



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

## **Australian perspective on the European Qualifications Framework**

**“National Qualifications Frameworks in an international perspective”**

International Seminar on the occasion of the launch of the Flemish  
Qualifications Structure

Brussels 30/11/2009

Jack Keating  
University of Melbourne  
Australia 3010  
+61 3 8344 6020  
jkeating@unimelb.edu.au

## **Background**

Thank you for the invitation to talk to you about National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks.

Historically Australia looks towards three international regions:

- The USA, where the strategic military alliance since the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war has been a major driver, as was very much the case with the previous Australian Government;
- Asia, which has become the major trading area and where Australia is located; and
- Europe to which Australia is culturally attached, and especially to Britain.

Australia derives its education, training and qualifications traditions from Europe – and mostly the UK. It has tended to look towards European approaches – especially through Labor governments which have been attracted to some of the social partnership models of the northern European countries. So for example in the 1980s Australia adopted a training levy largely based upon the French model, and a highly influential document on industry restructuring was drawn from the experiences of northern European countries.

For the Australian audience the EQF has both an economic and a social rationale. The European idea of a more integrated labour market is an economic objective, but it also is a social objective. The broader idea of a more seamless European education system that is able to help learners to move between educational institutions across Europe and support lifelong learning is also a social ideal.

Broadly these objectives are shared in Australia and across most of the countries in Asian and Pacific region (Burke et al, 2009). Australia has been at the forefront of some of the associated developments, such as the recognition of informal learning, but does not have the linked set of developments that have taken place across the EU and the wider European and neighbouring regions. The idea of the recognition of formal learning preceded the development of a national qualification framework (NQF).

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was one of the first phase NQFs and its engagement with the EQF has been limited. It has changed little since it was established in 1995. One reason for this is that it has been a type of agreement or settlement between the education sectors, and there has been a reluctance to change the AQF for fear of upsetting this settlement.

As well the AQF had its origins in the TVET (or vocational education and training sector – VET) and so was influenced by the industrial arrangement for industry awards, and especially wages. So there has been a reluctance to change it for fear of upsetting these industry award arrangements.

### **NQFs and associated initiatives**

NQFs, especially in countries with mature education and training systems have not evolved in isolation. They mostly are the product of innovations designed to encourage greater investment in education and training, or what has come to be termed ‘lifelong learning’.

So I think that we need to see NQFs in the context of the movement of education and training as a core area of social and individual investment. The human capital need has become an imperative for governments in the globalised economy, as has education as a mechanism for social inclusion. There is a similar imperative for individuals who can

gain substantial private returns from education, but can face significant risks of economic and social exclusion if they have not invested in education.

Reforms to qualifications; transferring, linking and recognising qualifications; and better means of recognising wider forms of learning are all part of the broader agenda of facilitating access to, recognising and transferring learning. Virtually all OECD countries have taken initiatives across these areas over the past two decades, and many have borrowed and adapted initiatives from each other.

We also need to consider the governance structures and cultures of education. We tend to associate NQFs with governments. However, education and training systems have degrees of autonomy from the state. This is especially the case in higher education. For example, my own university – the University of Melbourne – has decided to restructure its degree program based largely on the Bologna model. This is a major initiative that was taken unilaterally by the University, albeit in consultation with the National Government.

In Australia, in particular, there is a high degree of institutional or sectoral separation. This has been exacerbated by our federalist system of government. However, it is also an intrinsic feature of education and training systems with their different funding and regulatory structures, industrial and occupational cultures and stakeholder communities. Indeed a core reason for establishing an NQF in Australia in 1995 was to establish a bridge between the sectors, and the features of the AQF have resulted from this purpose. That is as a multi – sectoral framework it has maintained an internal separation between the sets of qualifications for the three sectors – secondary schools, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education.

So in terms of inter country and inter region engagement on NQFs I suggest that we need to regard them in three ways.

- First, the NQFs are typically surrounded by multiple initiatives in the broad area of qualifications and recognition, and in all of these areas there can be and have been multiple engagements between countries.
- Second, the engagements do not have to be through government. They can be through sector authorities, associations and providers.
- Third, while there are other regional bodies – such as the ASEAN and APEC secretariats – none of them have the resources or the presence across member countries that EU has across its member countries.

