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LEVEL DESCRIPTORS IN NATIONAL QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS (NQF): AN OVERVIEW OF “DESCRIPTOR CRITERION” IN NQF OF VARIOUS COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Level descriptors are seen as a channel for clarifying equivalence and rationalizing qualifications systems. The purpose of the study is to obtain a better understanding of ‘level descriptor’ in NQF and to explore the “descriptor criterion” in NQF of different countries. In this paper authors attempting to explore the dimensions undertaken by different countries in their qualification framework to decide on the learning outcomes. The study is exploratory in nature based on secondary data. The target reader’s group for this study are primarily the practitioners worldwide; who are involved in the development and implementation of NQFs; followed by equally important audience that includes education & training policymakers, social partners, education & training providers and experts who have interest in NQFs.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous graduates enter the marketplace year after year; this has led to immense mobility of workforce into the economy. The shifting and complicate nature of the world economy and the transformation of the occupational souk in the country, demands a unitary framework for employment at the global arena. However, to evaluate the suitability of workforce in the industry, there has to be an integrated system of qualification assessment worldwide. As a result, several nations like Russia, Tunisia, Scotland, South Africa, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and many more countries along, preferred to create respective National Qualification Frameworks (NQF). By the beginning of 2012, 138 countries were reported to be planning, developing or implementing NQFs, including all 27 countries of the European Union (Serban 2012; Cedefop 2011). The European Qualification Framework (EQF) recommendation defines an NQF as ‘an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate

national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society’ (European Parliament and Council 2008, C111/4).

NQFs introduced in different social, economic and institutional settings may look similar in their formal design and organisational structures but differ in their purposes and the ways that they work (Young 2007a). Researchers have explained this diversity in their own way: based on structure [communicational, transformational and reformative NQF (Allais 2007a; Raffe, 2009a)], sub-frameworks (Bjørnåvold and Coles (2010)) and regional models (Cedefop 2011; Pevec Grm and Bjørnåvold 2010). This paper aims to explore the diversity in NQF with regard to the key parameters at different levels. Although, this variation is pertaining to level descriptors. However, it could lead to changed objectives, process, and consequently the structure and implementation of NQF in different countries changes.

DISCUSSION/ARGUMENTS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature demonstrates the shift in the utilization of level descriptors. In this paper, the authors survey the literature from conventional procedure to new criticalness of level descriptors. In general, it is known that a learning outcomes approach can increase access to education by making entrance requirements more fair and transparent, and because individuals can be awarded certificates based on what they already know (Jessup, 1991). Although, in countries or sectors of economies where there are surpluses of qualified workers, qualifications become screening devices, rather than indicators of the attainment of skills necessary for the job in question (Shields, 1996). Traditionally ‘qualifying’ denotes a process of learning as well as the completion of a formal, institutionalized assessment procedure (Fuller, 1999). As governments have looked for closer links between the economy and education, qualifications have taken on a new significance (Lowe, 2000).

Since a decade, the phase of understanding the levels of qualifications and learning outcomes has changed, as the world economy has moved towards international trade. However, increased international trade in education and training has also contributed to a growing focus on qualifications (Holmes, 2003). Although Coles (2007, p. 7) suggested that qualifications frameworks involve “defining levels through descriptors that are sometimes written on the basis of learning inputs and sometimes written on the basis of learning outcomes”. Coles (ibid, p. 22) argues that the intention is “to chart a course from a system with curricula, assessment methods and qualifications that are based on inputs of content, teacher-time and norm referenced assessments to a criterion-referenced system based on agreed learning outcomes”. Also Coles (ibid, p. 3) suggested that NQFs are intended to make qualifications more “user-oriented”, which, he argues, means weakening the control of education and training providers over qualifications. Nevertheless, the ‘shift to outcomes’ (Cedefop, 2008) is widely (if largely uncritically) supported internationally, and represents a real change in how qualifications are thought about. Learning outcomes are also linked to what are described as better pedagogical approaches (Cedefop, 2008). Yet, the researchers who support this move argue that qualifications frameworks represent ‘new notions of knowledge’, and a ‘new hierarchy’ in which “education providers are no longer the leaders and standards-setters, and content (or inputs) is no longer the starting point” (Commonwealth of Learning and SAQA, 2008, p. 44).

