of Profession Awards (October 2011)

Feedback on Profession Award-type descriptors

- Language used in learning outcomes: ‘esoteric’; imprecise; differentiation in outcomes between levels not sharp or clear; cannot facilitate uniform understanding and consistency of application
- Level 9 pitched at an ‘unrealistic level’; overly ambitious
- Academic emphasis still pronounced in descriptors, including emphasis on research
- Sense that credit and assessment protocols are borrowed directly from academia and permit no innovation or flexibility
- Descriptors do not adequately reflect internationally agreed sectoral notions of professional competence

Now and Looking Forward I

- HEI Representative Body Perspective on CPD and recognition of work based learning qualifications quite different from my old NQAI perspective
- While the political and policy emphasis on responding to the education and training needs of the workplace has never been stronger, the discussion is still largely framed in terms of integrating work-based learning and informal and non-formal CPD into the formal system certainly framed in this way within and between higher education institutions
- Pressure to reform the system not jumping out at me in my day job – ‘conventional’ student numbers entering HE are relatively healthy and forecast to remain so for much of the next decade
- Recognise, though, that tensions still exist between the formal system and the workplace – evident for example in the recent debate on the introduction of new ‘enterprise-led’ apprenticeships; employers in consortia frustrated with formal validation processes etc

Now and Looking Forward II

- Tempting to view all this as an interminable dance between the formal education system and the workplace
- However, the rhetoric of the NFQ and the broader European and Global policy framework in which it is rooted created expectations – and that genie cannot be put back in the bottle
- Complacent to think that expectations should be ignored, and change avoided
- Frustration may lead employers to circumvent traditional accreditation, QFs and QA systems if their needs are not met
- Disruptive technologies, from Blockchain to Digital Badges, have the potential to leave traditional accreditation and certification systems trailing in their wake
- A new public discussion on how the NFQ and the formal system of education might accommodate workplace learning better is probably overdue, notwithstanding public discourse is currently fixated with the regulation of many aspects of service provision

A Concluding Snapshot from the Past – Greek NQF Consultation, Athens, February 2010

Main lessons from NFQ development and implementation in Ireland

- Need for leadership and determination
- Need for vision around Framework's purpose and utility
- Need to consult and involve all stakeholders, otherwise it will not be owned by them and become a truly national entity
- As a national framework, it should reflect national educational, cultural and social realities

Perhaps it is time to look again at the NFQ and to critically examine whether it is fit for purpose (conceptually and practically) in recognising work related learning and certification