NQFs: What's in it for the poor? Lessons from developing countries

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1. Brief history

In the 1970s and 1980s, starting in the UK and quickly moving to Australia, governments began to see education and training as an important instrument of economic reform. These governments believed that while education could and should lead to improved economic performance, it was not doing so, because education institutions were not providing relevant education. The idea of **qualification frameworks** covering all qualifications began to emerge. One of the key changes introduced was that qualification frameworks should define qualifications in terms of their learning outcomes (or competences) independently any specific educational provision and therefore of how such outcomes were achieved. One of the aims of this was to open up educational provision to the market. Another factor was the introduction into the public or state sector of business management techniques drawn from the private sector which emphasized outcome measures and the development of industry-wide standards as measures of quality. The ideas of competence and outcome-based qualification frameworks appeared to fit neatly into the new culture of performance management, as well as public sector reform which emphasized contracting out public services, even when provided by public bodies. This growing interest by governments in gaining more control over educational provision through the reform of qualifications was paralleled by an increasing belief that governments should not take an active role in economic policy, and specifically industrial policy, and that they should deregulate labour markets as much as possible.

Policy makers believed that outcomes-based qualifications could create markets in the provision of vocational education, thereby reforming the role of the state in educational delivery; change curricula, thereby improving their relevance to individuals and employers; and improve how education related to labour markets by providing better information to employers about the abilities of the holder of a qualification. The earliest outcomes or competence-based framework for vocational qualifications were the English National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) launched in 1987.

This was followed by a competence-based training reform in Australia following the same logic, a fully comprehensive NQF launched in New Zealand in 1992 and a similar one in South Africa in 1995. As recently as 2004, only five NQFs were in existence together with a larger number of competence-based vocational education and training frameworks; the latter were sometimes limited to one or more industry or occupational sector. Since then 120 countries are reported as developing some form of qualification framework--some restricted to vocational qualifications (like NVQs) and some being comprehensive frameworks for all qualifications (NQFs).

2. The spread of qualifications frameworks

In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was to poor and middle income countries that most work on qualifications frameworks (and competence-based training) spread. Drawing on the English National Vocational Qualifications directly or indirectly, qualifications frameworks emerged next in South Africa, Botswana, and Mauritius, competence-based frameworks for vocational education were developed in the Caribbean and some Asian countries, and labour competence frameworks were developed in some Latin American countries. Subsequent to the adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), EU countries have been, to various degrees, developing their own NQFs. Furthermore, with the support of the international agencies, countries in the other continents have followed.

One of the reasons outcomes-based qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems have great appeal in developing countries is because education systems, and particularly vocational education, are weak, and the state has no viable policy to ensure employment for all citizens. A policy focused on regulation of provision, rather than trying to build and improve providing institutions, and which claims to make people 'employable' without government intervening to create employment, seems like it would be appealing to policy makers. In most of the cases I have studied, developing countries have attempted to follow the model of creating a framework of qualifications, using employers (and other stakeholders) to define 'competences' or 'learning outcomes' that are the basis of the qualifications, and setting up state (and in some cases private) regulatory bodies to regulate both private and public providers against the stipulated outcomes. The specification of outcomes is supposed to improve the quality and relevance of education, as well as to improve the ability of government to regulate education, which is often linked to a desire to open up markets, and ensure that new providers can emerge, as well as provide a means of holding existing providers to account without the state having to play a central role in delivering education. There are also some examples of qualifications frameworks which were not narrowly modelled on the English National Vocational Qualifications, but usually only for higher education.

