CHAPTER THREE: SECOND CYCLE CONTEXTUALISATION

Introduction

This chapter sets out the context for the second cycle of the longitudinal NQF Impact Study. In the research design, the contextualisation of a particular cycle of the NQF Impact Study is integral to the findings. This is because it is expected that the focus of NQF implementation may shift. During the first phase of NQF implementation, the focus was largely on policy conceptualization and development. It is likely that subsequent phases will increasingly focus on policy implementation and practice. This chapter is designed to assist readers in the interpretation of the findings of the study.

Cycle 2 of the NQF Impact Study, *Establishing a baseline against which to measure progress*, reflects the first measurement of the impact of the NQF on the South African education and training system since its implementation. The findings of Cycle 2 are the baseline against which future measurements will be made.

Cycle 2 was initiated in September 2004, immediately after the conclusion of the pilot phase of the study. The context within which the second cycle of the study has taken place, is therefore largely similar to Cycle 1. For this reason, Chapter three of the first cycle report, as well as Annexure 2, which deals with the Contextualisation Literature Review of that report, are included as an annexure to the Cycle 2 Report. In addition, new and emerging issues influencing NQF implementation are discussed in this chapter.

This chapter covers:

- The origins and development of the South African National Qualifications Framework
- Reviewing the NQF - including discussion of an integrated framework, currently influential epistemologies and governance of the NQF
- An emerging typology of national qualification frameworks internationally
- A new NQF landscape

Origins and development of the South African NQF

It is now common knowledge that the South African National Qualifications Framework originated from the strong need of the post-1994 African National Congress (ANC) government to reform a disparate and unequal education and training system. New policy-makers attempted to put in place a system that would facilitate access, mobility and recognition of learning, particularly for those individuals who had been prevented from accessing formal education and training under the previous regime.

When the new ANC government came to power in 1994, in South Africa a model, that incorporates every sector and level of education and training, was proposed. All stakeholders, including providers of education and training, employers, organised labour and other interested parties were therefore involved in the conceptualisation of the South African NQF.

In the Cycle 1 report (SAQA, 2004:22), it is acknowledged that

> The [South African] NQF is a distinctly South African phenomenon that has been developed in a unique political and historical context. The concepts and organising principles were drawn from similar developments in Scotland, England, New Zealand and Australia in the mid to late 1980s. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise the essentially South African nature of the NQF and its roots in opposition to apartheid. While the methodology of NQF construction drew on international experience (that South Africa was both a contributor to and a beneficiary of), the aims and purposes of the NQF in South Africa were broader and more ambitious than in any other country. This was true in two senses. First, the NQF was given a central role in the transformation agenda. Second, South Africa sought to build a fully fledged national qualifications framework more or less from scratch.

The nature and purpose of the South African NQF therefore, although drawing technically from developments in other countries, is to completely transform the disparate education and training system that existed before 1994. It would therefore be fair to say that (SAQA, 2004:24):

> …although the South African NQF drew technically on developments in other countries (and in turn contributed to international developments), its political and social inspiration lay in the democratic struggle against apartheid and the goal of transformation. No other NQF has had to bear such a weight of expectation.

Qualifications frameworks and their associated quality assurance processes are increasingly attracting attention from the international education and training fraternity as a new approach to education systems. However, it is only the South African NQF that places such emphasis on 'addressing issues of social justice' (Tuck, Hart and Keevy, 2004:7). Jansen (2004:87) points out '[t]here are few policy initiatives which have consciously dubbed its major reform as "a social construct" with all the risks entailed in such an open-ended conception of the NQF'. In addition, the 'moral imperatives' of the first post-apartheid government resulted in a proposal for reform that was, according to Jansen (2004:88) meant to

> …address "employment opportunities" as well as "economic development" as well as "career paths" and of course "redress past unfair discrimination". I know of no policy in the world that can address all of these things in the ways envisaged, let alone at the same time.

Nevertheless, it is evident that it is the 'moral imperative', which has sustained the development of the NQF in the first phase of implementation. However, the NQF has been under review for the last four years and it now seems appropriate to take stock of where we are, in order to take the process forward in a meaningful and pragmatic way.

Reviewing the NQF

Three formal reviews of the South African NQF have been completed and published. These culminated in the following reports:

- The Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (2002)
- The European Union Mid-term Review (2002)
- An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework System. Consultative Document (2003)

In addition, the Higher Education Qualifications Framework Draft for Discussion (2004) was made available for public comment in July 2004.

The section dealing with 'A New NQF Landscape' offers an analysis of the recommendations of the Study Team responsible for the first report, the Task Team responsible for the third report, and the draft HEQF policy. The present section deals with the most prominent conceptual debates emerging from the reports.