### **The EQF as a regional and global initiative**

The EQF has been surrounded by multiple initiatives. They include

- The Bologna Processes;
- The Diploma Supplement;
- The EQF; and
- The recognition of informal learning.

There also have been more long standing programs, including Erasmus Mundus, which have engaged countries including Australia. As a researcher I also have had a substantial engagement with CEDEFOP and the European Training Foundation. In the area of education and training initiatives there can be no doubt that the action is in Europe and the EU, and the activities of the OECD tend to merge with the EU activities. Europe

and its various goals established in Lisbon, for us, tend to be the driver especially in the areas of qualifications, recognition and employment.

As an engine of initiatives in qualifications, recognition and the linkages with employment the EU as an organisation, a collection of countries and a region is unmatched internationally. In an era where countries pay greater attention to education, employment and training initiatives internationally there is widespread interest in these developments in Australia and some other countries in the region.

It is important to see engagement between Australian and the EQF as multi-level:

- Bologna, which has attracted the interest of the Australian government and universities as both a collection and as individual universities, especially my own;
- The recognition of formal learning through multiple engagements with multiple bodies over more than a decade;
- The diploma supplement, including engagement by various awarding bodies in Australia, and neighbouring countries;
- The Copenhagen process, although this mainly being observed rather than engaged with.

It should be stressed that these engagements are through multiple agencies: governments – state and national – and their departments; awarding and accrediting bodies; providers – universities and training institutes; and industry, occupational and provider associations.

### **Australia and the EQF**

In regards to the EQF the direct engagement has been limited, to this point in time. The reasons for this have been the ‘settlement’ and structure of the AQF. During the period of the development and endorsement of the EQF the AQF was relatively stable, with little stakeholder interest in changing it. As a consequence there was little education and training sector interest in engaging with international developments. More interest came from some state governments and agencies, especially in the area of credit and credit frameworks.

The sectoral structure of the AQF, as shown below, is different to the domain based structure of the EQF. Therefore, they represent different constructs. It would be possible for the AQF qualifications to use the level descriptors of the EQF to align levels for the Australian qualifications types. However, levels have been avoided in the past, largely because of the implications for the industrial awards or wages. So for example four apprenticeship graduates are typically awarded a certificate III despite the fact that one year traineeship graduates are also awarded a certificate III. There also has been some reluctance to address the question of volume of learning within qualifications.

Both of these issues have now been put on the table with a proposal for a ‘strengthen AQF’. The outcome of this initiative has not yet been determined

## The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Schools Accreditation	Sector	Vocational Education and Training Sector Accreditation	Higher Education Sector Accreditation
			Doctoral Degree Masters Degree Graduate Diploma Graduate Certificate Bachelor Degree Associate Degree Advanced Diploma Diploma
Senior Secondary Certificate of Education		Vocational Graduate Diploma Vocational Graduate Certificate Advanced Diploma Diploma Certificate IV Certificate III Certificate II Certificate I	

I will not go through the details of these developments and the Australian equivalents. However, it is important to recognise that these developments are inter related and they all have their equivalents in Australia and many neighbouring countries and that there is some degree of engagement with Europe on all of them.

So to try to get a focus for the paper I will attempt to address some questions:

- What is the nature of the engagement between Australia and the qualifications and recognition developments that have emanated from the EU?
- What has been and could be the impact of the EQF on Australian developments?
- Can the Australia case indicate the likely response of other non European countries to the EQF?

In considering these questions I will concentrate upon the EQF, but where appropriate make links with the other developments.

The connections between Australia and the EQF and associated processes can be grouped together as three sets:

1. The first is that in regards to the Australian NQF and I would suggest all NQFs the EQF and the associated activities are the major international development in qualifications and recognition.

There are other regional frameworks. However they are small scale and relatively isolated developments in comparison to the EQF. It is important to note that there are sets of regional agreements between sets of educational providers (mainly universities), professional associations, and governments for the mutual recognition of sets of qualifications – such as accountancy and surveying qualifications across the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and in some cases for common assessment systems.