3. Qualifications frameworks in developing countries

The South African National Qualifications Frameworks was one of the most extreme versions of framework, intended to replace all existing qualifications for all sectors of the education and training system, at all levels, and to entirely change the system of education inherited from apartheid. It is also one of the most advanced frameworks in the world in terms of the number of years it has been implemented, and is one of the few qualifications frameworks in the world that has been subjected to considerable scrutiny by researchers. What is evident is that the attempt to turn an outcomes-led qualifications framework into a real policy vehicle in which learning outcomes were stipulated separately from educational contexts led to a model that spiralled out of control, becoming completely unwieldy and unusable as a basis for educational reform. The

outcomes-led framework model led to a system which was not only very complex and cumbersome, but also a very poor basis for educational reform. Very few concrete claims are made, even by the South African Qualifications Authority, about what the qualifications framework has achieved. The framework was the subject of a protracted policy review, and was finally substantially changed in 2008. The framework was split into three separate but linked frameworks—one for higher education, one for schools and vocational education and training, and one for trades and occupational education. The outcomes-based model was partially abandoned. The unit standards and unit standards-based qualifications remain on the framework, but most have still never been used.

The problems in South Africa have been extensively researched. The evidence available from other developing countries (specifically, Bangladesh, Botswana, Chile, Mauritius, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Tunisia) suggests many similar problems; it is also important to note that many of these problems have also been experienced in developed countries, but the impact of them is felt less in relatively well established education systems.

Unused qualifications

The most startling common research finding is that qualifications frameworks have led to the creation of new qualifications which do not get used. In other words, qualifications based on learning outcomes, developed in processes which attempted to be participatory, and involved industry or relevant stakeholders, led to the development of new qualifications which then sat on qualifications frameworks, with no corresponding provision of education programmes. This is not unique to poorer countries; it is the case even in the relatively successful Australian competence-based training system. In most of the small number of countries internationally that have actually attempted to implement a framework, qualifications have been developed and not used. But it is most dramatically visible in countries where education levels are low, and provision is weak or haphazard. Besides the South African case, the starkest examples of this are Botswana, Mauritius, and Mexico.

In Botswana, a qualifications framework was created specifically for vocational education: the Botswana National Vocational Qualifications Framework. The Botswana Training Authority, an institution created in 1998, was mandated to develop a framework, and, after a four year planning and staff development programme that started in 2000, began to implement the framework in August 2004. As in South Africa, qualifications consisted of parts—known as unit standards—which could be separately awarded, and which were defined through learning outcomes or competences. Like in the United Kingdom and all the countries which have followed this model, the intention was that employers would be involved in creating these unit standards, in order to ensure that training would be relevant to the labour market. Task teams were constituted, initially located in 15 key economic sectors. Stakeholders were trained in designing unit standards. The unit standards produced look similar to their counterparts in other countries. Similar rules and structures were established.

The results? The development of unit standards was slow. Even slower, however, was the uptake of the unit standards once they had been developed. In 2008, 124 training providers were registered by the Botswana Training Authority, offering a total of 643 approved programmes. In a country with a small population, this probably accounted for a sizable percentage of educational providers. However, most of these providers did not offer courses based on the newly developed standards. Only ten of them used the unit standards registered on the qualifications framework. In other words, out of the 643

programmes offered across the 124 institutions under the qualifications framework, only ten programmes complied with the unit standards specifications.

Although the belief was that industry involvement in standards-setting would lead to relevant training programmes, the Botswana Confederation of Commerce and Industry did not adopt the unit-standards based qualifications. At the time of our research, government-run vocational colleges were also not using them. There were no official records of how many learners had actually been awarded unit standards, but based on the numbers of courses offered, they would be extremely low. Most of the unit standards have never been used.

In Mauritius, legislation was passed in 2001 that created the Mauritius Qualifications Authority and a qualifications framework. For higher education, the focus was on making sense of the 'jungle of qualifications', rationalizing the number of qualifications, and attempting to make them easier to understand. In vocational education, where the outcomes-/ competence-based model was introduced, the aim of the qualifications was to introduce substantial reform to both the curriculum and the delivery of education and training. The Mauritian Qualifications Authority was in charge of the qualifications framework, but it had far more jurisdiction over vocational education and training than over other areas. In vocational education, it was made responsible for the generation of new qualifications and unit standards. As in South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, the model was essentially competence-based training, with the intention of giving industry a central role in defining its required competences. Industry Training Advisory Committees were created. It was anticipated that the qualifications developed would replace the existing qualifications as well as create qualifications and unit standards in areas that had previously not had formal qualifications. According to the qualifications authority, 66 qualifications were generated, although public information is only available on about 20 of these qualifications and 476 unit standards. In 2009, at the time of our research, *none of these qualifications had been used by educational institutions or employers*, and there was no designated awarding body for them. The main state provider, the Industrial and Vocational Training Board, as well as many private providers, continued to offer the National Training Certificate that predated the qualifications framework. This qualification has a specified curriculum, and is assessed and certified through the Mauritian Examinations Syndicate or relevant international bodies.

