

Replacing an incoherent and chaotic qualifications framework

Professor Simon Roodhouse, Chief Executive of the University Vocational Awards Council, follows up his article on streamlined qualifications (February's issue of 't' magazine) with a thought-provoking account of how a coherent qualifications framework would work

David Sherlock, Chief Executive of the Adult Learning Inspectorate, recently called our qualifications framework "*incoherent and chaotic*".

A coherent national qualifications framework is a prize worth having - primarily for the learner - as it will provide for the first time, a coherent progression matrix; linked to a common credit system that is transportable from one institution to another across the country and ultimately internationally.

Such a system has the potential to increase the number of learners - particularly at work – who wish to take advantage of higher level qualifications to develop their competences. As a result, a serious contribution can be made to national economic development and social inclusion. (Scotland is already moving in this direction with an integrated qualification framework for further and higher education.)

The advantages of such a framework would be:

- A learner-centred approach to qualifications
- Explicit progression for the learner
- A system that is easily understandable by all
- Clarity relating to Agency roles and responsibilities
- A workable National credit system
- National transfer of credit between institutions and internationally
- Cost savings leading from the coordination of audit systems (avoiding overlap and duplication)
- Better employer engagement through a simplified and coherent qualifications framework based on national occupational standards
- The strengthening of existing relationships between further and higher education

So how do we go about making this a reality?

Sir Anthony Greener, QCA Chairman, has his own ideas about this – and also shares David Sherlock's views about the current qualifications framework. In a speech to the Sector Skills Development Agency on the 20 January 2004, Sir Anthony supported David Sherlock's assessment and suggested a way forward saying:

"He [David Sherlock] was not wrong. Our so-called national qualifications framework is not a 'framework' in the sense of providing architecture - at present it is merely a list of qualifications."

He went on to outline a way forward:

"I would start by seeking to fill in that over-riding element of the strategy that I suggested was missing - a coherence and a continuum which is built up from the needs of the consumer. That coherence requires:

First, a single qualifications framework which includes all general qualifications, vocational qualifications, university degrees and higher degrees. This single framework should be

- *regardless of the different funding mechanisms for parts of it (by the LSC or by the Higher Education Funding Council for England)*
- *it should be regardless of which agency accredits, regulates or quality assures it (by the QCA or by the Quality Assurance Agency)*
- *it should be regardless of whether the content of the qualification has its basis in industrial practice or in university research*
- *and regardless of the type of institution or workplace in which the teaching and learning takes place (school, college, university, office, laboratory, workshop, factory floor or on-line)"*

Such a system is now being developed by the QCA along with a national credit system. The emerging model reflects the proposal described in my recent article in 't' magazine – reproduced below (the full paper is available at www.simonroodhouse.com) :

Table 1: A revised and integrated National Qualification Framework

Qualification	General		Vocationally related	Occupational
7 D (doctorate) level			Doctorates	Level 5 NVQ
6 M (masters) level			Master degree, Postgraduate certificates & postgraduate diplomas, graduate apprenticeships Key skills	Level 5 NVQ
5 H (honours) level			Bachelors degrees with Honours, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas Key skills	Level 5 NVQ
4 I (Intermediate) level			Foundation degrees, ordinary (Bachelors) degrees, diplomas of Higher Education and other higher diplomas Key skills	Level 4 NVQ
4 C (certificate) level			Certificates of Higher Education Key skills	
3 advanced level	A and AS levels, key skills	Vocational A level advanced modern apprenticeships (advanced GNVQ)	Foundation GNVQ	Level 3 NVQ
2 intermediate level	GCSE Grad A*-C	Modern apprenticeships, including key skills		Level 2 NVQ
1 foundation level	GCSE grade D-G	Key skills		Level 1 NVQ
Entry level		Certificate of educational achievement		

(Source: Simon Roodhouse, 2004)

As Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the QCA, said at the University Vocational Awards Council's annual conference in November 2003:

"In Australia there is a character know as Blind Freddy who has the capacity to see the 'bleeding obvious'. For Blind Freddy it would be obvious that we should have one single four-country national qualifications framework, which should include every qualification,

including degrees and higher degrees, regardless of which body accredits the qualification, the type of institution in which that qualification is delivered or the way in which it is funded."

(Extract from a paper by Ken Boston published in Responding to Government Expectations: Vocational Education and Training, the proceedings of the University Vocational Awards Council, Annual Conference, November 2003, ISBN 0-907311-11-3)

Some implications of a coherent framework for HE

However, the introduction of a coherent framework isn't without its complications. Higher education is also changing: public funding for higher education in England for example, is increasingly reflecting the drivers as described in the HEFCE strategy 2003¹:

"Universities and colleges need to gauge their contribution to meeting regional and national needs in relation to the whole higher education sector---- the central message of the plan was that individual universities and colleges have to recognise that they cannot all meet the full range of customer and stakeholder needs to the necessary standards of excellence."

In particular, it suggests that there has to be a significant change in the nature of provision,

"One of the greatest changes identified in the plan is to the traditional concept of higher education. Lifelong learning - the continued acquisition of knowledge and skills from cradle to grave - is turning education from a single life episode to a long running series. This will require new types of courses and methods of delivery in order to provide education and top-up skills and knowledge where and when they are needed."

