

Positioning credential evaluation practices ¹

James Keevy

South African Qualifications Authority

Credential evaluation as a field is not an exact science, but is also sensitive to international trends, both political and philosophical. It is the responsibility of every evaluating service to stay informed of the current discussions in the field by keeping up on the recent literature and participating in existing international networks. (NUFFIC 1997:11)

Introduction

Modern society attributes great value to qualifications as agreed and trusted proxy for the competencies and skills of individuals (Keating 2008). The global spread of national, regional and transnational qualifications frameworks to organise qualifications in a manner that increases transparency and international comparability bears testimony to this fact, as does the prominent role of credential evaluation agencies in societies to translate foreign credentials into locally accepted currency. To date the relationship between credential evaluation and qualifications frameworks remains largely unexplored (NQAI 2010) and confronted by a range of criticisms: it is argued that qualifications remain at best, only limited proxies for competencies and skills; qualifications frameworks are criticized for not delivering on the promises of increased comparability and transparency; and credential evaluation methodologies are criticized for being opaque and outdated, susceptible to political influences. This paper elaborates on some of these aspects as it attempts to show the benefits of a closer relationship between credential evaluation and qualifications frameworks. In particular the paper draws on the South African experiences of qualifications framework development since the 1980s, and the establishment of a credential evaluation function that started in the 1950s. Based on these experiences, and considering also the

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related international developments, the paper concludes with suggestions for positioning credential evaluation practices in the context of qualifications frameworks.

The emergence of qualifications frameworks

During the late 1980s, and strongly influenced by the thinking on integration but also by a focus on vocational training through a competency approach, the notion of a national qualifications framework (nqf) emerged in the United Kingdom with its intellectual roots in the competence approach to vocational education that originated in England. The idea was developed that all qualifications could be expressed in terms of outcomes without prescribing learning pathways or programmes (Young 2005). Within this politically charged melting pot of factors, and a renewed emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning, the first generation of nqfs were established in Australia, England, Scotland, New Zealand and Republic of Ireland between 1989 and 1994.

In many cases, these nqfs were seen to be defaulting on their initial promises (McBride and Keevy 2010) and active opposition from critics, often from the higher education sector, resulted in changes to the original concepts, notably in Australia. In Scotland and the Republic of Ireland the challenges were less intense, while in England, New Zealand and South Africa significant changes have been necessary, some as recently as 2009. Despite the criticism and challenges, nqf development and implementation has not remained limited to the first generation countries (Chakroun 2010, Bjornavold & Coles 2010). Qualifications framework development has now become a global phenomenon with nearly 60% (130) of countries across the world involved in national processes, at least four regions in regional qualifications framework development, and some 80 countries involved in transnational qualifications frameworks.

After only two decades since they were first introduced, outcomes-based qualifications frameworks have made a significant impact on the international education and training policy terrain. Today few education, training or workplace discussions take place without some reference to qualifications frameworks as the dynamic phenomenon is increasing across the globe (see Raffe 2009). Due to ongoing research the literature has also become richer over the past few years and it is becoming increasingly possible to draw on this base, which includes empirical data, as the debates deepen and as countries and regions consider their options.

Elaborating on the current model of credential evaluation

The evaluation of credentials is not limited to the recognition of qualifications, but may include professional designations, and in some cases, also non-formal and informal learning. In most cases however, including South Africa, the evaluation of qualifications is preferred. While the use of interchangeable nomenclature may not seem important, it does signal the delineation of the scope of the object of evaluation; a point that is taken up again later in this paper. Notably, credential evaluation precedes the emergence of qualifications frameworks by several decades. As an example, the establishment of a foreign qualification evaluation service in South Africa dates back to the late 1950s, while the South African nqf was only formally established in 1995. The evaluation function was later transferred to the Human Sciences Research Council, and in 1999, to the South African Qualifications Authority. The evaluation of foreign qualifications gradually evolved from a quantitative, time-based focus to a more qualitative, benchmarking approach. Since its transfer to SAQA, this evolution has been accelerated as the principles of the South African NQF, which promote access, mobility, portability, a focus on outcomes and a culture of lifelong learning, have necessitated major changes in the work of the section. The ongoing need to review evaluation procedures, systems and practice was pushed to the extreme by the implementation of revised immigration policy in South Africa in July 2005, when the demand for the service trebled (Keevy & Coetzee 2006).