Though, Allais, Raffe and Young (2009) argued that qualifications are not separate factors alterable independently of the other ways in which education & training systems and economies are linked. However, Allais and Young (2009) suggested that qualifications are proxies for what people ‘know and can do’ and therefore are better seen as mediators of different parts of the education system and between education and employment than as drivers of educational reform. Although, the primary focus of the reviewed literature is on learning outcomes, however, gradually the authors have directed it towards the parameters/mediators of ‘level descriptors’. The learning outcomes are being introduced in different degrees into level descriptors, into qualifications then assessment and finally the learning processes. It is even conceivable to utilize the level descriptors in a structure as the

beginning stage for characterizing the planned learning in a program or work action. The scope of Qualification frameworks level descriptors is probably going to be broader. The key thought is that there must be straightforwardness in necessities from the learning circumstance to the confirmation of that learning in a qualification at a particular level in a NQF. However, the literature survey raises a question- as to how the level descriptors in any qualification frameworks have been understood and designed in different countries?

Research Gap

The discussion and arguments brought out in the literature explores that- many research studies have been carried out on the divergence nature of NQF, but not pertaining to the ‘level descriptors’ specifically. This limits the ability of policy makers to reach out to any conclusion and/or to answer the question raised in literature review.

Objectives of study

- To understand the concept of “level descriptors” in any qualification framework.
- To explore the “descriptor criterion” in NQF of different countries.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Research components	Description
Research type	Exploratory Research
Data source	Secondary Data

Objective 1. Level Descriptor in Qualification Frameworks: The concept

The following questions and their respective answers would help to understand the concept of ‘level descriptors’:

What are levels?

An indicator of relative demand made on the learner, the complexity and/or depth of achievement, and the learner’s autonomy in demonstrating that achievement. (SAQA 2001).

What are level descriptors?

A statement describing learning achievement at a specific level on the NQF – provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of these ten levels. (SAQA 2001).

Who uses level descriptors?

Following are the stakeholders, who make use of the level descriptors:

- Learners
- Providers
- Curriculum designers
- Employers, etc (SAQA 2001).

Where are the level descriptors used?

– An inclusive framework; the level descriptors are designed to enable their use across a wide range of learning contexts.

Table 1. A typical representation of Levels in NQF and Qualification Type

Levels in NQF	Qualification Type
1-4	-National Certificates
5	-Higher Certificates
6	-Diploma -Advanced Certificates
7	-Bachelors -Advanced Diplomas
8	-Professional Degrees
9	-Master Degrees
10	-Doctorates and Post-Doctoral research Degree

Source: Authors (*This format could vary from country to country)

Table 2. Showing some examples of countries having different “Descriptor Criterion” for each qualification level

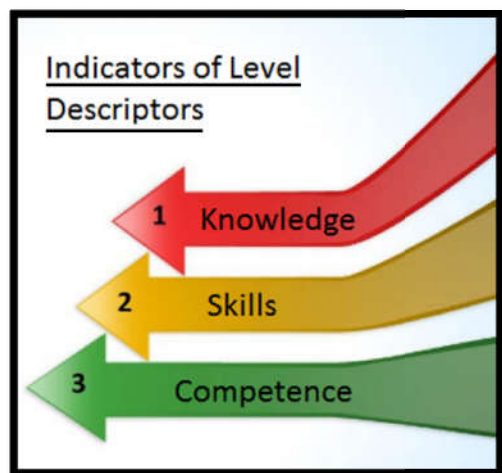
Country	Levels	“Descriptor Criterion” for each level
India (2013)	10	5 Domains: (1) Process, (2) Professional knowledge, (3) Professional skills, (4) Core skills (5) Responsibility
Russia (2012)	9	10 Indicators of professional performance: (1) Work with information, (2) Reflection, (3) Ability to learn, (4) Business communication, (5) Responsibility, (6) Motivation, (7) Setting up goals, (8) Independence, (9) Ability to teach, (10) Breadth of views
Malaysia (2007)	8	8 Domains: (1) Knowledge, (2) Practical skills, (3) Social skills and responsibilities, (4) Values, attitudes and professionalism, (5) Communication, leadership and team skills, (6) Problem solving and scientific skills, (7) Information management and lifelong learning skills, (8) Managerial and entrepreneurial skills
South Africa (2002)	10	10 Types of competencies: (1) Scope of knowledge, (2) Knowledge literacy, (3) Method and procedure, (4) Problem solving, (5) Ethics and professional practice, (6) Accessing, Processing and managing information, (7) Producing and communicating of information, (8) Context and systems (9) Management of learning, (10) Accountability
Tunisia (2009)	7	6 Types of descriptors (1) Complexity, (2) Autonomy, (3) Responsibility, (4) Adaptability, (5) Knowledge, (6) Know-how & Behavior
Scotland (2001)	12	5 Characteristic (Generic Outcomes): (1) Knowledge and understanding, (2) Practise, (3) Generic cognitive skills, (4) Communication, ICT and numeracy skills, (5) Autonomy, accountability and working with others
Turkey (2015)	8	5 Policy Indicators (1) Awareness raising (2) Conceptualization (3) Implementation (4) Monitoring policy cycle (5) Independent policy learning