These drivers can be summarised as:

- ❖ 50% target, government imperative (*White paper the Future of Higher Education 2003, DFES, HEFCE*).
- ❖ Social inclusion and economic disadvantage. (*Mainstream Government policy*)
- ❖ Skills development, for the workforce, a government imperative. (*National Skills Task Force, the Skills Strategy White Paper and Sector Skills Councils, LSC*).
- ❖ Response to local, sector and regional economic need (*Individual mission of the FEC/HEI, Learning and Skills Council, and HEFCE Strategy*).
- ❖ Foundation Degree recruitment (*FEC/HEI*).
- ❖ Around 1.3m people in work with level 3 type qualifications. (*LSC,SSDA, FEC/HEIs*)
- ❖ Work-based learning as a credible progression route into higher education. (*Hefce, access and widening participation, Partnerships for Progression, and Aim Higher, LSC*)
- ❖ Government target for 28% of young people to enter MA by 2004 (*Skills Strategy, DFES*)
Vocational routes from the age of 14yrs (*14 – 19 Green Paper DFES*)
- ❖ The introduction of fees (*government policy*)

There should be no surprise in these circumstances that a coherent and integrated national qualifications framework is being developed by the national regulatory body.

There are several implications for higher education institutions in establishing a coherent national framework, which includes higher level qualifications.

1. Quality Assurance and Auditing of Qualifications

The first of these is concerned with the quality assurance and auditing of qualifications in the revised national framework. At present, the QCA has regulatory powers, associated with the national framework and the qualifications within it. It can therefore regulate awarding bodies such as Edexcel, City and Guilds and OCR.

On the other hand, higher education quality assurance matters are currently led by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It does not have statutory regulatory powers and operates voluntarily to provide reassurance to those engaged in - or expecting to be engaged in - learning in higher education institutions in England that courses are fit for purpose, and institutional quality assurance arrangements meet nationally agreed benchmarks.

In the proposed new arrangements, would the QCA have regulatory control over the higher level qualifications in the revised framework? This is the key question for higher education. There is no doubt that whatever the criticism of the QAA, it remains preferable to any other for those working in the sector. However, for the largest of the further education colleges with substantial higher education provision, there remains a significant bureaucratic burden generated through responding to the requirements of the QAA, and QCA as articulated by the awarding bodies. This problem was identified in 'The Future of Higher Education White Paper' and has yet to be resolved. One approach to this is to accept the establishment of a national qualifications framework and clarify roles and responsibilities for each qualification between the two quality assurance agencies - combining inspections and audits wherever possible.

2. A National Credit System

The development of a national credit system associated with the revised framework (which is likely to be called a *framework for achievement*) also has implications for higher education. At present the QAA is the guardian of the general credit system for higher level qualifications. This works satisfactorily within individual institutions, yet it has not been entirely successful in being recognised between HEIs across England. In other words, there is a credit system in higher education, but it is not universally transferable or recognised as a common currency, with equitable value between institutions, nationally or internationally, particularly within the European Union.

The introduction of a credit system based on the revised framework has yet to articulate the relationship between the proposals and the existing higher education, credit arrangements. If this is not achieved, then progression will be jeopardised. This could potentially provide barriers to learners in further education wishing to progress to higher study. In addition, it will continue to restrain the application of accreditation of prior learning and experience (APEL), which is essential to developing the workforce. These problems are not insurmountable, and the University Vocational Awards Council is planning to work closely with QCA to develop an integrated approach - one which has the potential to articulate the two systems along with the HE credit consortia in the four countries.

3. Foundation Degrees

The introduction of foundation degrees in a revised and coherent national framework potentially opens the way to a reconsideration of the traditional awarding arrangements for higher level qualifications, particularly for higher education qualifications in further education. If foundation degrees are included in the framework, then it should be possible for other awarding bodies - besides universities - to offer this qualification. At

present, foundation degrees awarded by universities are not included in the QCA framework. This is in contrast to Higher National Diplomas for example, which can be found in both systems. It may be desirable to consider establishing a pluralistic approach here, whereby occupationally specific qualifications - at whatever level - can be offered; assuming the criteria are met by a spectrum of awarding bodies including universities and consortia. This is likely to lead to a responsive cost efficient system, which can quickly meet the demands of learners -wherever they are.

4. Funding

Whether the proposed new arrangements will affect the funding of qualifications in further and higher education is a question that is inevitable when considering a national qualification framework. Currently, all qualifications included in the existing framework by QCA are eligible for funding from the Learning and Skills Council. Similarly, higher education qualifications in England are recognised by HEFCE as eligible and are quality assured on the Council's behalf by the QAA. It is highly unlikely that the funding arrangements will change. However, it may lead to greater clarity for further education institutions that provide higher education qualifications.

Conclusion

Sir Anthony Greener perfectly sums up the need for a revised and coherent framework:

"This is a radical proposal, as it joins up the National Qualifications Framework (general and vocational qualifications) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (university degrees and higher degrees). But it is absolutely necessary if we are to sweep aside the provider focus which has kept separate and paramount the interests of the different policy-making, funding, accrediting and delivery agencies. Instead this proposal puts the consumer, the learner at the core. Nothing short of this will provide genuine pathways for lifelong learning.

Second, the framework must be market-led, reflecting what learners and their employers want, rather than what agencies and institutions are prepared to fund or provide. The essential characteristics of the framework must be:

- *that each qualification is constructed from a series of units or modules, of different sizes and levels of demand, arranged to be taken sequentially, and each carrying a specified level of credit points*
- *that each qualification has recognised currency or value; that is, the level of challenge and content of each unit. Each whole qualification must be specified, plain, and widely understood*
- *that the number of qualifications is reduced to a single pathway at each level in each occupation, made up of a core and optional units. Like the modern motor car industry, and unlike Henry Ford, there will be occupational models designed for each level with optional extras to meet the needs and interests of individual learners and employers."*

(extract from the speech by Sir Anthony Greener, QCA Chairman, to the Learning and Skills Development Agency, 20 January 2004, Isn't it time we put the consumer first? available on the QCA website)

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ⁱ The full strategy can be found on the HEFCE website ADMIN-HEFCE@JISMAIL.AC.UK