The recognition of foreign qualifications in South Africa involves both a process leading to understanding of what a particular qualification signals, as well as the result of that process, which is a decision to accept the qualification for a specific purpose, i.e. an acknowledgement of its appropriateness for that purpose. Credential evaluation in South Africa involves both these aspects, namely (SAQA, 2005):

- the evaluation of a qualification awarded in another country to inform the decision to recognise that qualification, where the recognition is based on a relevant knowledge base, and includes access to information and the formal criteria used for assessment
- the formal acknowledgement/recognition of the qualification and a binding decision allowing the qualification holder to access employment or further studies based on empowering regulations

The activities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While one role-player may have both the competency to evaluate and the jurisdiction to recognise specific qualifications, another may have

only the competency to evaluate, or the jurisdiction to recognise. A decision-making body needs adequate knowledge, criteria and resources to allow for an in-house evaluation if it does not engage the services of an external evaluation partner. However, its findings are valid in specific contexts only and cannot necessarily be transferred to others.

The South African model, as is the case with most other credential evaluation agencies (see NUFFIC 1997), is based on international guidelines as contained, inter alia, in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) which differentiates between National Information Centers (NICs) and Competent Recognition Authorities (CRAs). NICs evaluate and offer advice intended to be as universally applicable as possible, but do not make binding decisions, while CRAs make binding decisions on recognition. The evaluation of foreign qualifications at SAQA (the first of the two aspects outlined above) is a typical NIC function. The second type of entity is referred to as a CRA, where “competent” refers to a legal status and/or common agreement within a particular community of practice, which allows it to make determinations and application decisions. In some cases CRAs may have the technical ability to determine the extent of “sameness” or substantial differences between qualifications, but these processes would ideally be closely aligned to those promoted by the NIC. CRAs generally refer information on decisions to the NIC that fulfill a guiding function.

Importantly, a distinction is made between CRAs for academic recognition and CRAs for professional recognition (Rauhvargers, 2003 in SAQA, 2005). CRAs for academic recognition include higher education institutions and their representative bodies, and focus on two levels, namely undergraduate, where the emphasis is on access qualifications at school leaving level and their suitability for admission into higher education programmes and where determinations are made by matriculation boards and similar bodies; and postgraduate, where the suitability of access qualifications is determined by the faculties, schools or departments of individual institutions. The purpose of CRAs for professional recognition is to determine whether the foreign qualification holder possesses sufficient skills and competencies to pursue a particular profession or career in a receiving country. Two different types of professional CRAs are distinguished (Rauhvargers, 2003 in SAQA, 2005:13): *De jure* professional recognition (the recognition of qualifications in professions in respect of law which regulates either the education leading to the pursuit of the profession, the pursuit of the profession itself, or both), and *De facto* professional recognition (the recognition of foreign qualifications for employment purposes, where neither the professional activity, nor the relevant education, is regulated by law). Examples of CRAs for professional recognition include

professional teaching councils, statutory and non-statutory professional bodies, employers and associations.

The diagram below illustrates the differences between the NICs and the CRAs. It also shows that a link can exist between the national qualifications authority and the NIC, as is the case in South Africa, Australia, Namibia, Mauritius, and New Zealand.