In Mexico, a labour competence framework was initially envisaged as a framework for qualifications in vocational education and training, as well as in workplace-based training, but ended up focused on the latter, where it was used mainly for the assessment of prior learning. Providers of vocational education did not accept or use the standards. The competence standards developed described mainly low levels of competence in the workplace, and many competence standards were developed that were never used.

A five level framework was developed, with the levels derived from an analysis of the complexity of labour involved, the degree of autonomy of performance, and the different activities included in the qualification (Klapp, 2003). Lead bodies, including representatives of employers and workers as well as sector experts, used the English National Vocational Qualification 'functional analysis' approach to produce competence standards. Awarding bodies were accredited to verify the quality of the assessment centres in which candidates were to be assessed against standards. From 1996 to 2003, 601 competence standards were registered. A very small number of these were ever issued to learners. From 1998 to 2003, 256,282 certificates were issued against these qualifications. One qualification generated 29.7 per cent of the certificates, and 80.7 per

cent of the issued certificates corresponded to only 26 qualifications. Those qualifications which were used were linked to specific government-driven programmes. Although the overall project included a focus on educational institutions, in most instances the standards developed did not relate to their courses, so they developed their own standards. Pilot projects were commenced in seven priority industries, and Tourism and Electricity reported some gains *in terms of learners achieving certificates.*

One reason for this is the inherent clumsiness of outcomes-based qualifications, as well as contradictions between them and the way in which educational institutions usually develop curricula. Another is the shift to a regulatory state *à la* New Public Management, in contexts where state provision was already poor; in other words, reliance on the emergence of a market of providers, in the context of weak educational institutions.

The regulatory state and weak institutions

What was common to many of the countries in our study was an emphasis on treating state and private institutions in the same way through contractualization and the introduction of accountability measures, in the belief that this would increase efficiency and effectiveness. In some of the countries, this type of approach was explicitly based on commitments to neoliberal market policies and principles. In many others this was not explicit.

Emphasis on a regulatory state 'quality assuring' different providers, has not increased the quantity or quality of provision, and in some cases (such as South Africa) may have decreased it. In most instances, the main achievement has been to develop paper qualifications that in fact are never used, despite the involvement of industry and other stakeholders in their development. This is a tragedy not only due to the pointless expenditure of resources in a context in which governments have very limited finances for a number of competing priorities, but because many more serious priorities—such as developing and supporting educational institutions—are neglected because the policy *appears* to be taking care of them.

So, for example, in Bangladesh, a framework for vocational education was supposed to bring coherence to a large and complex set of providers, including many government ministries, private institutions and non-governmental institutions. But at the time of our study, the documents associated with the qualifications framework had very little to say about these institutions—how they would be funded and supported, where provision will come from, and so on. The idea seemed to be that designing new qualifications which contained competence statements or learning outcomes as the benchmark for all provision, whether offered in formal education and training, workplace training, or on-the-job training in the formal and informal economy, would in itself regulate and therefore enable provision. This is not an uncommon approach, and was certainly the approach in South Africa.

The education system in South Africa survived the qualifications framework where the reasonably strong education institutions *ignored* the outcomes-led qualifications framework model. In the sectors where educational provision has been historically very weak in South Africa—such as vocational and adult education—the existence of outcome statements has not led to increased provision or improvements in quality, and there is considerable evidence that it has made provision more difficult.

