

CURE OR SYMPTOM?

Why Outcomes-Based Qualifications Frameworks Don't Improve Education/Labour Market Relationships

Developments in vocational training cannot be understood solely by examining the inner dynamics of education and training systems. They do not acquire their societal significance and their value for companies and trainees until they are embedded in the labour market. In particular, differences in industrial relations, welfare states, income distribution and product markets are the main reasons for the persistently high level of diversity in vocational training systems. (Bosch & Charest, 2010, p. 22)

The previous two chapters considered neoliberal public sector reform whereby states have tried to shift from providing public goods to regulating markets and/or creating quasi-markets. One of the intended roles of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks is to provide the basis for quality assurance of provision. The learning outcomes are intended to operate as mechanisms for regulating and contracting provision of education. Stephen Ball (2007) points out that decoupling education from direct state control and tying it more closely to economic interests are two complexly related contemporary policy agendas. Qualifications frameworks represent attempts to do both. The previous chapters have considered the former, and this chapter considers the putative role of qualifications frameworks in improving relationships between education systems and labour markets. I suggest that outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are a *symptom* of weak relationships rather than a viable mechanism to improve relationships.

Qualifications are seen as the nexus between education systems and labour markets. Policy makers believe that improving how they function will improve both the efficiency of labour markets and the functioning of education systems. The perception that improvements in education will improve labour markets is unsurprising given that many policy makers see education systems as little more than markets for human capital acquisition. I argue in this chapter that this approach to policy reform ignores the ways in which notions of skill as well as skill formation systems are deeply embedded in different ways of organizing economies and societies. Specifically, I argue that the way labour markets are structured, as well as the nature of social and industrial policy in a country, are far more likely determinants of the nature of vocational education, and the strength of education/labour market relationships, than qualification frameworks.

BRINGING EDUCATION CLOSER TO LABOUR MARKETS
THROUGH EMPLOYER-SPECIFIED COMPETENCES

Many countries have introduced qualifications frameworks and/or competence-based training to reform vocational education, and sometimes other parts of the education system as well, in the hope that such reforms will lead to education programmes being more relevant to labour market needs. The idea is that industry representatives or employers would specify competences or learning outcomes, which education providers could then use to design their curricula. This, in policy jargon, is usually defined as giving more emphasis to *users* rather than *providers* of education in the process of defining what is included in a qualification. This is why, in many instances, it is claimed that qualifications frameworks based on outcomes or competences are *industry-led* policies.

Competence-based training systems and labour competence-standards are based on the same idea: that employers specify what they require, and then educational institutions design programmes that enable people to acquire the required outcomes. The hope is that if industry representatives are involved in specifying the qualifications, then educational providers will develop learning programmes which develop the required competences, and learners will get jobs after qualifying. An interviewee from one of the qualifications authorities in our study captured this sentiment as follows: “the process means that industry has developed the qualification. If the training provider offers it, they know that these people will get a job because it was done by industry people”. Outcomes or competence statements are also supposed to provide a ‘language’ through which education systems can communicate with labour markets.

As will be elaborated in Chapter 7, inadequate information, or unequal access to information about what the bearers of qualifications know and can do, is believed to be a reason for failure in labour markets. Qualifications frameworks, particularly based on outcomes-based qualifications, are seen as a way of improving the information available to all parties in the market. In our research, in many of the interviews with people in countries which have introduced national qualifications frameworks, the term ‘jungle of qualifications’ was invoked to describe the system that the qualifications framework was supposed to replace. The perception was that there were so many qualifications on offer, that people could not make sense of them. Learners didn’t have enough information about which to enrol for, and employers didn’t know whom to hire. By improving the availability of information, qualifications frameworks were seen as a way to clear up this ‘jungle’, and so were considered key to improving the education ‘market’. The outcomes specified in qualifications are intended to provide information to learners—seen as ‘investors in skills’—about which jobs specific training programmes will lead to, and to industry—seen as the buyers of labour—about what skills potential employees have. This, it is hoped, will improve the functioning of labour markets, as employers can, it is hoped, employ people with greater confidence. Education markets should

also improve, as individuals will be clearer on what skills and abilities they will be acquiring through an education programme.

THREE 'LOGICS' OF LABOUR MARKET ORGANIZATION

Eliot Freidson (2001) distinguishes between three ideal types or logics of labour market organization: those which are 'free'; those which are organized bureaucratically; and occupational labour markets. All three are *markets* in which labour is bought and sold, but they operate in substantively different ways. Each 'logic' or type has different implications for "how tasks are organized and divided among workers, and for the organization of labour markets" (Freidson, 2001, p. 83). He argues that the differences between the three have major implications for the possibilities of developing successful training programmes.

A free labour market would be one in which the consumers of labour were completely sovereign, with no controls or restrictions on them. By virtue of having the money to pay for a service, and in the absence of any other constraint, they would decide what goods and services to demand, whose labour to employ, and what they were willing to pay. Production would follow consumer demand, and workers would compete equally for jobs. Such conditions are very rarely achieved in real life, although different labour markets may have some aspects of them; most economists, Freidson (2001, p. 65) suggests, agree that "the conditions for a perfectly free labor market are virtually impossible to find in all but minor and marginal segments of modern economies". A free labour market requires "an island in which there is no immigration or emigration and neither workers' organizations nor employers' associations, while all workers are equally skilled and efficient, employers are indifferent to the personal characteristics of those they hire, and workers have complete knowledge of the pay rates prevailing for different work, choosing work solely on the basis of what it pays" (Freidson, 2001, p. 64). Freidson suggests that in the marginal segments of modern economies there are something like free labour markets, as for most workers there is no stable specialization, and little public or official recognition of their work as distinct occupations. In this context, it makes no sense for individuals to attain high levels of education. As Freidson (2001, p. 87) points out, a free labour market works against skills development because demand is so fluid that it is "difficult to imagine many workers investing in training for specialized skills before entering the market". This is because precarious or casualized work makes it risky to do a training course in the skills currently required, as they may not be required next month or next year. This is why Guy Standing (2011, p. 40) asks, "Why invest in an occupational skill if I have no control over how I can use and develop it?"

No substantial education and training programme can be designed and delivered to learners in a short space of time. However, employers are interested in the development of discrete skills for the immediate job at hand. They require an

education system that responds quickly to changing demand for specific skills in the workplace. It is thus very difficult for institutions to develop programmes which both prepare learners for the workplace and also provide them with a broader education. In labour markets with casualized or constantly changing jobs, vocational education programmes can either be somewhat removed from the immediate needs of the labour market, leading to the accusation that they don't meet the needs of the labour market, or they can be comprised of ever-changing short courses in narrow skills.