There has been a substantial engagement between the EU developments and Asia and Pacific nations. This has been supported by the international organisations.

The EQF and associated developments have attracted a considerable interest in Australia governance of education and training is distributed between the national and state governments and most of the responsible agencies have paid some attention to the EQF.

So for example the National Education Department (Keating et al, 2008) sponsored a study on 'enhancing the AQF' that used the EQF as a benchmark for a possible redesigned AQF. It proposed 8 levels and suggested that the domains of 'knowledge, skills and competencies' could be starting points for a revised AQF.

Over the past year a review of the AQF has been initiated and a proposal has been put forward for a 'strengthened AQF' (AQFC, 2009). Unfortunately the proposal is more distant from the AQF than the original proposal. This is because the different sectors have wanted to hold on to their sets of qualifications – which is the way in which the current AQF is constructed. The core concept of an EQF which has a set of objective and independent domain descriptors against which individual qualifications or components of qualifications can be benchmarked has not been fully accepted.

2. This point also relates to the second implication of the EQF - the concept of a regional qualifications framework. The Asia and Pacific region is not as clearly defined as Europe – economically, culturally, politically, or geographically. Two prominent regional associations are the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. Through ASEAN there have been a number of agreements for the mutual recognition of sets of occupational qualifications (e.g. Teo, 2005). There also are relations established between professional associations across countries in the Asian region and some countries have signed accords, such as the Washington Accord, that commit signatories to the mutual recognition of degree programs in engineering (Basri et al, 2004).

The Bologna processes have also had an impact here. A Brisbane Communiqué in 2006 was largely based upon 'lessons from the European (Bologna Process)' (DEEWR, 2008) and committed APEC education ministers to collaborate on goals to encourage and facilitate regional student and academic mobility and exchange.

A recent survey of APEC countries found that most would be interested to pursue a regional qualifications framework (Burke, et al, 2009). The study recommended that this should be a voluntary framework and that it should be based upon the EQF to minimise developmental costs.

3. A third set of connections is the educational export market. Australia has a robust educational export market in higher education and TVET programs and qualifications. The market is mainly located in Asia. In recent years it has become clear that the market has become more competitive with some Asian countries such as Singapore and China building their own capacities and with competition from North America and Europe.

The Bologna process that has resulted in the 3 + 2 year structure for higher education degrees is seen as potentially more attractive for international students,

than the mostly 4 year bachelor degrees in Australia. One Australian University has adopted the Bologna structure and two other are soon to follow. These are all high status and demand universities with a large percentage of international students.

An extension of the international student market is student exchanges and other bilateral relations between Australian and European universities and colleges. My own university has bilateral relations with over 40 European universities and this is more than for any other region. It is likely that these linkages will increase and as many of these relations include student placements and exchanges it is likely that the Bologna processes and outcomes will continue to have an influence upon Australian universities, especially at the bachelor degree level.

## **The AQF & the EQF**

A core reason for looking to 'enhance' and 'strengthen' the AQF has been a feeling that as a 1<sup>st</sup> phase NQF it has fallen behind international developments, and especially the EQF and associated developments. In this sense the EQF has had a significant impact, and will continue to do so.

The current AQF is basically a set of qualifications type descriptors located across the three sectors of senior secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education. Thus its capacity to link qualifications across the sectors is limited. The EQF and other NQFs have prompted the proposal for domain based descriptors, which appears to have relatively wide support. However, the proposal to locate these at 10 levels and to also include domain based descriptors for each qualification type is more controversial. On the other hand the three domains of Knowledge, Skills and Application are close to those of the EQF. One state (Victoria) has developed its own credit matrix, with eight levels. This matrix was developed in parallel with the EQF and there are clear synergies.

In Australia a robust agenda for strengthening the recognition of informal (or prior) learning and credit transfer systems has existed for over two decades. The AQF while a limited framework has provided a forum for cross sectoral negotiations over these issues and a set of guidelines for credit systems and recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been established.

Transfers from the vocational education and training sector now represent about 10 percent of bachelor degree enrolments. A third of these enrolments carry some amount of credit, which is high by international and EU standards. A key lesson here from the Australian experience is that credit systems depend upon trust between sets of providers, supported by clarity and transparency in processes and requirements.