An integrated framework

…to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements

The first of the five objectives of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is to 'create an integrated national framework for learning achievements'. The Study Team (Department of Education (DoE) and Department of Labour (DoL), 2002:65) noted that this objective is 'an obvious outcome of the NQF, for which … SAQA in collaboration with its partners has legal responsibility', but that 'there is general concern that the integration of education and training has not been achieved' (p.22). The notion of an 'integrated framework' was central to the idea of the South African NQF as it was envisaged that such a framework could overcome the 'traditional division between different types of qualifications, and between education and training' (Tikly and Motala, 1994, in Chisholm *et al,* 2003:122).

'An integrated framework' has been one of most intensely contested ideals of NQFs internationally. The New Zealand Qualifications Framework is a case in point. One reason for the contestation, according to the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) is that so many interpretations of the idea abound. The Study Team also noted the political differences between the two Departments responsible for education and training in South Africa, stating that the Departments:

> …have made no attempt to analyse in further detail how the integrated approach to education and training should be operationalised, especially in areas where the departments do not see eye to eye (*Ibid*, 67).

While these contestations are not unique to the South African NQF, and while it is acknowledged that the Departments have been trying to develop a common approach, the result is that NQF stakeholders had to engage with the concept of 'integration' in the absence of clear direction. In the context of international developments of NQFs, the principles of 'coherence, access and portability' are the main drivers for the establishment of qualification frameworks. Tuck (*et al*, 2004:3) says that where the establishment of an NQF in South Africa was strongly linked to issues of social justice, as well as improved systemic coherence, other NQFs are being developed to improve access and progression within qualifications systems and to establish standards for comparability and benchmarking in the interests of systemic coherence.

As recently as in August 2004, the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission, articulated the same orientation for a proposed European Qualifications Framework. Such a framework would provide the 'means [to structure] sector activity so that it becomes coherent and integrated with work in other sectors' (European Commission, 2004:3).

Several commentators (for example Mehl, 2004 and Jansen, 2004) have suggested that integration in South Africa could have been achieved through a single Ministry for Education and Training as mooted in the pre-NQF days. Jansen (2004:52) notes that 'the work of SAQA and the ambitions of the NQF were always going to be constrained by a simple fact: and that is that the early promise of a single ministry of education and labour was not to materialise'. He adds that there has not been sufficient acknowledgement of 'the massive consequences of bureaucratic and political divisions between education and labour for the operations and goals of the National Qualifications Framework'.

Political differences in no small measure contribute to implementation problems of NQFs. Such tensions seem to inhibit the formation of 'communities of trust' (Young, 2003:18) where shared experience and usage can be built through practice. Instead political differences often seem to stand proxy for other deeply rooted philosophies about the very nature and purpose of learning and are seen to be an obstacle to finding innovative ways in which integration is operationalised (Heyns and Needham, 2004).

An important reason for the slow progress in the achievement of the objective to achieve an 'integrated framework' may be that there does not seem to be a common understanding of what we mean by an 'integrated approach'. Currently, the understanding of 'integration' seems to emerge at a number of different levels:

- The *macro* understanding, namely that education and training should be integrated. As noted above, it seems as if the contestations evident between the two sponsoring departments (DoE and DoL) are the result of the decision not to have a single Ministry of Education and Labour in the post-1994 government. This resulted in what Badat (2002:20) called the lack of 'a shared language, understanding and agreement around areas of initiative and cooperation'
- The *meso* understanding, referring to epistemological differences between the nature and purposes of education and training respectively. Young (2003:10) says that 'the power of different types of learning is a reality that any NQF has to start from. If it does not it will be a barrier to progression [and] not a way of overcoming barriers'.
- The *micro* understanding, namely in terms of the inclusion of theory and practice in qualifications, curricula and learning programmes; and 'learning in the “context of application” (Gibbons, in Kraak, 2000:40). This last understanding, i.e. at the 'micro' level, in particular, seems to have much support across the education and training spectrum (Heyns and Needham, 2004). This understanding is reflected in
  - The integration of theory and practice in learning programmes
  - Partnerships between education and training providers and workplaces
  - The application of theory in authentic situations, i.e. in simulated and/or real scenarios

This may be where the greatest promise for the development of an integrated approach to education and training lies - in what is emerging from the 'more persuasive logic locked up in daily practice' (Jansen, 2004:90).

…a continuum of learning

Isaacs (in DoE & DoL, 2002:67) noted that 'for some, [an integrated framework] is actually an integrated system. For others, it is two systems running side by side and if you occasionally look over the fence dividing the two, that's the integrated approach'. However, the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002:72) strongly supported the notion that an integrated framework should entail 'a single framework that includes all qualifications, and that academic and vocational qualifications represent *a continuum* of education and training, not a division between them' (emphasis added).