By contrast, a bureaucratically controlled division of labour is one in which a directing authority and their support staff decide what work shall be done, and how it shall be divided into different jobs. This could take the form of either centrally planned markets, in which the division of labour is planned, and wages are specified for recognized categories of workers, or of internal labour markets within large firms or state bureaucracies, in which workers hold particular jobs, and gradually gain rises in salary and promotions or transfers internally. In labour markets that operate according to this logic, allocations of work and decisions about job structures are made by specialists in personnel management, who are responsible to the authorities in charge, rather than to the workers who do the work, or the consumers of this work or its products. Training is necessary to take on these jobs, and this training is often very specific to the internal requirements of the given firm or state bureaucracy.

The third logic is an occupationally controlled division of labour. Here, members of distinct occupations have exclusive right to perform the tasks associated with them, with some overlap or ambiguity with related occupations. Consumers and managers who want to contract for the tasks connected with those specializations are obliged to use *bona fide* members of the occupation; they are neither free to employ any willing worker, nor to train workers for the purpose. It is the occupations themselves which determine what qualifications are required to perform particular tasks, and which control the criteria for the licensing or credentialling procedures that are enforced by the state (Freidson, 2001, p. 56). Empirical examples of this type of labour market are craft guilds and professions. In this third type of labour market, not only is training likely to be strong, it is essential. It is the acquisition of bodies of knowledge and skill that enable the creation of these 'labour market shelters' for given occupations or professions. Within the professions, the acquisition of bodies of theoretical knowledge, and the relationship with universities that teach, develop, refine, systematize, and expand the body of knowledge over which each profession claims jurisdiction, gives workers more power over their work.

Professions are generally regulated even in very liberal economies, although many have seen a considerable onslaught against this in the name of the free market. Friedson describes how governments have argued against occupational regulation, and have in some instances substantially weakened professions in the name of the 'free market', and of 'breaking monopolies'. Standing (2011, p. 39) concurs, arguing:

In the globalization era, governments quietly dismantled the institutions of 'self-regulation' of professions and crafts, and in their place erected elaborate

systems of state regulation. These removed the capacity of occupational bodies to set their own standards, to control entry to their occupation, to establish and reproduce their ethics and ways of doing things, to set rates of pay and entitlements, to establish ways of disciplining and sanctioning members, to set procedures for promotion and for other forms of career advancement, and much else.

Dismantled is probably an overstatement, particularly for the classic self-regulating professions. Nonetheless, there is always political contestation about who has the right to restrict and regulate labour markets. Where it is an option, people attempt to free themselves from ‘free labour markets’ by obtaining a qualification in a more protected and socially recognized occupation—an occupation where there is some kind of labour market shelter. One way of doing this is attaining the knowledge and skills of a protected occupation or profession. Higher levels of general education are also generally seen as leading to the possibility of a white collar or so-called ‘knowledge-based, knowledge-economy’ job.

LABOUR MARKETS, TRAINING, AND QUALIFICATION REFORM

It is striking that the particular notion of ‘industry-led’ outcomes- or competence-based vocational education described above emerged in Anglophone liberal market economies in which there were *very weak relationships between education and training systems and labour markets*. It is also interesting that they were targeted at the lowest and most fragmented sections of the workforce. Vocational education systems in such countries (such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) have been aimed at providing individuals with options for developing their own ‘employability’. This is in contrast to vocational education and training systems focused on education for an occupation, such as the German dual system (Brockmann, 2011, drawing on Rauner, 2007).

In the latter systems, vocational education and training aims to develop vocational competence and identity for a *regulated occupational labour market* which relates occupations to the corresponding tracks of vocational education. An occupation is a formally recognized social category, with regulations in terms of aspects such as qualifications, range of knowledge required, both theoretical and practical, and promotion. The employment relationship is a long-term one. This makes it possible for it to be founded on broad abilities, such as an understanding of the entire work process and of the wider industry, and on an integration of manual and intellectual tasks, in order to be able to plan, execute, and evaluate, and not just carry out narrowly specified tasks. The nature of this labour market makes strong vocational education both necessary and possible. Vocational education “is provided through comprehensive programmes that are part of the national education system and thus constitutes the continuation of ‘education’ (commonly based on a curriculum, with a broad content) rather than ‘training’ as more narrowly focused on the labour

market and the job” (Clarke, 2011, p. 108). Clarke further argues that in this system, vocational education aims to develop vocational competence and identity, and is

...designed to develop the ability to act autonomously and competently within an occupational field. Qualifications are obtained through the successful completion of courses developed through negotiation with the social partners, integrating theoretical knowledge and workplace learning.

Of course the word ‘occupation’ itself is used in different ways across different contexts. Winch (2011) distinguishes between a restricted sense, usually used in Anglophone contexts, in which an occupation is considered to concern occupational standards and a series of skills—in other words, a set of related tasks bundled together—and the broader German notion of *Beruf*. As explained by Georg Hanf (2011), the concept of a *Beruf* structures the German labour market, mainly at the level of intermediate qualifications and the vocational education system. To pursue a *Beruf*, an individual needs a systematic combination of formal knowledge, skills, and experience-based competence, and their deployment is not linked to a specific workplace. *Berufe* are strongly linked to the collective bargaining system as well as to the welfare system. They are also part of a broader concept of ‘cultivated and qualified’ labour, and linked to the idea of dignity as opposed to humiliation in work (Hanf, 2011, p. 55). This organizes and reduces competition in the labour market, and protects those who have a *Beruf*; it provides, in Friedson’s term, a ‘labour market shelter’.

In liberal English speaking countries, which saw the first emergence of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks and competence-based reforms, education is regulated through a ‘market of qualifications’ (Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2011). Individuals can choose from this market, and compose their own qualification profiles according to what they think will improve their position in the labour market:

a ‘market of qualifications’ enables individuals to enhance their employability through continuing vocational education or certification of sets of competencies acquired either through work experience or modularized courses.” (Brockmann, 2011, pp. 120–121)

This type of arrangement is premised on the notion of a free labour market. But even in the most liberal economies, labour markets are probably the least ‘free’ and most regulated of markets, starting with the immigration policies of any given country, which are a major determinant of relationships in the labour market.

Qualifications frameworks and the idea of employer-specified competences or learning outcomes emerged in places with a weak relationship between education, particularly vocational education, and the labour market. The outcomes or competence statements are supposed to improve this relationship. As Rauner (2007, p. 118) explains:

When competence development is disconnected from occupationally organized work and the related vocational qualification processes, the relationship

between vocational identity, commitment and competence development becomes loose and fragile. In which case, modularized systems of certification function as regulatory frameworks for the recognition and accumulation of skills that are largely independent from each other and disconnected from genuine work contexts.