It is more difficult to generalise about RPL. There are no reliable estimates for the higher education sector. Within the vocational education and training sector it is estimated that 3.4 percent of students gained some credit through RPL in 2005 (Hargreaves, 2006). Once again this is high by OECD and EU standards.

## **Competence**

A final point on the concept of competence should be considered. Australia together with England was amongst the first countries to adopt the idea of competency based training (CBT). This outcomes based approach has proven to be controversial in New Zealand and South Africa (Strathdee, 2003; Allias, 2007). It has been less controversial

in Australia, although it is contested (e.g. Wheelahan, 2007). The controversy in New Zealand and South Africa was caused by attempts to bring outcomes and standards based curriculum in unit form into the higher education sectors. This was not attempted in Australia and the sector based structure of the AQF avoided this.

The EQF does include competence as one of its domains. However, it does sit with knowledge and skills, and I think this is very important, as I do not believe that the idea of competency abstracted from knowledge has yet to establish legitimacy within qualifications, especially in the generalist areas of schooling and higher education.

The EQF offers further protection because as a meta framework it allows countries to link their qualifications to its levels rather than allow the domain descriptor to dictate the constructs of knowledge within them.

### **Conclusions – the EQF and Australian qualifications in the future**

It seems likely that the broader Asian region will continue to look towards the EU & the EQF for NQFs and all of the associated developments. At this stage the national developments remain fragmented, and the short term prospects for a regional framework are not good, mainly because of the relatively weaknesses of the regional associations including their weak infrastructures.

Whether this will lead to some adoption of elements of the EQF or some connections with the EQF similar to those of the non-EU countries that have bought into the EQF is hard to judge. If it does occur it is likely to come from an Asian rather than an American nation. At this stage I don't see it happening with Australia, but New Zealand may be a possibility. Nevertheless a strengthened AQF could link into the EQF in a similar manner to the NQFs of other first phase countries that are EU members.

Australia has been an active scene for the questions of the recognition of learning, the transfer of credit between qualifications, and a more transparent and open qualifications system. The education and training community within Australia is active internationally. Therefore it is highly likely that it will seek greater engagement with the European developments, but at multiple levels and in multiple forms.

## References

- Allias Stephanie (2007) *An evaluation of the South African Qualifications Framework* unpublished PhD thesis, The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- AQFC (2009) Strengthening the AQF, Adelaide; online: <http://www.aqf.edu.au/Portals/0/Strengthening%20the%20AQF%20-%20An%20Architecture%20for%20Australia's%20Qualifications.pdf>
- Basri1, H.; Che Man, A. B., ;Wan Badaruzzaman, W. H., and Nor, M. J. M. (2004) Malaysia and the Washington Accord: What it takes for full membership, *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, pp. 64 - 73
- DEEWR (Dept. of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications across the Brisbane Communiqué Region, Canberra,
- Gerald Burke (Team Leader), Phillip McKenzie, Keating Jack; Vickers Alison, Fernside Rob; Bateman Andrea, and Chandra Shah (2009) *Mapping Qualifications across Asian and Pacific Countries*, Monash University–ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET)
- Hargreaves, Jo 2006, Recognition of prior learning at a glance, NCVET, online: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1662.html>, accessed 16/6
- Keating et al (2008) *Enhancing the AQF*, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra (unpublished)
- Strathdee E. (2003) *The Qualifications Framework in New Zealand: reproducing existing inequalities or disrupting the positional conflict for credentials*, *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 26, No 2.
- Teo Chee Hai (2005) Mutual Recognition of Surveying Qualifications within the ASEAN, Framework Agreement on Services<sup>1</sup>, Association of Authorised Land Surveyors Malaysia, online: [http://www.fig.net/pub/jakarta/papers/ps\\_05/ps\\_05\\_3\\_teo.pdf](http://www.fig.net/pub/jakarta/papers/ps_05/ps_05_3_teo.pdf) (accessed, 11.11.2009)
- Wheelahan, Leesa (2007b) *How competency-based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge: a modified Bernsteinian analysis*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 28, No. 5, pp. 637-651