There is support for an integrated framework. According to the *Consultative Document* (DoE & DoL, 2003:1) an integrated framework is 'a reference point for all new developments in our national learning system', but there is also critique. A respondent to Cycle 1 of the NQF Impact Study argued that 'advocates of integration of education and training really ignore the fundamental difference [in their] epistemological basis'.

These debates are most pronounced in the discussions about unit-standard based and non-unit standard based (or 'whole') qualifications and the appropriateness of such qualifications within different components of the system, and are most marked in the attempts to develop common level descriptors.

In the *Consultative Document* (DoE & DoL, 2003:13) for example, the statement is made that the Departments will stop '[attempting] to bridge the conceptual divide with level descriptor statements of broader and broader generality' and therefore propose 'fit-for-purposes level descriptors for each learning mode'. Ensor (2003:325) agrees and maintains that the idea of an integrated framework 'is at odds with formal education and training, which rests upon a different social base and generates different knowledge structures. This makes common membership within a single qualifications framework of the South African type ultimately unworkable'.

The problem of establishing equivalence and parity of esteem between different components of the education and training system is by no means unique to the South African NQF. Young (2004) argues that this is because there is a tension between 'the principles of similarity and of difference'. He notes that it was not until the first NQFs that there has been an attempt 'to bring together academic and vocational qualifications, school and university qualifications or the different types of professional and vocational qualifications'. In other words, in the past, qualifications were defined in terms of their differences, and there was no attempt to find 'similarities' in terms of the level and depth of learning and in the key or core skills that are common to the different contexts of learning. This resulted in problems of progression, transferability and portability. In South Africa, the NQF promised to be 'a radical credit accumulation and transfer system, promised to accredit workers for accumulated proficiency and undertook to open up access to education and training routes that had previously been closed to them' (Ensor, 2003:327). 'Equivalence' therefore took on a much more important meaning than anywhere else in the world. Mehl (2004:22) makes the point that:

> The way in which society recognises, rewards and measures learning achievement is through qualifications. It is society that provides the ultimate validation of qualifications and accords respect to the bearer. Society awards status and also opportunities and privilege.

In a society where 'difference', according to Young's principle discussed above, equated to lack of opportunity and privilege, it seems much more important to find ways whereby social barriers to advancement are eroded and replaced with a more equitable approach.

These different views of education and training are still, at this point of the implementation of the South African NQF, considered a stumbling block in the achievement of a seamless, integrated framework. Ensor (2003:341) states that…

> [f]ormal education and the NQF thus rest on two fundamentally different assumptions about knowledge, knowing and identity. Formal education and training aim to specialise academic and or professional identities through induction to largely disciplinary-based forms of knowledge, whereas the NQF wishes to background knowledge and emphasise a generic capacity to learn.

From very early on the debates on the NQF were characterised by these opposing epistemologies: discipline-based (or institution-based) learning and workplace-based learning. The HSRC (1995:3) summarised this crucial debate as follows:

> Training-minded' participants were concerned about the inclusion of theoretical or academic [competence] and felt that competence might 'not reflect sufficiently' the measurable demonstration of performance standards in explicit behavioural terms…'Education-minded' participants were concerned about whose standards would be used to determine competence and didn't want education to 'become the handmaiden of the economy'.

The development of the South African NQF in particular, and NQFs in general, therefore seemed to coincide with changes in the very nature of learning and knowledge production throughout the world. NQFs both contributed to and were shaped by these changes. Kraak (1999:4), argues that the conceptualisation and development of the NQF in South Africa coincided with the emergence of a mode of knowledge production which increasingly favours 'problem-solving' (or Mode 2) knowledge:

> A vibrant debate has begun in the international literature on knowledge production centred on the premise that fundamental changes are occurring in the mode of production of new knowledge (1999:1).

Young (2003:10) maintains that

> …parity of esteem is not a reality in any country, partly as a result of continuing social inequalities and the unequal distribution of wealth and partly because there are real differences between types of learning.

However, despite these differences, the emerging system seems to be evolving a structure that provides a space where education and training are not considered to be opposite, but a 'continuum of learning' (Study Team). At a colloquium hosted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for example, the participants acknowledged that if

> …education and business were not posited as opposites and if both parties could transcend “the vocabulary of condemnation” it would be possible to construct sound relationships between the partners in education and training (CHE, 2002:17).

Differences continue to hold sway between those who maintain the ideal of a fully integrated system, those who believe that there are significant differences between modes of learning that make even the loosest form of integration a remote possibility, and those who recognise these differences but argue that they represent points on a continuum.

NQF governance and reviews

As we have seen, SAQA and the NQF have been subject to several reviews in the relatively short eight-year period of NQF implementation in South Africa.

The first noteworthy point is that two of the reviews were initiated (and responded to), by the political heads of the two sponsoring departments. This is significant as it points to South Africa's belief in 'the redemptive power of policy' (Jansen, 2004:88) and to the extent that policy is a symbol of a break from the past (Jansen, 2001). However, a political agenda, according to Young (2003:226) is not unique to South Africa. He maintains that 'qualifications reforms have less to do with improving the quality of education and more that a NQF provides a government with an instrument for making educational institutions more accountable; [and] quantitative measures for comparing different national systems'.