Of course there are labour market shelters in these economies, particularly at higher levels, so in many instances individuals aim at ever-higher levels of general education. This leads to qualification inflation, as employers use qualifications as a screening device, and potential workers are obliged to strive for higher and higher levels of qualifications to improve their place in the queue, and to have a chance in the increasing competition for good jobs. This leads to many people acquiring qualifications which they don't need for the substance of the work that they will be doing, which in turn leads to increasing criticism of education, both in terms of content and form. The perception that education does not prepare people for work becomes ever-more entrenched.

This context makes it difficult for providers to develop strong vocational education programmes. Vocational education is seen as a last resort for several reasons: many jobs do not require any substantial qualifications; where qualifications are required in order to get jobs, the connections between vocational education and work are so weak that graduates often do not get the jobs they are ostensibly trained to do; and when they do get jobs, they are often low-waged and short-term. All of these factors create a negative cycle of neglect of vocational institutions and curricula. Individuals with low levels of education are generally perceived by employers as inefficient workers, and are left trapped in low-level, 'unskilled' work.

SOCIAL POLICY, TRAINING, AND QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

The two models of skill—the first aimed at developing general employability and the second aimed at long-term training for regulated occupations—map onto the two main types of capitalist systems described by the 'varieties of capitalism' literature: coordinated market economies and liberal market economies (Hall & Soskice, 2001). In this literature, which takes its name from Peter Hall and David Soskice's book *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, coordinated market economies (for example, Germany, France, and Scandinavian countries) are described as resting on multiple mechanisms of institutional coordination, including tight coupling between the financial and industrial wings of big business, collective wage determination, and strong and well-funded systems of general and vocational education, supported by the state. Liberal market economies (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada) operate more closely to the textbook model of the unfettered 'free market'.

The former set of economies have liberalized since this body of literature emerged, which might mean that the differences between the two types are diminishing with

implications in the long-term for training systems in the former coordinated market economies. This may to some extent explain the increasing interest in competence statements, learning outcomes, and qualifications in Europe, an issue which I will return to in Chapter 8. For now I simply want to make the point that the descriptive purchase of the varieties of capitalism literature has diminished in today's world due to increasing similarities between the two main models of capitalist economies. The varieties of capitalism literature is also critiqued for downplaying power relations, particularly in relation to the role of trade unions in building the welfare state. Furthermore, the models it describes are all models of advanced capitalist economies. Nothing in the analysis helps to work out how best to build the general and vocational skills systems of developing and middle-income countries. Nonetheless, the findings regarding complementarities between different systems of the labour market, social policy, and training policy remain salient, for this literature usefully highlights the *relationships* that different systems of education and training have with distinct modes of capitalist production and social protection. It shows that the relationships are not coincidental, but are *intrinsic* to the way the different systems are structured.

Torben Iversen and John Stephens (2008) argue that there are strong links between specific and general skills at the bottom of the distribution of educational achievement and employment protection, unemployment replacement rates, and active labour market policies. This is because high levels of social protection in the coordinated market economies encourage individuals to acquire specific skills: unemployment protection and other active labour market policies support individuals who lose their jobs, making it easier for them to look for a job that uses their skills, as opposed to being forced to take the first job that comes along. This supports a vocational education system that enables firms to specialize in international niche markets—often with quasi-monopolistic competition and high mark-ups. Where there is strong vocational education provision, workers at the lower end of the achievement distribution have strong incentives to work hard in high school to get into the best vocational schools or get the best apprenticeships. This raises the skills of those at the low end of the educational achievement distribution, and supports a more compressed wage structure.

Within the Scandinavian coordinated market economies, a historical domination by centre-left coalitions has led to high levels of wealth redistribution. This has enabled heavy investment in public education, including high quality public day care and preschools, and industry-specific and occupation-specific vocational training, which have led to high levels of *both* general skills *and* industry-specific skills. Flexibility in the labour market is supported by extensive spending on retraining. The result of this *combination of policies* is compressed skill distribution: workers at the lower end of this distribution have specific skills that the equivalent workers in liberal market economies do not have; they also have better general skills, due to good general education, making it easier for them to acquire additional technical skills. The high level of specific skills supports high value-added production in international niche markets, and the high level of general skills supports service industries. Provision of

public day care provides jobs, allows parents to enter the workforce or increase their working hours, provides early childhood education, which is particularly important for children of less educated parents, and facilitates higher fertility rates, which in turn enable more stability in the long-term funding of the welfare state. In other words, *social equality* fosters the development of high levels of both general and specific skills, especially at the bottom end of the skill distribution, which in turn reinforces social equality. General skills at this level are strongly related to day care spending, as well as to strong vocational education. Iverson and Stephens also argue that in general ‘information age literacy’, including reasonably high levels of general literacy as well as information technology ability, is “extremely strongly and negatively related to the degree of inequality”, which is why levels of achievement in this area are high in the Scandinavian countries (Iverson & Stephens, 2008, p. 621).

In other coordinated market economies where there are alliances across class lines, such as in those dominated by strong Christian Democratic parties, demands for redistribution are fewer. Support for heavy public spending on preschool and primary education is lower than in the Scandinavian countries, and spending on overall education, higher education, and day care is closer to that in liberal regimes. Nonetheless, general skills at the bottom are significantly higher than in liberal regimes. Most continental European countries have well-functioning vocational training institutions, which offer opportunities for reasonable levels of general education. They also have strong collective bargaining systems, which have facilitated well-paying stable jobs. High social insurance and job protection, as well as strong vocational training, have facilitated acquisition of firm-specific and industry-specific skills.

In contrast with both types of coordinated market economies described above, liberal market economies have much lower redistribution of wealth to public schooling and social welfare. The middle and upper-middle classes self-insure by attaining high levels of general education, often through private institutions. Students who expect to go to higher education have strong incentives to work hard. Because vocational education is weak, learners in the bottom third of the achievement distribution have few incentives to do well in school, and few opportunities to acquire skills. Skills at the bottom end are therefore low, and workers end up in poorly paying jobs with little prospect of advancement. Manufacturing uses mainly low and general skills. Wages for labourers are based on outputs, generally at variable rates (Clarke, 2011). Intellectual functions—planning, coordinating, evaluating, controlling—are sharply separated from execution. It is difficult for unions to gain bargaining leverage, as workers are easily replaced. This means incentives to join unions are low, which weakens unions, which in turn makes the regulation and protection of occupations less likely. Training is aimed more at specific short-term jobs, or even tasks, than at broad ‘occupations’. In short, in liberal market economies, *the structure of the economy and the labour market leads to weak vocational education.*

It is in this labour market and social policy context that the idea took hold that if employers specified competences and learning outcomes, education would produce

the required results. The starting point was an analysis of a ‘mismatch’ between skills ‘supply’ and ‘demand’. This was seen as largely the fault of the education system. However, relationships between education systems and labour markets are complex, and many examples can be found of where ‘mismatches’ are not caused by the poor functioning of education. To cite just two, Chang (2010) points out that bright Koreans are increasingly becoming doctors, rather than engineers or scientists, not because there is no need for the latter two professions in industry, but because the government has reduced already low social security nets, and many companies retrench or otherwise get rid of older people. Because this is not a threat for doctors, medicine is seen as a more secure profession. Here, the social welfare system, not education institutions, is a crucial factor in skewing the supply of qualified professionals. In another example, Wildschut and Mgqolozana (2009) point out that there is a shortage of nurses in South Africa, despite more than adequate numbers being trained, because nurses are recruited to work overseas; similarly, Breier (2009) shows that from one-fifth to one-third of South African doctors are working abroad. These are merely two examples of a whole host of complicated reasons why education systems may not ‘produce’ according to ‘demand’.