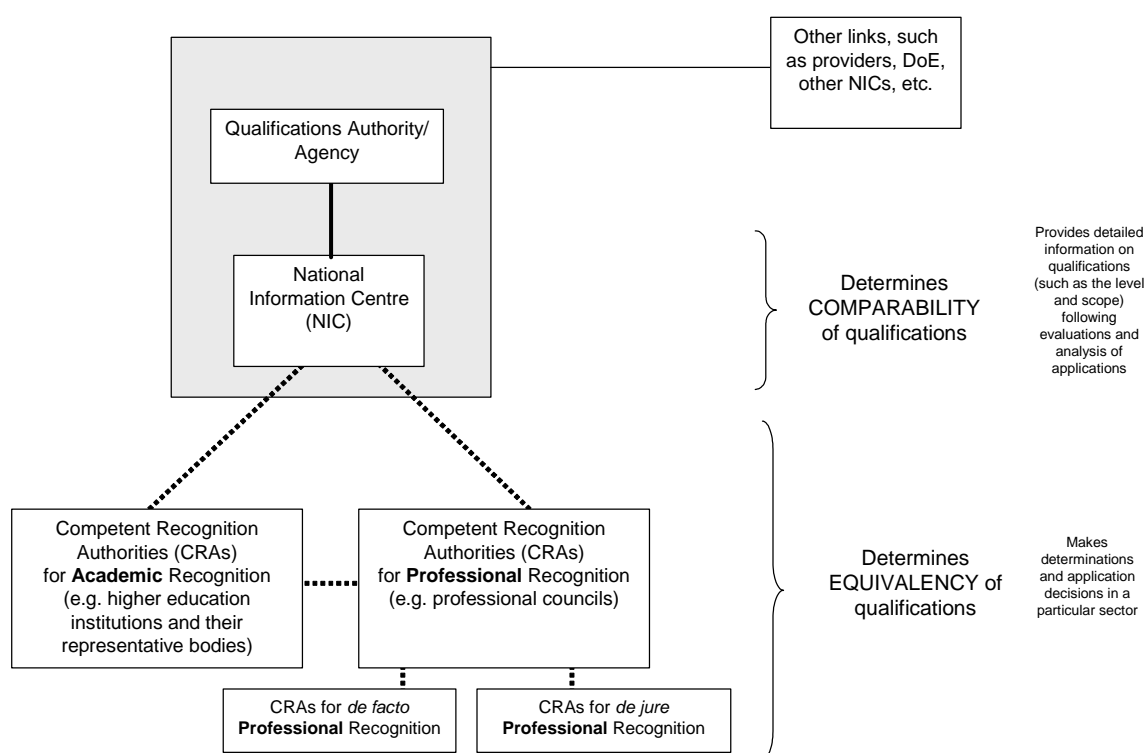


Diagram 1: Credential evaluation agencies

An important distinction is made in the diagram between the “comparability” of qualifications, as a more generic level of evaluation (i.e. a level that does not require subject matter experts) performed by the NIC, and the “equivalency” of qualifications, performed by CRAs, and which requires subject matter experts. This refinement of the language of recognition has been suggested to signal the differences between the different activities in the credential evaluation process, as developed in a Commonwealth study on teacher qualifications (Keevy and Jansen 2010), which in turn, draws on the international move away from the term “equivalence” (see Rauhvargers, 2003 in SAQA, 2005). The differences between the two levels of recognition are outlined below.

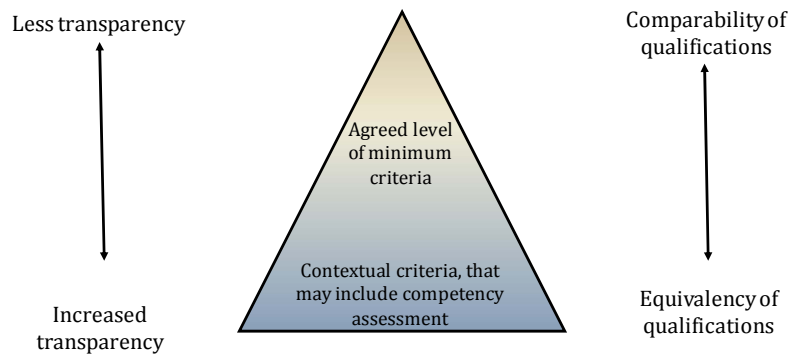


Diagram 2: Levels of evaluation

From the Commonwealth study it was suggested, in order to judge the claims of comparability, it is important to gauge first the meanings of three key terms surrounding this important construct, which are sometimes used interchangeably (*Ibid*, p.18):