However, the political positioning is particularly marked in South Africa and has had a major impact on the extent to which the NQF has become embedded in education and training.

In a meta-evaluation undertaken on the two reviews, Jansen (2004:52) maintains that 'it is clear that the implementation dilemmas facing SAQA, as the body tasked to oversee the development and implementation of the NQF… have their roots in unresolved political divisions, bureaucratic inertia and [the lack of] financial commitments on the part of its key sponsor-government'.

Other commentators have observed these difficulties and seem to be equally affected: in a strong response to the recently published draft Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) discussion document (DoE, 2004), the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), voiced their frustration with the lack of direction from the two departments (2004:1):

> NAPTOSA finds it perplexing and frustrating that the tensions between the Departments of Education and Labour are such that there is a very real danger that the rift will result in "territorial" imperatives and protection of sectoral interests (along the DoE:DoL/ education:training/ academic:vocational divide) at the cost of integration across education and training and across formal: non-formal education and training opportunities…It would seem that while pace-setters in Europe are embarking on a process of developing…integrated qualifications framework[s], South Africa (because of inter-departmental differences and absence of a political will to drive the process) is preparing to make a 180 [degree] turn and head back in the direction from where we emerged in 1994!

Others commentators agree, for example:

> Political contestation should now be put aside and we should honestly engage with ways in which [an integrated framework] can become a reality to ensure the development of an integrated NQF as the country moves to the notion of a "Ministry of Learning" (Mehl, 2004) in principle, if not in practice (Heyns & Needham, 2004:45)

The political contestations between the two sponsoring departments is therefore perceived as a major stumbling block for engagement with a 'complex adaptive systems such as education and training' (Mehl, 2004:21). Jansen, (2004) is much more direct in his assessment of the apparent lack of political will displayed by the departments which is 'the result of naked contestations by people/departments who are (or should be) on the same side' (NAPTOSA 2003:71).

In a number of questions posed on the occasion of the launch of the Cycle 1 Report, Jansen (2004:91) highlights some of the issues impacting on the implementation of the NQF, namely:

> How do you know whether government (or another lead agency) is serious about a particular *change proposal or policy reform*?
> What kinds of *resources* have been dedicated to enable change to happen?
> What kinds of *plans* have been put in place to make change happen? Are the plans feasible, and do they articulate a clear and persuasive logic of implementation?
> What kinds of *timeframes* have been stipulated against which reasonable progress can be measured? Are the timeframes realistic?
> What kinds of *contexts* have been described, in all their variations, as the receptive sites within this change has to happen? Is there sufficient capacity within these contexts to make sense of, engage and implement the proposed changes?
> What kinds of *support* for the change have been built among practitioners, policymakers and planners to ensure smooth implementation?
> What kinds of *key personnel* have been identified to lead the change process? That is, is there sufficient expertise and capacity at the center to drive the change process?
> What kinds of *obstacles and impediments* to change have been anticipated, and how will these concerns be addressed in the implementation process?
> What kinds of concrete *benefits* flow from the change plan? In other words, why should (would) practitioners buy into the change plan to begin with?
> What kinds of *consequences* result from non-implementation? Who is held accountable, and under what conditions, for implementation failure?
> What kinds of *evidence* exist that this change proposal can make a positive difference in practice? In other words, is the plan credible on the ground?

Seen in this light, the implications may very well be that the 'lead agency' does not seem to be serious about 'a particular *change proposal or policy reform*' (Jansen, 2004:91). In the first review of the NQF undertaken by the Study Team (DoE, 2002:116) the notion of leadership of the NQF project was strongly underlined. The Study Team recommended that the NQF Strategic Partnership should be:

> …established in law, to comprise the senior executives of the Department of Education, the Department of Labour and SAQA, to ensure clear strategic leadership of NQF implementation, to approve and monitor the National Plan on NQF implementation, and to resolve differences

While this recommendation was broadly accepted in the subsequent response to the *Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework*, the departments proposed instead:

> …the continuation of the DoE/DoL task team [responsible for the report *An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework System. Consultative Document*] as the nucleus of the inter-departmental NQF Strategic Team, to
>
> - Be a permanent point of liaison between SAQA and the two departments
> - Develop a broad national plan for the implementation of the NQF, to be updated annually in consultation with SAQA and formulated as an annual remit by the Ministers to SAQA
> - Promote the alignment of NQF implementation with the government's HRD strategy
> - Advise Ministers on SAQA's annual business plan and budget
> - Consult regularly with the National Treasury on the funding of NQF implementation.