As described in Chapter 3, the idea of employer-specified competences was first systematically implemented in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in the 1980s, through a framework of National Vocational Qualifications. Seen as an alternative to ‘knowledge-based’ curricula, these qualifications introduced the idea of learning outcomes derived from an analysis of work functions. The outcomes were specified according to the requirements of employers, and hence were described as ‘industry-led’. This attempt to link vocational education to the workplace through employer-specified competence statements would be better seen as an attempt to regulate the ‘market of qualifications’ in order to compensate for the lack of well-defined and protected occupational roles in the labour market, particularly at lower levels. As Dale *et al.* (1990, p. 70) explain, the *assumption* is:

... an ideal labour market in an ideal free market economy would function such that the wage nexus determined the long term supply and demand for labour, so the education system would be responsible for generating the supply of labour to an economy which generated demand for it. Like in a commodity market, educational credentials must indicate the potential ‘value’ of individual labourers to employers. At the same time the output of the education system should mirror the divisions of labour (which would be differentiated horizontally and hierarchically in the most technically efficient and profitable ways) and the subjects taught should serve the needs of the economy.

This assumption lies behind much of the interest in qualifications frameworks and qualifications reform, as policy makers attempt to improve how qualifications supply information in labour markets, hoping that this in turn will have an effect on the organization and content of education systems. This reform of vocational

qualifications in the United Kingdom in the 1980s was designed to legitimate constantly shifting, job-type specifications, by making them easier to accredit (Winch, 2011), and accordingly there was a strong emphasis on the development of separate ‘units of competence’. This, perhaps, explains why Clarke and Westerhuis (2011, p. 146) argue: “In its almost exclusive focus on skills, the English meaning of competence ... is almost incomprehensible in most countries”. The English notion of competence is seen as narrow and ‘task-based’, as opposed to a broader, more holistic notion in continental European countries (Bohlinger, 2007; Hanf, 2011; Méhaut, 2011). Brockman, Clarke, and Winch (2008, p. 106) write: “On the continent, in contrast, LOs [learning outcomes] are interpreted as broad outcomes or competences, implicitly linked to curricula in the context of a broad occupational field.”

The narrower notion of competence lies behind competence-based training reforms as well as outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. Reforming qualifications systems is easier than regulating labour markets or developing strong social policy, which provides some insight into the why outcomes-based qualifications frameworks and competence-based training appeal to policy makers. None of the developing countries in our study have the factors found in coordinated market economies that support strong vocational education systems: strong social welfare, well-developed and well-regulated industries, and active labour market policies. They do not have the labour market regulation and social policy which are necessary in order for vocational education systems to develop strong linkages with regulated occupations. Instead, informal (‘free’) markets dominate, often supported by structural adjustment programmes or the equivalent, as well as ‘technical assistance’ and conditional loans and grants which have pushed neoliberal policy models. It is thus not surprising that vocational education policy models in developing countries are derived largely from those in liberal market economies. Education reform, as described in the previous two chapters, is focused on forcing education providers to behave like corporate, profit-driven entities, competing in markets or quasi-markets. As described in this chapter, education reform is supposed to improve the functioning of labour markets by supplying the required skills, with outcomes-based qualifications both indicating to providers what skills to provide, and to employers what skills learners have acquired. The policy does not engage with the substantial reasons for the weaknesses of vocational education, or with the poor relationships between vocational education and labour markets, because these are much harder things to fix.

For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, frameworks of labour competences influenced by the British National Vocational Qualifications were developed in some Latin American countries in the 1990s, in the context of major economic shifts and political reforms aimed at reducing the role of the state and liberalizing economies (Palma, 2003). De Moura Castro discusses the strong national training institutions that were established in these countries mainly through payroll levies. He argues that they had “financial stability, comfortable budgets and a long-run perspective” (de Moura Castro 2000, p. 252), that they were successful and

prestigious, in some instances far more so than the schooling system in their countries, and that they trained several generations of highly-skilled workers. However, these workers worked in industries nurtured by import substitution policies. These industries later collapsed when economic crises led to import substitution being abandoned. The weakness of the industrial sector was *not* caused by lack of skills. The education institutions had met the needs of industry while industry flourished, and while there were stable jobs within industry. But when skilled workers suddenly had no industry to work in, because of broader economic conditions as well as the responses of their governments to these conditions, education and training came under the spotlight. The idea of competences and competence-based training was seen to offer a way of improving the relevance of training, particularly in the informal sector, and in a context in which the previous systems no longer seemed to be working. As one of the advocates of this approach argues:

work in the current situation requires subjects who actively construct their labour career, and who have the capacity to identify and value their resources and capacities with an attitude of seeking help and the will to overcome their limitations, and this makes them managers of their own employment opportunities. (Vargas Zuñiga, 2005, p. 89)

My analysis above also goes some way towards explaining why there is so little empirical evidence that the ‘industry-led’ competence/ outcomes-based model has created strong relationships between education systems and the world of work: besides creating a model for educational delivery which is unsustainable, it does not address the root of the problem in labour market and social policy. As Keep (2005, p. 546) argues, “policy interventions that simply attempt to enhance the quality of labour supply through addressing the individual ‘deficiencies’ of young people are unlikely to succeed and that policy interventions to *decasualize* the labour market are needed” (my emphasis). Winch (2011) argues that the notion of ‘skill’ partly derives from the fragmentation of the labour process, which is why countries with broader occupational categories tend to use it less: “When reference to workplace ability is almost exclusively centred around skill, it becomes difficult to allow for the concept of occupational integration, as skill is a fragmenting rather than an integrating concept” (Winch, 2011, p. 92). Drawing on Braverman, Winch points out that, whilst ‘skill’ is suited to conceptualizing the segmentation of the labour process into particular episodes of work or tasks, at its limits, this fragmentation removes any aspect of personal ability, or, ironically, skill, from an operation. This is the dilemma of casualized and precarious work, and it is the dilemma of the ‘market of qualifications’ approach. Brockmann *et al.* (2011, p. 19) argue further:

... the English output-related qualification system, such as the NVQ, rests on the certification of narrowly defined skills and reinforces the fragmented nature of the labour process, resulting in weak occupational identities and an obsession with managerial control.