As Gert Loose (2008) argues, one of the biggest problems with the promotion of competence-based training in developing countries is that what these countries actually need is the creation of an effective training system—the development of institutions,

programmes, and curricula. These are just the things that outcomes-based qualifications frameworks and competence-based training do not address: competence-based training, Loose argues, has provided "*the definition of competencies and the methodology for assessing them*; but it *failed* to provide the "T" in CBET, a learning process as the basis for the creation of *training* itself" (Loose, 2008, p. 76, emphasis in original). So, to pursue the above example, policy makers that I interviewed in Bangladesh argued that including a specification of 'pre-vocational' qualifications on the Technical and Vocational National Qualifications Framework would lead to increased access, as many people would not have the basic education needed to access vocational qualifications. However, there were no policy mechanisms under consideration other than specifying these qualifications. The assumption was that once qualifications had been specified, provision would start: institutions would take them up and start offering them, thereby increasing access to education and training. But there was no plan for which institutions would offer them, no notion of developing a curriculum or learning programme, no clear notion of who would teach them. This epitomizes Loose's point above: this model fails to provide the 'T', the training itself; it simply assumes that it will happen.

The focus on outcomes/ standards/ competences, as well as quality assurance and accreditation, shifts attention away from learning processes, and the need to build and support educational institutions to ensure that learning happens. Quality assurance systems do not *build* quality, they build procedures that *claim* to *measure* quality. Poorer countries, and countries with weak institutions, may find themselves facing a whole new set of problems if they rely too much on such mechanisms. This issue may be most stark in technical and vocational education, where a considerable infrastructure of workshops and other facilities is required in order to ensure quality. Models which narrowly link funding to learner enrolments and outcomes-based qualifications may not encourage institutions to take a long-term perspective, and are unlikely to provide the necessary incentives for building and developing institutions. Qualifications frameworks and competence-based reforms are often introduced with the professed aim of promoting the 'autonomy' and 'empowerment' of vocational institutions. However, 'autonomy' without increased capacity, without increased financial support, and with a series of new 'accountability' requirements, may turn out to be rather less empowering for institutions than is claimed, and governments are unlikely to get the desired results.

Further, setting up a viable accreditation system is a costly endeavour, and is based on the assumption that bureaucracies which are putatively incompetent at delivering good training are likely to be good or at least better at contracting it out and managing quality, or, that new institutions created for this purpose will be able to do so with no track record or institutional history. Conducting meaningful evaluation of educational quality is costly and time-consuming, and demands high levels of professional capacity amongst staff. This type of approach can lead to more emphasis on building quality assurance institutions and accreditation systems than on building educational institutions.

A model of decentralized, institution-based assessment has most potential to be effective when it is based on very strong institutions. Where institutions have substantially divergent standards, the outcome statements—notwithstanding all their detailed specifications—are not sufficient to 'hold the standard', to ensure that all teaching and/or assessment is at the same or a similar level. Thus, far more quality assurance is required—checking up on the institution, each assessment, and so on. The weaker the institutions, the more expensive this type of model is. Clearly, no country wants to spend more on quality assurance than it spends on provision. While registration and accreditation processes are important, they prove costly, time consuming, and ultimately

ineffective, in the absence of more traditional quality measures such as prescribed curricula and centrally-set assessments[1].

In the context of vocational education systems which are underfunded, countries which want to improve educational quality need to make serious choices between focusing on improving the capacity of education institutions or on increasing quality assurance. Managing contracts and evaluating the performance of contracted institutions, whether public or private, demands enormous regulatory capacity from the state, and possibly leads to many additional expenses for the various players in the education and training system. South Africa, for example, now has a huge and complex set of regulatory institutions and processes that oversees a tiny, diverse, but mainly extremely weak system of vocational and occupational education (Allais, 2012b).