Further, linked to the leadership issue, the lack of coherence in terms of the legislation that governs education and training in South Africa seems to be exacerbating the difficulties associated with the leadership of the NQF. In a report developed for SAQA dealing with the audit of the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) in 2004, the independent auditors noted the lack of legislative coherence as an inhibitor to the development of an efficient quality assurance system. They noted that the 'political posturing' (SAQA, 2005:10) between the departments is having a detrimental affect on the system, for example:

> The roles of SAQA, the band ETQAs, the SETAs and the professional bodies in terms of a revised NQF cannot wait any longer for clarification. This single issue alone is responsible for much of the confusion and instability in the system. In addition much of the administrative overlaps and gaps that exist in the system can also be attributed to this systemic issue….The posturing and political games that are being played at both ETQA managerial and state level with regards to territory have affected the constitutional rights of learners and providers on the ground and can no longer be tolerated. It appears as if the voices of persons whom this system was supposed to enable have been disabled by the very organisations that were entrusted with this mandate.

The auditors (SAQA, 2005) also noted that the failure of some ETQAs to achieve favourable audit reports was 'due to systemic issues, influenced in part by the fact that the ETQA(s) [have] to address more than one set of legislation.' In the case of SETA ETQAs for example, 'there has been considerable pressure from the Department of Labour (DoL) on the SETAs to perform in terms of the DoL criteria, [and] there were definitely instances where the ETQA suffered a lack of attention and resources as a result'.

It therefore seems that while the South African NQF is still considered completely central to the reconstruction of a post-apartheid society and still enjoys widespread support in its eighth year of implementation, the issues of leadership of the NQF has not yet been resolved. In addition, the fact that different sectors are governed by different sets of legislation, not necessarily aligned to the first education act promulgated after the ANC took power, namely the SAQA Act (58 of 1995), is creating confusion and contestation about the 'supremacy' of the acts promulgated for each sector.

In Table 4 the shifts in the thinking about the NQF and the governance of the project are illustrated:

Current conceptual model	Study team report 2002	Consultative document 2003	Draft Higher Education Qualifications Framework 2004
One implementing agency (SAQA) with executive powers reporting to two ministers (Education and Labour)	Strategic partnership of implementing agency (SAQA) with the two departments (Education and Labour)	Departments of Education and Labour have a strategic role with one overseeing body (SAQA) and three implementing agencies (HI ED QC; TOP QC; GENFET QC)	Minister of Education responsible for policy One implementing agency providing intellectual and strategic leadership (SAQA) One implementing agency responsible for standard generation and quality assurance (CHE-HEQC)

Table 4: Shifts in thinking about the governance of the NQF

In the current legislative framework, the South African Qualifications Authority has executive powers over the establishment and monitoring of the quality assurance and standard-setting apparatus of the system. The Study Team in their review of the implementation of the NQF (DoE/DoL, 2002) recommended that SAQA and the two sponsoring departments take joint responsibility for the implementation agenda through a 'strategic partnership'. In the response to the review, however, the Departments recommended instead that they would take on the strategic and executive roles, that SAQA retains an oversight role and that three implementing agencies (HI-ED QC, TOP QC and GENFET QC) take charge of the operationalisation of the system (DoE/DoL, 2003). In yet another shift regarding the leadership of the NQF,the draft Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) discussion document (2004) proposed that the Minister of Education have the executive responsibility, that SAQA take responsibility for intellectual and strategic leadership and that the executive responsibility for quality assurance and standard-setting move to the CHE-HEQC.

In conclusion: the ongoing reviews of the NQF 'is best understood as part of a series of policy reviews undertaken by the second post-1994 Minister of Education' but cannot simply be seen as 'part of the normal cycle of administrative review associated with government bureaucracies throughout the world' (Jansen, 2004:49). It also seems evident that the reviews did not succeed in bringing to a close the main areas of contestation. Nevertheless, it did succeed in highlighting some key issues that need to be resolved in order for NQF implementation to be taken forward meaningfully.

The next section deals with some of the other dimensions of NQFs, which has largely been ignored in the reviews, and is included to throw some light on future NQF development.

Towards a typology of National Qualification Frameworks

A typology of national qualifications frameworks is emerging through international debate on the usefulness and implementation of such frameworks. It is included in this chapter as a conceptual tool that may shed some light on the debates on the South African NQF.

At one time, according to Tuck, Hart and Keevy (2004:6) the term 'NQF' was closely associated with Anglophone countries such as Scotland, New Zealand and Australia, but increasingly many other countries are exploring and developing qualifications frameworks. Some member states of the European Union (EU), the Accession countries, some former Soviet Republics and many of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, such as Mauritius, Namibia, Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia and the Seychelles, are at various stages of NQF development and implementation.