There are a few other reasons for the problems experienced with this type of model, which I will mention briefly below.

OTHER PROBLEMS WITH EMPLOYER-SPECIFIED COMPETENCES

A common practical problem with the employer-specified competences model was the involvement of industry. All the countries in our study were developing qualifications frameworks and competence-frameworks in the hope of improving relationships between education and training systems and labour markets, and all were premised on industry participation, but, at the time of our research, and with the exception of Australia, this participation was very limited in all countries. Despite policy makers claiming that these were ‘industry-led’ systems, industry often appeared reluctant to lead. Where industry did participate, it was often not at the desired level. For example, human resource personnel instead of technical experts were sent to the meetings to develop standards, and in many instances, the process of developing the standards was in fact subcontracted out to consultants, undermining the whole concept of employer-specified competences. For example, in Lithuania, where workplace-based assessment has been officially conducted by the Chamber of Industry, the vocational education and training schools argued that much of the work was delegated to them, leaving the Chamber to the task of organizing and coordinating. The vocational education and training schools argued that the Chamber could not design the actual assessments, due lack of expertise and knowledge in the specific fields. This is borne out by other studies internationally. Keep (2005, p. 543) captures the problem well in relation to English policy: “Unfortunately, the government’s obsessive love affair with qualifications is not a passion necessarily shared by employers to anything like the same extent.”

Where industry is involved in designing qualifications or specifying competence statements, in many instances the qualifications are not valued in the way authorities hope or intend. Even employers frequently seem not to value the qualifications which emanate from ‘industry-led’ qualifications processes. In many of the countries in our study, students, parents, employers, and governments value university qualifications above all, and therefore, by extension, value school qualifications which can potentially lead to university. This is usually not the case with qualifications which emanate from competence-based or learning outcomes-based qualifications.

One reason that vocational qualifications which are employer designed are not valued is because employers are likely to focus on their immediate short-term needs. King (2012) points out that in India, for example, while there is a policy emphasis on ‘demand-driven training’, “the present system is already very demand driven, but driven by a massive demand for using cheap, unskilled labour, and training on the job”. Basing a system primarily on what employers *say* they need can trap a country in the production strategies of the moment, which may be based on low-wage, low-skill work. In other words, a so-called ‘demand-led’ system will be focused on employers’ short-term labour market needs, rather than the long-term

educational needs of young people or even, perhaps, the long-term needs of the economy. Employers build on the ‘skills of yesterday’. Ironically, this leads to lack of labour market currency for many occupational qualifications:

If a qualification seeks only to mimic a traditional, restricted and shrinking area of labour market activity, then it will inevitably have low labour market currency and become quickly out of tune with changes in the labour market. It is the educational element, in particular the integration of the theoretical knowledge component with practice, which gives a qualification its longer-term value and which can in turn facilitate rather than impede the development of the labour process. (Clarke & Westerhuis, 2011, p. 143)

This, together with the analysis in the beginning of this chapter, may explain why even the ‘industry-led’ Australian competence-based training system has “weak links between vocational education and training and employment” (Cooney and Long 2010, p. 29).

Further, while they may have some notion of what their immediate needs are, employers may not always be able to articulate what it is that they require, and frequently have unrealistic expectations about what education institutions can achieve. Certainly in most instances they are not able to predict what skills and knowledge will be required in the future¹. And, as Freidson (2001, p. 130) points out, “at any moment during a period of high change and innovation, old, declining sectors will be better represented by sector-level organizations than new, dynamic ones.” Employers in any industrial or service sector also vary widely, in terms of size, how their service or production is organized, and in their demands for knowledge and skills. There is no one “employer view” of qualifications, even in a specific sector. As Wolf (1995, p. 104) argues: “Serious differences which relate to fundamental views of society and people, as well as to job demarcations and future trends, inhere in the process, and are not something which can be solved in a technical fashion.”

Designing and developing qualifications and curricula cannot be based solely on the evidence of current employer needs, for the latter will inevitably be based on today’s workplaces, which are likely to change. Thus, in our study, representatives of educational institutions interviewed in Lithuania argued that the problem was not so much lack of input from employers as lack of research into present and future skills needs. Qualification design needs to involve specialists making judgements that take account of a range of factors, including the likely development of industries and services and the current needs of employers, as well as how the qualification provides the basis for learner progression.

Another set of problems, which is discussed in depth in the following chapter, lies in the assumption that once competences have been specified, creating a curriculum is a simple process of ‘designing down’ from them. This idea of employers specifying competences which educational institutions deliver harks back to the Taylorist ideas introduced into educational reform in the early twentieth century, discussed in

Chapter 2. Some passages from American educational reformer Franklin Bobbit are worth re-quoting here:

... the commercial world can best say what it needs in the case of its stenographers and accountants. A machine shop can best say what is needed in the workers that come to it. The plumbing trade contains the men who are best able to state the needs of those entering upon plumbing; and so on through the entire list. (Bobbit, 1913a, cited in Callahan, 1962, 83-84)

After society has given to the school its ultimate standard in any particular case, it then is certainly the business of the educational and psychological experts to determine the time of the beginning, the intensity of the work, and the standards to be attained in each of the successive stages. (Bobbit 1913, cited in Callahan, 1962, p. 84)

This mechanical notion of education suggests that educational institutions are factories which can simply produce on demand, and so it is a simple matter to change the design specifications and produce a different product. Education and training are much more complicated processes than simply producing ‘products’ to specification. When employers are asked to express needs, they usually come up with long wish-lists, which in many instances are beyond the capacity of educational institutions to deliver, and which take no consideration of, and usually have little knowledge of, what it actually takes to get people to master the skills and knowledge required in a particular occupation. Invariably, they specify things like ‘problem solving’, ‘taking initiative’, ‘working in teams’. It is highly debatable whether producing all of these can or should be the responsibility of educational institutions, and, if so, what kinds of educational programmes would be needed to produce them. Employers also often expect educational institutions to produce skills which can only realistically be produced in workplaces.