Our research, although conducted while qualifications frameworks were in fairly preliminary stages in many of the countries, suggests that there may be problems in many of the countries in the study; while there have been new developments in all the countries, there is little research available. In Botswana, the training authority which was supposed to accredit providers found this work difficult to carry out, particularly when donor funds that had initially supported it dried up. Subsequent to our research, a comprehensive National Qualifications Framework for Botswana has been developed, and legislation passed to create a new authority, as well as a human resource development council; however, implementation has not yet begun. In Mauritius, while the qualifications authority officially took over the function of registering providers of vocational education and training, the Industrial and Vocational Training Board, the state provider of vocational education, continued to play a role in quality assurance for private providers that offered the National Training Certificate, the qualification that predated the new outcomes-based qualifications framework. In Mexico, because the criteria to become an assessing or awarding centre were so stringent, there were few assessment agencies, and these bodies charged high prices for assessment. In South Africa's the plethora of quality assurance institutions initially introduced has been substantially changed after there was very little evidence of improved quality, and even some evidence that it had made it impossible for non-profit and community-based organizations to offer education programmes.

Reiterations of policies and complex institutions
Another commonality across many countries (developing countries as well as the English-speaking countries which introduced the earliest frameworks) is the reiteration of different versions of standards, outcomes, and so on, as well as of structures. Many countries introduce qualifications frameworks, outcomes- or competence-based approaches, and describe them as new policy models, despite having attempted similar approaches before. In almost every country in our study, competence- or outcomes-based education and training was used in the reform of vocational education systems to replace *previous versions of competence-based models*. Almost every country had various iterations of competence-based models. A new model would be introduced as the solution to the problems that the old model tried to solve, and the same reasons would be given for why it would succeed: industry-developed outcomes would ensure that learners had the appropriate competences; competences would allow an appropriately modular approach, and so would create more flexibility for learners; and so on. In almost every case, the previous system of vocational education was already modular, and based on competences which were developed in the name of industry. In each case, there is no

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[1] Outside of university systems, where assessments are usually not centrally set.

record of an examination of *why* the original model failed. It seems to have been assumed that either the standards were formulated in the wrong way, or that industry was not involved enough, so that solving these two things would ensure that this new version would succeed. So, 'embedded' knowledge is renamed 'underpinning' knowledge, range statements (which attempt to define the context in which the learning outcomes or competences will be evaluated) are developed, and changed; the format of assessment criteria is changed. The Mexican labour competences, for example, were reiterated in many different ways, as each proved to be differently interpreted by key stakeholders.

Vocational education focus

Outcomes-based qualifications frameworks seem mainly to affect vocational education and training. In the poorer countries included in our study, those classified as middle and low incomes, qualifications frameworks have mainly been focused on vocational education. This is the most marginalized and low status sector of education systems, particularly in Anglophone countries. And in some cases, this type of reform has taken place only in the most marginalized section of the vocational education system—for low-level workplace-based training, or even, in some instances, not for training at all, but simply to recognize the competences workers already demonstrate in the workplace. In most instances, it is implemented in response to what is diagnosed as a problem with the irrelevance of education and training to the needs of the labour market. Even where the framework was ostensibly comprehensive, such as, for example, in Malaysia, Mauritius, and South Africa, the outcomes-based approach seems to have had the greatest impact in the vocational sector. In South Africa the rest of the education and training system largely ignored the qualifications framework, and in Mauritius, it was only in the vocational sector where the qualifications framework was introduced as part of developing new outcomes-based qualifications. In Malaysia, while the framework as a whole was more focused on higher education, there was a competence-based framework of qualifications for low-level workplace-based qualifications. In this sector, mainly low levels of qualifications were awarded, and they provided limited opportunity to move up the education and training system. In Chile and Mexico, the frameworks were initially envisaged as frameworks for qualifications in vocational education and training as well as in workplace-based training, but in both they were only really used in latter, and there they were used mainly for the assessment of prior learning. Providers of vocational education did not accept or use the standards. In both countries, the competence standards developed described mainly low levels of competence in the workplace.