The proposed (and perceived) benefits (cf. Tuck *et al*, 2004) of national qualifications frameworks are immensely appealing, to the extent that the international community is now talking about first generation NQFs (of which the South African NQF is considered one despite the limited time for implementation) and emerging, second generation NQFs (also see 'Origins and development of the South African NQF').

NQFs translate these perceived benefits in different ways. The characteristics of NQFs according to Raffe (2003) provide some clues to the possible models for (and problems with) implementation. He points out that NQFs can be understood in terms of five characteristics: the purpose, scope, level of prescription, incrementalism and policy breadth. Purpose, scope and level of prescription relate broadly to the debates on integration, while incrementalism and policy breadth relate to debates on leadership. Each of these are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Purpose

Internationally the argument has been made that old qualifications and old qualification systems are 'frequently seen as out of date and inappropriate in the new economy, and [as] inflexible obstacles to labour market mobility and the need for lifelong learning' (Richardson in Blackmur, 2003:6). Blackmur suggests that all NQFs can be conceptualised at their most basic level as 'a set of principles in terms of which qualifications can be classified'. In most cases though, NQFs are seen to have broader purposes, such as:

- Addressing issues of social justice
- Improving access to the qualifications system and progression within it
- Establishing standards, achieving comparability and intra-national or international benchmarking (Tuck *et al*, 2004:7).

In South Africa the NQF is considered to be 'a set of principles and guidelines which provide a vision, a philosophical base and an organisational structure' for the construction of a qualification system (SAQA, 2000:1). Words such as 'vision' and 'philosophical base' hint at more than a classification system. South Africa and Namibia, in particular, have a transformation and redress agenda, but it is also clear that most countries where NQFs are being implemented have a broader view of the benefits of an NQF. As Young (2003:223) notes, the rhetoric or broad goals of NQFs are hard to disagree with. He asks 'who could not want qualifications to be more linked to each other and to exhibit greater transparency'?

The proposed benefits of NQFs therefore include (Tuck *et al*, 2004:7):

- Making the qualifications system easier to understand
- Making progression routes easier and clearer/improving career mobility
- Increasing and improving credit transfer between qualifications
- Improving the recognition of prior learning
- Improving access to education and training opportunities
- Rationalising qualifications by removing duplication of provision
- Ensuring that qualifications are relevant to perceived social and economic needs
- Ensuring that education and training standards are defined and applied consistently
- Securing international recognition for national qualifications

The *purposes* of qualification frameworks could include 'frameworks of communication' and 'regulatory frameworks' (Young, 2005:13). Young (2004) maintains that this distinction relates directly to the goals of an NQF. In 'frameworks of communication', the framework provides a map of qualifications and possible progression routes between levels and, in principle, across sectors. In 'regulatory frameworks' there is a more deliberate political intervention that seeks to effect change in education and training using an NQF as a vehicle. Such frameworks are usually 'associated with concerns about quality (e.g. in the training provider market) or as a lever for ambitious qualifications reform (South Africa, New Zealand)' (Tuck *et al*, 2004:3). The South African NQF can be considered to be a 'regulatory' framework with the purpose to 'communicate' a common format.

Scope

The *scope* of an NQF refers to the education and training sectors included in the framework. While some NQFs mainly function in vocational education and training (VET), most NQFs seek to eventually increase the scope by developing relationships between all categories of education and training.

A useful classification of the *scope* of NQFs was developed by David Raffe (2003), namely a 'tracked, linked' or 'unified' system. In a 'tracked system' each of the separate components of the education and training system has distinctive purposes and a different ethos associated with each track; in a 'linked system', there are common elements across tracks and the purposes and ethos overlap; a 'unified system' displays multiple purposes, has a pluralistic ethos and integrates academic and vocational learning (Raffe, 2003). The South African NQF is currently the best example of a unified system. Table 5 below highlights the main differences:

Tracked	Linked	Unified
Vocational and general education organised in separate and distinctive tracks	Different tracks exist with emphasis on similarities and equivalence. Common structures. Credit transfer between tracks	No tracks Single system

Table 5: Scope and policy breadth of NQFs

Level of prescription

In relation to *prescriptiveness*, Young (2003) distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' frameworks. Tuck *et al* (2004) prefer to call them 'tight' and 'loose' frameworks because of the possible derogatory connotation with 'weak'.

Broadly, a 'tight' framework refers to a high level of prescription about qualification design, quality assurance and key system features, while 'loose' frameworks are based on general principles which 'accept that there are valid differences between types of learning or education/training sectors, and to work with the grain of education and training institution practice' (Tuck *et al*, 2004:5), e.g.:

Tight	Loose
Prescriptive about qualification design and quality assurance Regulatory purpose Aim to achieve wider social goals Tend to apply common rules and procedures across all sectors	Based on general principles Seek to communicate Regulate to some extent Accept differences between sectors

Table 6: Prescriptiveness of NQFs

'Tight' frameworks are often associated with controversy and contestation. Tuck *et al* (2004:5) maintain that such contestation:

> …largely [arises] from resistance in the university and school sectors to what may be perceived as the imposition of alien and inappropriate ideas and processes imported from VET. This has been evident both in South Africa and New Zealand, but also in Scotland where a particular reform (Higher Still) had tight features related to assessment that provoked some opposition in the school sector.