Once policy separates qualifications from educational institutions, and provides specifications to institutions, the question must arise: how can qualifications mediate between educational institutions and the labour market (Young & Allais, 2009)? Qualifications must have a relationship with educational institutions if they are to mediate between them and labour markets. But if they are neither embedded in institutions nor originate from them, and if they do not refer to the activities of educational institutions—in other words, if the outcomes are not linked to the activities that learners are engaged in during a course of study—then the qualifications will have very little to do with education institutions, and will not be able to mediate between these institutions and labour markets. However explicitly learning outcomes or competences are specified, a qualification can only ever be a proxy; it can never summarize all that the holder knows, all that is required to undertake a task or to be trusted as a ‘qualified’ member of an occupation. The issue of trust cannot be derived from the specification of outcomes. Trust can reside in the providing institution—specific educational institutions build up a reputation over

time, or build strong relationships with employers or professional bodies over time. If a qualification refers to the learning that has taken place in an institution, and that institution has built up credibility and trust in its offerings, the qualification is more likely to mediate between the learning that has taken place in that institution and the knowledge and skills needed in the world of work.

People may also trust qualifications examined by institutions whose assessments have an established reputation over time, or awarding institutions which have a good reputation for a particular qualification. They may trust a regulatory body which accredits providing institutions—but this, as discussed below, is only likely if the numbers of providing institutions are not too great, if quality of provision is high to start with, and if the regulatory body has the capacity to make meaningful judgements about the qualifications or institutions it regulates. When a particular qualification is trusted and is seen as a valuable and reliable qualification, a combination of these factors may exist.

This brings me to a final problem: the problem of transparency. This is discussed in detail in the following chapter. I discuss it separately here insofar as it relates to labour markets, and the claim that learning outcomes improve labour mobility nationally and internationally.

LABOUR MOBILITY AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: 'TRANSPARENCY' AND INTERPRETATION

There is a strong rhetoric about labour mobility in documentation about qualifications frameworks. The European Qualifications Framework is seen as an important tool in creating a single labour market throughout Europe. And a task team from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) that argues for a regional framework also emphasizes that qualifications need to travel across national borders (Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation 2005), as do other documents emanating from SADC (see for example Pesanai 2003).

It should be noted that the rhetoric about labour mobility is at least partially misleading, as immigration has become more and more difficult in many respects. Furthermore, it seems likely that qualifications frameworks will be used as a way of controlling immigration. For example, the South African Department of Home Affairs, which processes immigration applications, recently tasked the South African Qualifications Authority with validating the qualifications of people seeking work permits in South Africa. This adds an extra hurdle for people wanting to work in South Africa, but also makes the South African National Qualifications Framework a tool for controlling immigration. It seems plausible that the frenetic development of qualifications frameworks in countries surrounding Europe, with substantial assistance from European advisors, is concerned with controlling the supply of 'desirable' immigrants.

Putting this aside, let's consider the actual mechanism which is supposed to increase mobility: outcomes-based qualifications, and specifically, level descriptors

composed of learning outcomes. Level descriptors are key to qualifications frameworks and competency-based standards, and in many countries are described as *the* crucial mechanism that enables qualifications frameworks to achieve their goals. Level descriptors are broadly specified outcomes or competences which are supposed to capture what it means to be competent at a particular level of a qualifications framework; in other words, they are supposed to capture qualities or abilities that should be achieved by all learners who achieve a qualification at a specified level. This, it is hoped, will help the process of comparing qualifications across different fields as well as across countries—so that country A’s level 5 qualification can be seen as broadly at the same level as country B’s. Inside of countries, it is hoped that they can help with clarifying which qualifications are equivalent to which other qualifications, and, perhaps, can be a mechanism with which to convince skeptics that qualifications which are not currently viewed as equivalent can be recognized as such—for they can demonstrate that they lead to the same broad outcomes or levels of competence. The learning outcomes or competences in the level descriptors are also supposed to help designers of qualifications and learning programmes, by indicating to them what broad outcomes should be achieved through the qualification.

For the uninitiated, an example may assist. Below in Boxes 1 and 2 are the descriptors for level one and level four respectively of the South African Qualifications Framework. Level one in South Africa is supposed to be roughly equivalent to the ninth year of formal schooling, or the end of primary education, and level four to the twelfth year of formal schooling, or the end of senior secondary education.

As can be seen from these examples, level descriptors are supposed to capture outcomes or levels of competency across a range of different categories or areas. In South Africa there are ten categories: scope of knowledge; knowledge literacy; method and procedure; problem solving; ethics and professional practice accessing; processing, and managing information; producing and communicating information; context and systems; management of learning; accountability.

By comparing this example to systems in other countries, a potential problem can immediately be seen. Different countries have chosen substantially different categories, revealing that they are by no means self-evident (as seen in Box 3). This partly explains why the process of arriving at these ten categories in South Africa was long, drawn out, and highly contested. Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer (2008) reveal similar complexities and difficulties involved in reaching agreement on the level descriptors for the European Qualifications Framework, and the continuing differences in interpretation of the key terms. Their description reveals a string of processes which attempted to reach clarity and develop common interpretations, difficulties in pinning down specific definitions and interpretations of different terms, and various reformulations when differences became apparent.

Once the categories have been agreed on, it is by no means self-evident what each category *means*: what, for example, is ‘knowledge literacy’ or ‘accountability’ to the uninitiated observer? Bear in mind that a key claim made about qualifications

Box 1: Level One of the South African Qualifications Framework

Scope of knowledge, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a general knowledge of one or more areas or fields of study, in addition to the fundamental areas of study

Knowledge literacy, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding that knowledge in a particular field develops over a period of time through the efforts of a number of people and often through the synthesis of information from a variety of related sources and fields

Method and procedure, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to use key common tools and instruments, and a capacity to apply him/ herself to a well-defined task under direct supervision

Problem solving, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to recognise and solve problems within a familiar, well-defined context

Ethics and professional practice, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to identify and develop own personal values and ethics, and an ability to identify ethics applicable in a specific environment

Accessing, processing and managing information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to recall, collect and organise given information clearly and accurately, sound listening and speaking (receptive and productive language use), reading and writing skills, and basic numeracy skills including an understanding of symbolic systems

Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to report information clearly and accurately in spoken/ signed and written form

Context and systems, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding of the context within which he/she operates

Management of learning, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to sequence and schedule learning tasks, and an ability to access and use a range of learning resources

Accountability, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to work as part of a group.

frameworks and level descriptors is that they make qualifications systems more transparent.

It could also be argued that not all qualifications should enable learners to achieve higher competency levels in all ten categories. For example, 'working as part of a group' should not be necessary for all qualifications at any particular level.