Source: Authors

The descriptors have been written to cover the full range of learning achievement i.e. all forms of learning - formal, non-

formal and informal (NQF Act, 2008). The level descriptors are the backbone of any qualification framework.

They are complex but also are believed to be the focal component for making decisions. It is difficult to envision how they can be useful in making decision about qualification location in any framework. Although, the concept is vital, at the same time questionable, as to what level descriptors mean and if there are descriptors for each of ten areas and ten levels of capabilities respectively. In Fig. 1, the 3 indicators of level descriptors are revealed. These indicators are measured taking under consideration the various dimensions at different levels of qualification.



Source: Authors

Fig. 1. Indicators of Level descriptors

These indicators help the respective stakeholders to categorize and also certify a candidature based on their capability as per the pre-defined ‘descriptor criterion’ mentioned in their NQF. Level descriptors are seen as a guide for clarifying equivalence and rationalizing qualifications systems. They are also seen as a mechanism to increase transparency of qualifications systems, because they are intended to provide broad information about skills, abilities, and possession/mastery of knowledge areas, which should apply to all qualifications which are pegged at a specific level of a qualifications framework. They are also seen as the mechanism which will ensure that qualifications are broadly “comparable”, and that equivalent qualifications, which are currently not viewed as equivalent, will be recognized as such. (Allais 2010). Table 1 represents the Level Descriptors as sets of learning outcomes statements that define levels in a framework as per the qualification band. This grid sets out descriptor statements for a framework of ten (10) levels. Each qualification band or type is described based on the 3 indicators i.e., knowledge, skill and competence (EQF descriptors). These Level Descriptors form the foundation for any NQF.

Objective 2

“Descriptor criterion” in NQF of different countries

Some countries see an NQF as a way of designing new qualifications, with level descriptors as the starting point in terms of broad specifications of competencies. Some countries rather emphasize their role in organizing existing qualifications in a clear, consistent, and transparent manner. In both cases, level descriptors are seen as the main mechanism that will create or improve transparency. Official sets of levels have been created in all the countries, and level descriptors in most

of them. What then, do these descriptors look like? (Allais 2010). Table 2 represented below, considers NQF of certain countries as examples to bring out the diverse ‘descriptor criterion’ while defining the qualification level. In the table, 7 different countries have different dimensions to measure the 3 common or base indicators i.e., knowledge, skill and competence. Table 2 shows that the qualification levels in the NQF of these countries range from 7 to 12. The dimensions of descriptor criteria lie between 5 to 10. Each dimension varies from other. However, the statements in any qualification level would be defined for all the 3 indicators, which would be further taken into consideration for decision making regarding the qualification band.

Conclusion

Although, the NQF are seen as a step in the paradigm shift to systems based on learning outcome, in reality this is a gradual process. However, the use of qualification descriptors is made prominent. The findings of the current study attempt to provide empirical indication about having diverse criteria for setting up the dimensions of the level descriptors for any qualification type; in order to gauge or esteem the human capacities regarding learning outcomes. The paper gives detailed understanding of ‘level descriptors’ in qualification frameworks and has also revealed that the ‘descriptor criterion’ in NQF of different countries varies from each other. In spite of having variation, the level descriptor tends to measure 3 common indicators in any NQF i.e., knowledge, skill and competence. However, these indicators would ultimately facilitate the decision on the qualification level of a candidature.

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