In addition, the 'tightness' or 'looseness' of a framework may illuminate the discussion on integration. In the current integration debate, the focus is on a 'unified', 'linked' or 'tracked' system, but such a system may also have the added dimension of being 'tight' or 'loose'. The diagram below explains this notion:

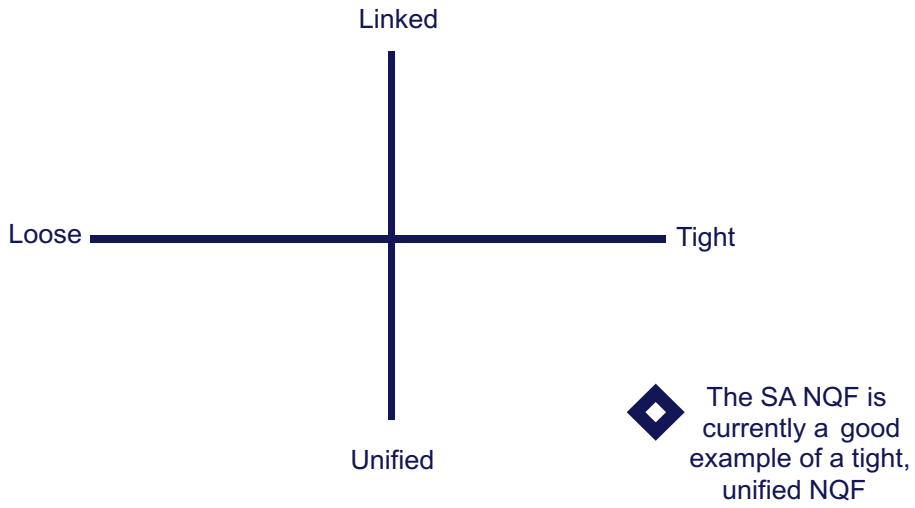

Diagram 4: Scope and prescriptiveness of NQFs

Incrementalism

The degree of voluntarism in terms of the participation of different components of the education and training system, (such as vocational and academic, further and higher education) is characteristic of the scope of a system, and implementation of the system usually takes place on a more *incremental* basis, i.e. it is implemented over time and at differing paces amongst the components of the system. The Irish NQF for example, came into being over a period of twenty years (Granville, 2003).

In Scotland, the framework was also built over a long time, with relative absence of conflict and controversy. However, as Tuck *et al* (2004:13) note: 'countries such as South Africa, aiming for radical transformation, understandably wish to build their frameworks more quickly' and therefore aim to include all sectors and levels of education and training.

Policy breadth

Raffe (2003) describes *policy breadth* as 'the extent to which the establishment of the framework is directly and explicitly linked with other measures to influence how the framework is used'. The South African NQF is seen to be one of three pillars to transform education and training, and by implication society, with its association with the Human Resource Development and National Skills Development strategies. Tuck *et al* (2004:13) point out that it is the policy breadth that may lead to 'exaggerated and unrealistic impressions of what the building of an NQF can achieve in isolation from other developments'. This comment was also made by the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002:66):

> Given its origins and scope, many South Africans have justifiably high expectations of the NQF in the transformation of education and training. However, the NQF was never intended to achieve transformation on its own and could not do so.

An important point to note is that even if a framework is only considered to be a 'classification system' (Blackmur, 2004), it is unreasonable to expect that the NQF can achieve its objectives on its own. There is sufficient evidence, for example, from the Irish and Scottish experiences that a single strategy is not enough to lead to deep change in the education and training system. It is therefore quite interesting to note that the two other 'legs' of South Africa's national approach to human resource development, namely the Human Resource Development (HRD) and National Skills Development (NSD) strategies, are not nearly as contested, and certainly not as reviewed, as the NQF has been (and continues to be). The South African NQF, however, has been consciously dubbed as a 'social construct', and not only as a 'classification system'. Cosser (2001:157), says that

> …by a "social construct" SAQA means in the first instance [it] is a mental construction (of a framework) that is socially determined - shaped by consensus of those individuals and groups party to its construction…

Policy breadth is also linked to the notion of 'intrinsic' versus 'institutional logic' (Raffe, 2003:242) and to 'communities of trust' (Young, 2003:18). If the focus, in reforming an education and training system is only on the building of a framework, only the 'intrinsic logic' is addressed. Tuck (*et al,* 2004:8) maintains that 'the intrinsic logic of an NQF arises from its design features, such as flexible pathways and the establishment of equivalences between different qualifications'. However, deep change in the way that practitioners act on the ground needs to be supported by wider policies and initiatives that will address 'institutional logic', e.g.:

> [Institutional logic comprises] the opportunities, incentives and constraints arising from such factors as the policies of educational institutions (in their roles as providers and selectors), funding and regulatory requirements, timetabling and resource constraints, the relative status of different fields of study and the influence of the labour market and the social structure. A qualifications framework may be ineffective if it is not complemented by measures to reform the surrounding institutional logic, for example, local institutional agreements to promote credit transfer, or encouragement to employers to reflect credit values in their selection processes (Raffe, 2003:242)

It is evident, from international practice, that it is not sufficient to focus only on building progression pathways into a framework. Young (2003:18) maintains that it is also necessary to build 'communities [of trust and/or practice] with shared experience (which is often expertise in a subject or occupational field), which provide people with the basis for making judgments'.

To conclude; it is also evident that there is growing international support for establishing NQFs in trying to achieve the widely accepted public goals of promoting social justice, improving access to education and training and raising standards. However, Young (2005:1) asserts that there is 'relatively little evidence from the experience of countries that have already introduced NQFs that they can achieve the goals claimed from them'. He maintains that political reasons are behind the implementation of NQFs, particularly in terms of making a 'break from the past' and for increased national accountability of education and training systems. In South Africa the political rather than the educational purpose of the NQF seems to dominate: Jansen, (2004:50), for example, is of the opinion that 'the first ten years of policy making in South Africa, following official moves towards a new democracy, hinged largely on the symbolism rather than the substance of change in education' (2001:41) and consequently that the two reviews[12] of the South African NQF reflect 'a political intervention intended to revisit, revise or even reverse policies around which the political agenda has shifted' (2004:50).

A new NQF landscape

The South African NQF has been subject to debate and contestation from the outset. A respondent in the Cycle 1 report (SAQA, 2004:27) noted that

> …here is a framework, which if you use it well, will enable you to accomplish whatever it is that you do. So, if there is a coherent way in which one is able to assess what the human resource challenges and needs for the country are, then it's possible, by a framework of this kind, to plot the movement of people towards achieving what is required in terms of strategy.

[12] Study Team Report (DoE & DoL, 2002) and Consultative Document (DoE and DoL, 2003)

The discussions and recommendations emanating from the two reviews and the draft discussion document dealing with the Higher Education Qualification Framework policy regarding the architecture of the NQF have significant implications for how the new NQF landscape may look in the near future. The following is a brief summary of the recommendations:

The *Study Team* (DoE and DoL, 2002) recommended that a permanent NQF strategic partnership consisting of the Department of Education, the Department of Labour and SAQA be formed and enacted in law. It was also recommended that standards writing and quality assurance bodies be hosted under one roof.

The *Inter-Departmental Task Team* (DoE and DoL, 2003) recommended that a permanent inter-departmental NQF strategic partnership be established that would interact with a National Human Resource Development Forum. It was also recommended that three new standards-generation and quality assurance bodies be constituted: TOP QC (to include the SETAs and professional bodies); HI ED QC (to include the CHE and HEQC); GENFET QC (to include Umalusi, NBFET and NABABET). Other recommendations included a ten level NQF, three sets of level descriptors to describe the competencies required for General, General Vocational and TOP career and learning paths and three pathways to relate to one another as partnered pairs, namely: (1) Stand alone discipline-based qualifications with components of workplace practice; (2) Stand alone occupational context-based qualifications with components of discipline-based study.

The draft *HEQF* (DoE, 2003) recommended a permanent inter-departmental NQF Committee reporting to the Minister of Education and that only two new standards-generation and quality assurance bodies be constituted: HI ED Qualification Council; and GENFET Qualification Council.

Table 7 reflects how these ongoing NQF review processes might be viewed in the light of the suggested typology of national qualification frameworks:

	Current conceptual model	**Study Team Report (DoE and DoL, 2002)**	**Consultative Document (DoE and DoL, 2003)**	**Draft Higher Education Qualifications Framework (DoE, 2004)**
Purpose	Social justice Improve access Establish standards	Social justice Improve access Establish standards	Social justice Improve access Establish standards	Silent on these issues
Scope	Unified	3 tracks linked	3 tracks linked	Tracks not necessarily linked Recognise differences in purpose, content, outcomes or equivalence but similarity in terms of levels
Prescription	Tight	Tight	Tight	Tight
Incrementalism	Regulatory	Regulatory	Regulatory	Regulatory
Policy breadth	Combines intrinsic and institutional logic	Sees the NQF as an element in transformation	Sees the NQF as one of three pillars in transformation, with HRD and Skills Development Strategy	Sees HEQF as part of other policy initiatives in higher education and within the broader NQF

Table 7: The shifting typology of the South African NQF