There could also be considerable debate about what it would mean to have a higher level of competency. For example, South African learners at level one are required to be able to

Box 2: Level Four of the South African Qualifications Framework

Scope of knowledge, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a fundamental knowledge base of the most important areas of one or more fields or disciplines, in addition to the fundamental areas of study and a fundamental understanding of the key terms, rules, concepts, established principles and theories in one or more fields or disciplines

Knowledge literacy, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding that knowledge in one field can be applied to related fields

Method and procedure, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to apply essential methods, procedures and techniques of the field or discipline to a given familiar context, and an ability to motivate a change using relevant evidence

Problem solving, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to use own knowledge to solve common problems within a familiar context, and an ability to adjust an application of a common solution within relevant parameters to meet the needs of small changes in the problem or operating context with an understanding of the consequences of related actions

Ethics and professional practice, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to adhere to organisational ethics and a code of conduct, and an ability to understand societal values and ethics

Accessing, processing and managing information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a basic ability in gathering relevant information, analysis and evaluation skills, and an ability to apply and carry out actions by interpreting information from text and operational symbols or representations

Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to communicate and present information reliably and accurately in written and in oral or signed form

Context and systems, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an understanding of the organisation or operating environment as a system within a wider context

Management of learning, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a capacity to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment, and a capacity to evaluate own performance against given criteria

Accountability, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate a capacity to take decisions about and responsibility for actions, and a capacity to take the initiative to address any shortcomings found

(Sourced from www.saqqa.org.za accessed 20 January 2012)

demonstrate an understanding that knowledge in a particular field develops over a period of time through the efforts of a number of people and often through the synthesis of information from a variety of related sources and fields

CHAPTER 5

while learners at level four must be able to

demonstrate an understanding that knowledge in one field can be applied to related fields.

Is the former at a 'lower level' than the latter?

Finally, what each *specification* means is open to a huge range of interpretation. For example, to “solve common problems within a familiar context” could mean many different things. It is far from clear that, using this as a criterion, people would easily be able to adjudicate between different qualifications, and make judgements about whether they are at the same level.

Consider some examples in Box 3 below, drawn from our study (Allais, 2010b).

Box 3: Some extracts from different countries' level descriptors

Six types of descriptors in Tunisia

This qualifications framework has six types of descriptors of learning outcomes:

Complexity,
Autonomy,
Responsibility,
Adaptability,
Knowledge,
Know-how, and
Behaviour.

Five 'characteristic generic outcomes' in Scotland

The Scottish level descriptors, which were developed based on pre-existing descriptors for the different sectors, specify 'characteristic generic outcomes' for each level (except level one) under five headings:

Knowledge and understanding;
Practice (applied knowledge and understanding);
Generic cognitive skills;
Communication, ICT and numeracy skills;
Autonomy, accountability and working with others.

Eight 'domains' in Malaysia

Malaysia has eight domains of descriptors:

Knowledge;
Practical skills;
Social skills and responsibilities;
Values, attitudes and professionalism;
Communication, leadership and team skills;

Problem solving and scientific skills;
 Information management and lifelong learning skills; and
 Managerial and entrepreneurial skills.

Concise and detailed descriptors in Lithuania

In Lithuania, levels are defined not only by competences, but also by types of activities. There are two kinds of level descriptors, concise, and detailed or comprehensive. The former are described providing a brief description of qualification levels for general information purposes, and include characteristics of activities, content and acquisition of qualification, and opportunities for further learning. Detailed descriptors, on the other hand, are for the usage of different experts (designers of vocational education and training curricula, experts involved in the assessment of competences and awarding of qualifications, experts responsible for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad and so on). In these, levels are described comprehensively with detailed indicative characteristics of the level of qualifications. Descriptors of levels are based on two parameters, each of which contains three criteria. Levels are defined not only by competences but also by types of activities.

Ten 'indicators of professional performance' in Russia

In Russia the ten most important indicators of professional performance were identified to formulate descriptors:

Work with information;
 Reflection;
 Ability to learn;
 Business communication;
 Responsibility;
 Motivation;
 Setting up goals;
 Independence;
 Ability to teach; and
 Breadth of views.

Descriptors were developed according to the following rules:

- a descriptor at each level has to be independent of other descriptors. Only at the place of transfer to a higher level does a descriptor have to correlate with the descriptors of higher and lower levels;
- descriptors have to be defined in the affirmative grammatical form;
- they have to be concrete and clear, words with abstract lexical meaning cannot be used (“good”, “narrow”, “acceptable” etc.);
- they cannot contain professional jargon, they have to be understandable for non-professionals;
- they have to be formulated in a short form to provide clear understanding of the essence of the given level.

Just consider how many different categories of descriptors there are, and how these differ across countries. We have already seen ten categories in the South African level descriptors. The European Qualifications Framework contains three types of specifications: knowledge, skill, and competence. In Tunisia, there are six types. In Scotland, there are five ‘characteristic generic outcomes’, which must be elaborated for each level (except level one). Malaysia has eight ‘domains’ of descriptors. The list goes on and on. Note the very last point in the rules for level descriptor development in Russia: that they must provide a clear understanding of the ‘essence’ of the given level. Considering the length of the descriptors, the variety of different categories across countries, and the various other problems discussed above, this seems extremely unlikely.

There are implicit hierarchies between qualifications in all formal education systems, with some relationship to hierarchies within knowledge areas or disciplines. There is no doubt that a PhD is higher up any such hierarchy than a bachelors’ degree, or a post-school vocational qualification. But beyond these very broad specifications, making judgements about levels of difficulty is not straightforward. In some countries in our study, disciplinary specialization was seen as crucial for a qualification to be seen as ‘at a higher level’, while others specified a greater need for inter-disciplinary knowledge at higher levels. High levels of responsibility or autonomy need not necessarily require or imply high levels of knowledge, and *vice versa*. Leadership and team skills, or communication skills, may not be required at all for some people working at extremely high levels of knowledge specialization. Or, even if some degree of these skills may be required, it does not follow that each type of skill, competence, and ability must be developed to the same level. For example, a theoretical physicist working at the most advanced levels of her discipline may not need level 10 communication or team working skills, even though some communication ability will be very handy for her.

Markowitsch and Luomi-Messerer (2008) argue that there is simply no coherent theory which enables the development of such descriptors. Méhaut and Winch (2011) discuss the substantial differences across European countries in the understandings of words such as ‘knowledge’, ‘skill’, and ‘competence’—the three categories which are defined for each of the levels of the European Qualifications Framework. In other words, simply saying that to be placed at a particular level on a framework, a qualification must ensure that a learner has “[k]nowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field of work or study”, or that a learner has “a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and to solve problems by applying basic tools, methods, materials and information”²² does not make allocating qualifications to levels a straightforward decision.

While reaching agreement on what the level descriptors should look like is difficult, it will be more difficult still to ensure that everyone interprets these descriptors in the same way. Analyses of the development of these descriptors (for example, Hart, 2009; Markowitsch & Luomi-Messerer, 2008) shows that there are huge differences in interpretation across them. It is precisely because they are

so open to interpretation that learning outcomes and competence-based approaches tend to lead to over-specification. This is why we see examples like that of Lithuania, in which there are both ‘concise’ and ‘detailed’ descriptors. As seen in the box above, the Lithuanian descriptors are highly complex, and yet all the complexity is supposed to be generic—it is supposed to be generically applied across fields and knowledge areas.