None of this was very different from the early-starter rich countries which began the trend for qualifications frameworks. Although New Zealand attempted a comprehensive unit standards-based model, in the United Kingdom (except for Scotland), as well as in Australia, the competence-/ outcomes-based qualification model was targeted at vocational education[2]. It makes sense for vocational education to be the focus of these models, firstly, because it fits well with the claims made about outcomes-based qualifications' ability to improve education/ labour market relationships, and secondly, because vocational education programmes have always contained some notion of being 'competent' to do a particular job. It is also the case that in many countries vocational education does not have strong and organized voices speaking on its behalf, perhaps making it easier for policy makers to fiddle with it.

Frameworks in most countries are positioned as contributing to solving problems of increased unemployment, skills shortages, and perceived failures in the education and

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[2] This trend may have changed in more recent qualifications frameworks in richer countries, as higher education has been included in many since the adoption of the European Qualifications Framework.

training system. It seems a strange irony that it is the weakest parts of most educational systems that are being called on to solve the problems of the economy through a reform which places no emphasis on supporting provision, perhaps suggesting the largely rhetorical nature of such reform initiatives.

Recognition of prior learning

One of the strongest and most consistently made claims about qualifications frameworks, as well as outcomes- and competence-based qualifications, is that they provide a basis for recognizing, validating, and certifying learning that has happened outside of the formal education system. This is variously known as recognition of prior learning, accreditation of prior experiential learning, and by other similar terms. It is thought to be helpful for individuals, because, it is hoped, having certificates will assist them to enter education programmes, get jobs, or get a promotion.

There is little evidence that learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks help people to gain qualifications on the basis of prior learning, and even less evidence that the qualifications thus obtained lead to further learning, jobs, or promotion. In South Africa, for example, the Qualification Authority's research in 2005 found that the South African qualifications framework had had "...minimal positive impact or a mix of positive and negative impact" with regard to portability of full qualifications (SAQA 2005, p. 45), and that the framework had also not facilitated credit accumulation and transfer (SAQA 2006). A more recent report produced for the OECD found that recognition of prior learning was not widely implemented, and had taken place only in small pockets of the education system (Blom, Parker, and Keevy 2007). One of the few examples of 'success' was found in our case study on Chile, which suggested that awards recognizing existing competences had improved workers' self-esteem. However, there was no evidence that they had led to workers gaining promotion or getting better jobs. They had simply received certificates which did nothing more than prove that they could do what they were already doing. In no county was there any clear evidence that workers who were given certificates benefited from them in terms of promotion, salary, or job security.

A particularly poignant story comes from Botswana, where the Botswana Training Authority developed unit standards for traditional dancers in the Kalahari. This project was funded by the government, and encountered many problems, such as the fact that the unit standards were in English, which none of the traditional dancers could speak. At great expense, the unit standard was translated into Setswana, and experts assessed dancers against the learning outcomes. Dancers were awarded certificates in a ceremonial and celebratory event. However, although policy makers were convinced that providing individuals with certificates for their existing skills would help them, these traditional dancers discovered that the certificates did nothing other than certify that they could do something that they were already doing. After the initial excitement had died down, some of the dancers approached the authorities to ask what they could do with their certificates. They were told that they could practice as traditional dancers—which is what they were doing before. There were no increased educational or work opportunities for them on the basis of this certificate. As Christopher Winch (2011, p. 96) puts it, "the award of a qualification for an existing workplace ability does not create a new skill but merely assigns a name to the skill an individual already possesses".

While the recognition of prior learning has particular appeal to policy makers and governments in developing countries, as it seems to hold out an alluring possibility of increasing qualification levels relatively cheaply, it is unlikely to be successful on a large scale. One reason for this is the prevalence of informal labour markets: while skills and

knowledge may be useful in informal labour markets, it is less likely that *qualifications* will be required than more organized and regulated labour markets. Another reason recognition of prior learning is not a policy solution for poor countries is generally low educational levels. While workers may have acquired practical skills at work, lack of formal education will often remain a barrier to progress in workplaces where, say, literacy is necessary. Poor education is the real problem to be solved, and putting resources into awarding qualifications and certificates of dubious labour market value may well divert resources away from building education systems and ensuring access to them. Furthermore, this trend towards certification often ignores other barriers to education and training: over-emphasizing qualification barriers, it under-emphasizes the extent to which user-fees, the inability to take time off work, as well as other financial factors, prevent individuals from accessing education.

