The experiences of NQFs on QA regimes

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Presentation to INQAAHE Members Forum

15 May 2008, Buenos Aires

Why NQFs?

- Why are national and regional qualifications frameworks spreading so fast?
  - The 1980s Anglophone movement towards integration of education and training to meet ‘new’ requirements of labour markets (VET)
  - The Thatcherite demand for ‘accountability’ to the state and ‘relevance’ to the economy - steering/commodifying/privatising HE
  - Mobility of cognitive capital and the increasing fungibility of knowledge and skills in the market-place

Trust

- An erosion of trust pervades all higher education. At the same time, beliefs about its importance have grown. Human capital theory has become orthodoxy and higher education is under intense scrutiny: the appropriateness of its offerings, together with its quality and effectiveness, is no longer taken-for-granted. **Verification of the public goods of higher education is seen to require regulation.**

Scope and purposes of NQFs

- Distinction between two archetypes of NQFs that distinguish between frameworks that describe and coordinate ***'what is'*** and frameworks that prescribe ***'what ought to be'.***
- ***IS: Developed Countries: Descriptive and Communicative***
- ***OUGHT: Developing Countries: Prescriptive and Transformative***

‘Is’ and ‘Ought’

- Descriptive frameworks develop incrementally towards ‘common standards’.
- Prescriptive frameworks tend towards a radical rupturing with the past and are intended to transform education and training systems

Steering and Articulation

- Both descriptive and prescriptive NQFs are being used to ‘steer’ E&T systems and to improve ‘articulation’
- Steering
  - Determination of ‘standards’
  - Accreditation of providers and their programmes
  - Public funding of providers and their programmes
  - Evaluation of providers and their prorgammes
- Articulation
  - between E&T and
    - Learners
    - Labour market
    - State
  - Between different providers and different sub-systems of E&T

Comparability

- Global pressures are pushing qualifications to be ‘comparable’ across institutional and national boundaries, and to become a far more reliable ‘currency’
- Credit Accumulation and Transfer (across institutional and national boundaries)
- Recognition of Prior Learning (formal, informal and experiential)

Central role of standards in NQFS

- An assumption driving NQFs is the possibility of identifying, recognising and evaluating ‘something’ that can be compared and transferred across ‘boundaries’
- Increasingly ‘standards’ are being used as a means to measure the ‘something’
- NQFs are intended to enable ‘boundary crossings’

What is a ‘standard’?

- The term ‘standards’ is used to:
  - denote a level of achievement in the general sense of an overall standard (i.e. “high standards are maintained”);
  - describe performance indicators of competencies linked to a hierarchy of levels.
- Standards are contingent on NQFs
- Two main approaches to standards setting – descriptions of:
  - Outcomes/Competencies
  - Knowledge fields/disciplines/knowledge grammars

Common sense

- HEIs ‘should’ function within regulatory frameworks defined by specified standards
- “Traditional models and methods of expressing qualification structures are giving way to systems based on explicit reference points using learning outcomes and competencies, levels and level indicators, subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors” (EHEA, 2005: 22).

A challenge

- At the macro-systemic framework level, an important question is: How to develop a scheme for the comparability and quality of HE offerings without interfering with national and institutional autonomy? How do systems respect diversity in the face of homogenizing forces?

Fallacies of Genericism

- The EHEA Framework maintains that at institutional context, generic level descriptors and outcome statements will assist those people involved with the processes of:
  - Curriculum design and development;
  - Programme review and evaluation;
  - Quality management;
  - Benchmarking of qualifications.
- How generic level descriptors will play an ‘assistance’ role is left unclear. The tension between a laissez faire descriptive approach and a prescriptive approach is apparent.

Tension between disciplinary differentiation and transferability

- For higher education, an important challenge is that of how to retain what is distinctive about disciplines and their discourses in particular contexts and yet avoid their becoming so insulated that they exclude most people
- The very generality necessary to create comparability is so broad that it ceases to serve as meaningful basis for standards generation and articulation
- Both outcome statements and knowledge statements are too generic to be useful

Impossibility of outcome/knowledge statement standards

- Trying to prescribe quality up front through ever increasing levels of specification and complexity is a doomed enterprise, which assumes that outcome or knowledge statements are transparent descriptions of ‘competence’ or knowledge fields
- A design down approach, which begins with outcome or knowledge statements, is oriented away from actual curriculum, pedagogic and assessment practices towards policy and design criteria. Approval of qualifications becomes a matter of compliance with technical regulations rather than a fit-for purpose practice oriented approach.
- Distinction between descriptive statements and actual practices

Articulating Artefacts

- NQFs are intended to have a major impact on the definition and *modus operandi* of QA
- They are unlikely to succeed given the impossibility of using descriptive statements as a ‘common currency’
- They could be a useful ‘communications platform’ to encourage comparability, harmonisation and transferability
- They will be highly contested articulating artefacts