Where countries have similar looking level descriptors, it is because they have been designed using the European Qualifications Framework as a basis. Turkey, for example, has adopted the European descriptors. In Bangladesh, level descriptors drew on the European Qualifications Framework, but with some changes. They are based on ‘knowledge, skill, and responsibility’, and are linked to very broad ‘classes’ of jobs. Another reason for commonalities across countries is that level descriptors are frequently designed by consultants who base them on the level descriptors of another country (Scotland was cited as a common source in our study). This could be a potential resolution to the problem of many different descriptors. The existence of the European Qualifications Framework as a powerful force in the world of qualifications frameworks may lead to level descriptors looking similar. But this still does not escape the other problem identified above: what will they mean? How will people interpret them?

Even if we consider only a hierarchy of *cognitive* processes, making judgements about levels is not a straightforward matter. This was illustrated by two curriculum evaluations which I led as researcher for a government agency in South Africa (Allais, 2006, 2007b). We asked evaluators to use an adapted version of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy³ (a hierarchy of different kinds of cognitive processes) to guide their judgements about the standards of specified curricula and examinations. In the former evaluation, we compared South African school and college curricula, and in the latter, we compared senior secondary curricula in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia. A hierarchy of types of cognitive operations was produced, derived from the revised taxonomy, which evaluators were then supposed to apply to their analysis of the curricula documentation. What emerged starkly in our evaluation of this research was that subject experts found it very difficult to make meaning of the hierarchy of cognitive skills; they tended to make judgements based on disciplinary knowledge as well as contextual knowledge of teaching and learning. They were not convinced that there existed clear, uncontested distinctions between the various cognitive processes specified in the tools that we had developed. For example, the science evaluators argued that it is often the *way* in which knowledge is tested which determines whether it counts as factual or conceptual knowledge, not the content alone: to *remember a statement* of Newton’s Third Law of Motion is simple recall, but to actually *understand the concept* embodied by this statement is challenging, since it is counter-intuitive. In biology, there was some kind of relationship between cognitive operations, types of knowledge and levels of difficulty, but there were also differing levels of difficulty across cognitive operations and types of knowledge. For example, evaluators argued that most of the easy (level one) questions in the South African examinations were in the category *understand conceptual knowledge*, while

in the *Zambian papers*, the easy questions tended to be *recall factual knowledge*.⁴ This in itself is not specific to a learning outcomes-approach, and is something that needs to be considered in any assessment design. The point, however, is that a statement of a learning outcome does not contain intrinsic criteria as to how it should be interpreted. A range of factors needs to be considered, and expert judgements need to be made.

To the extent that evaluators were able to make judgements about the nature and quality of the courses, it was only the specification of *content* that enabled these judgements. Evaluators argued that the content specification was essential but not sufficient, and that a careful analysis of examination papers was required. Evaluators also argued that intended and examined curricula need to be evaluated together; or at least in light of each other, as far as possible. They emphasized that there are often vast differences between the intended curriculum, as represented by the official syllabus documentation, and the enacted curriculum, as represented by the full spectrum of possible classroom practices. But they also pointed out that assessment practices, particularly in ‘high stakes’ assessment, do have a powerful ‘backwash’ effect, which means that classroom practice is substantially affected by what learners need to know and be able to do in assessments. This meant that it was essential to consider assessment instruments, in this case, examination question papers, to reach any kind of meaningful judgement about relative standards⁵.

Even when considering specified syllabuses together with examination papers, evaluators were only able to make limited judgements, as, for example, evaluators could not always make judgements about the predictability of questions, particularly in other countries. Of course, none of the evaluations enabled any insight into the *enacted* curriculum, or into how examination scripts were actually marked, both of which have substantial impact on educational quality. But evaluators were able to gain some insight into the relative standards of the different courses from the content specification in the curriculum documents, together with the examination question papers. None of this will be particularly surprising to educators who work in school systems or do research on school curricula or examinations. But the ways in which judgements were made: subject experts examining context, content, and assessment tools, could not have been done using only learning outcomes. The inability of evaluators to reach agreement across subject areas about the meaning of different words describing cognitive activities raises questions about the possibilities of creating hierarchies of level descriptors (or learning outcomes separate from knowledge areas) in any kind of meaningful way. It also corroborates the argument made by Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch (2011) that outcomes or standards only make sense in the context of the curriculum of which they are a part.

All of these conceptual problems suggest that level descriptors cannot play the roles that are claimed for them. This may explain why our research found very little evidence that level descriptors are actually being used, to say nothing of evidence about *how* they are being used, or how useful they are in making decisions about the location of qualifications on the framework, or about credit transfer, or at comparing

foreign qualifications. The only exception was in Scotland, where researchers described level descriptors as ‘assisting professional judgements’.

CONCLUSION

The claims made about the role of learning outcomes and outcomes-based qualifications in labour markets do not stand up to critical scrutiny.

The idea of level descriptors is broader than that of employer-specified competences, and applies to almost all qualifications frameworks, while the idea of employer-specified competences dominates some, but not all. I have demonstrated that a broader notion of outcomes in the form of level descriptors is unlikely to improve worker mobility, for the outcomes cannot operate in the way that they are claimed to—level descriptors do not provide a language to translate one education system into another, because they themselves are understood differently in different countries and even between different practitioners in the same countries. Further, outcomes-based qualifications frameworks do not address more fundamental problems with labour mobility—restrictions placed by national governments on emigration. Prior to this I explained why the idea of employer-specified competences and the outcomes/ competence-based qualification model that follows it emerged primarily in countries with *weak* relationships between vocational education and labour markets, and in more liberalized labour markets with weaker social policy. There is very little evidence that competence-based qualifications have solved the problem of weak relationships between education and labour markets, and I have shown that the reason for this is that they do not address the primary causes of the problem. What they do lead to is low-level qualifications containing narrowly specified skills, which have low-labour market currency—ironic for a policy that claims to improve education/ workplace relationships. This is aggravated by the ways in which outcomes-based qualification reforms can weaken education systems, as discussed in the previous two chapters. There are further educational problems with this approach, which I examine in the following chapter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Wolf (2002) for a useful elaboration of this problem.
- ² These are two of the descriptors for level three of the European Qualifications Framework, and are cited in Brockman *et al.* (2011, p. 7).
- ³ Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)
- ⁴ This and other related research is discussed in more detail in Allais (2012a).
- ⁵ The ‘backwash’ effect of assessment can, of course, have negative effects on education systems, particularly if the assessments are narrow, or if there is too much assessment, but this is a different issue from the problems with learning outcomes, and is certainly not solved by introducing learning outcomes, as is sometimes argued.