4. A few possible lessons

- NQF policy proposals invariably consist of general design statements followed by claims as to what an NQF or NVQF will achieve. In other words, they tell the reader what a qualification framework is and what it is assumed it will achieve when implemented. What they do not address is the specific problems of the existing system and how developing an NQF or NVQF might help to overcome them. Instead, where frameworks are seen as desirable, policy makers should start by considering what qualifications can do, not all the problems in their system which they wish could be solved. Starting with a framework of outcomes and levels and then trying to make them 'proxies' for skills is to invert the way that the most successful qualification systems have been developed.

- A key distinction in frameworks that have been implemented is between those which primarily describe existing systems, and frameworks that are intended to replace existing qualifications and so introduce substantial changes to education systems. In particular, in poor countries the latter approach has meant that governments or development agencies seem to presume that provision will somehow follow the creation of frameworks, outcome statements, and standards. When there is very little provision, the framework relates to very little. It follows that a key focus should be on building provision. The most successful frameworks try to better describe how their systems work, as opposed to overhauling their systems. They are developed to some extent organically and incrementally, with limited goals, bringing people along. A framework might seem like a good starting point—like a road map, pointing the way for the creation of provision. But creating such a framework can absorb a lot of resources, which are better spent on provision, particularly in contexts where there is little educational provision. Outcomes-led qualifications frameworks give the impression that a problem is being solved when it is not. They thus represent a significant waste of time and money, both in terms of policy development, and in terms of the enormous bureaucratic burdens they impose on underfunded and overworked educational institutions. It is more useful for poorer countries, or countries with weaker education and training systems, to concentrate on building or supporting institutions that can provide education and training. Similarly, poorer or weaker states should be cautious when assuming that adopting regulatory models which rely on contracts and accountability mechanisms will solve the problems that they have had in delivering education and training. Where provision does not exist in the first place, or where it is weak or uneven, and where an outcomes-led qualifications framework is introduced to drive educational reform, the *best* such a framework can do is reflect the (weak or non-existent) provision that is already there

in the system. But it can have a worse effect, which is to damage the already weak educational provision.

- Learning is not as undifferentiated as a single definition of qualifications covering all kinds of skill and knowledge tends to assume. Rigid boundaries between qualifications undoubtedly do act as barriers to all kinds of mobility. But these boundaries also reflect the process of specialization and at least in part represent tried and tested methods of pacing, sequencing, selecting and acquiring knowledge. In other words, boundaries are not only barriers; they also play a role in supporting the acquisition of specialist knowledge and skills. Qualification routes need to be conceptually coherent if learners are to progress to higher levels of skill and knowledge; this limits their portability in the short term. At the same time, where possible, barriers between different qualifications should be minimized to provide opportunities for learners to move between different qualifications as occupational labour markets become less insulated from each other, and as qualification inflation obliges more and more learners to get higher and higher qualifications. But if policy makers focus on mobility between qualifications at the expense of the coherence of learning pathways, the opportunities for progression and the acquisition of knowledge can be sacrificed. Overcoming barriers between vocational and higher level qualifications involves more than bringing them into a single qualifications framework. It involves changes in the TVET curriculum and the training of TVET teachers and enhancing their knowledge base.

- Qualifications frameworks originally emerged in countries with weak education/labour market relationships. It seems more likely that they are a symptom of this problem than a solution to it. Governments need to consider all the factors which affect education and training, and particularly vocational and occupational education, and focus on the non-educational areas as well, if they wish to improve vocational and occupational education. This includes industrial policy, social welfare, and labour market regulation.

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