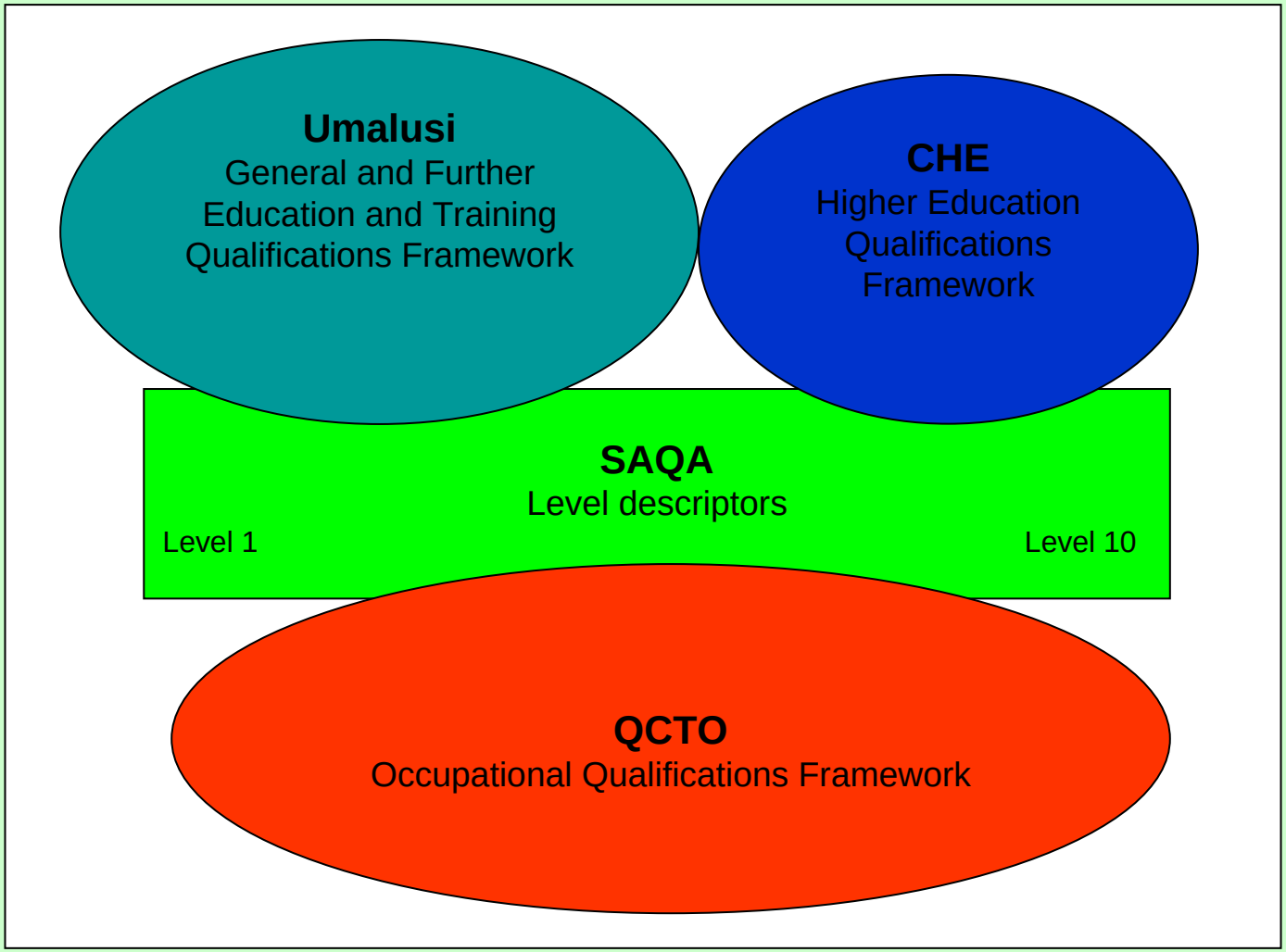
Architectonics

- NQFs and standards depend on an underpinning classificatory system for different forms of knowledge or ouctomes
- Agreements on classifications are grounded in communities of expert practice/peers
- Standards ought to be janus-faced:
  - Epistemological – forms of knowledge
  - Ontological – inscriptions of practices in institutional ecologies

Ecologies and Communities

- Institutional ecologies and communities of practice are far stronger determinants of Quality than NQFs and standards
- NQFs and standards can play a modest descriptive and communicative function within an array of systemic and institutional quality development and assurance initiatives

South Africa: Levels and Sub-Frameworks



HEQF Nested Model

LEVEL (level descriptor) e.g. *Level 7*

QUALIFICATION TYPE (qualification descriptor) e.g. Bachelor's Degree

DESIGNATED VARIANT (designator) e.g. Bachelor *of Science*

QUALIFICATION SPECIALISATION (qualifier)
e.g. Bachelor of Science *in Geology*

NQF Level	Qualification Type
10	Doctoral Degree
9	Master’s Degree
8	Bachelor Honours Professional Bachelors Postgraduate Diploma
7	Bachelor’s Degree Advanced Diploma
6	Diploma Advanced Certificate
5	Higher Certificate