Transparency is the degree to which the value of qualifications can be identified and compared in education, training, the workplace and more. It is the degree of explicitness about the meaning of a qualification (outcomes, content, levels, standards, awards). It implies the exchange of information about qualifications in an accessible way within and outside the country of award. When transparency is achieved, it is [potentially] possible to compare the value and content of qualifications at national and international level.

Recognition is the formal or legal specifications that a qualification must meet in order to be accepted (recognized) as fulfilling the (transparently) set standards, such as are often defined for the professions. Recognition can be unilateral, mutual or based on regional/trade agreements.

Comparability is the comparison of one qualification with another, based, most often, on a common format or instrument - such as comparability tables - that enables the “face value” of a qualification to be established. The act of comparing enables judgments to be made about the similarity of qualifications [criteria may include: the purpose of the qualification, date of completion, minimum entry requirements, minimum duration, structure and type of programme, further access gained by virtue of the qualification and formal right bestowed on the qualification holder (SAQA 2005:22-23)].

The greater the transparency with which a qualification is presented, the easier it is to compare one qualification with another, and the more reliable the system of recognition by which a qualification can be accepted by the state, professions or an individual. Transparency is seen as a necessary precondition for claims about comparability, but these two constructs are clearly not the same. So

too, recognition can be achieved without the necessity of detailed comparison - for example through legal agreements and directives between institutions or nations for qualifications, such as a medical degree, obtained in a different context which would then be deemed equivalent to each other.

Challenges presented by qualifications frameworks for credential evaluation practices

Qualifications frameworks aim to promote access and mobility within education and training and in career paths. Similarly, the major thrust of the work of credential evaluation agencies, be it NICs (functioning at the broader advisory level of evaluation and comparability), or CRAs (functioning at the more detailed level of regulated recognition or “equivalence”) would be to facilitate international worker and learner mobility. This service supports decision-making when foreign learners seek placement in the receiving countries, and to a lesser extent, when citizens are placed overseas. It would ensure that receiving countries are open to foreign qualification holders who want to contribute to the country’s socio-economic growth. The critique that qualifications frameworks have yet to deliver on many of the promises of increased mobility and progression is valid, yet there are encouraging signs of progress in some sectors. It is also apparent, though, that power struggles and ideological shifts are deeply embedded in development and implementation of national, regional and transnational qualifications frameworks. Credential evaluation services, on the other hand, have for some time proven useful in facilitating mobility of foreign skilled workers, but remain at the mercy of political shifts directly influenced by skills shortages and migratory concerns:

When migrants are able to employ their skills, their work clearly benefits both themselves and receiving societies. But when skilled migrants are compelled to work at jobs that are not commensurate with their qualifications, their capacity to contribute is compromised. Such waste arises from barriers in the recognition of degrees, certificates and qualifications obtained abroad. International cooperation is necessary to improve the portability of qualifications and the mutual recognition of degrees and certification (United Nations, 2006:15).

In a recent study commissioned by the European Training Foundation (Keevy, Chakroun and Deij 2010) it was found that transnational qualifications frameworks are introducing new qualification recognition methodologies that are challenging existing models. The study points out that unilateral recognition (where the receiving country decides which skills and qualifications it will recognise),

mutual recognition agreements (formal agreements between sending and receiving countries, mostly within the professions) and trade/regional agreements are being overtaken by qualifications frameworks and new forms of recognition:

It is however evident that qualification frameworks in general have brought about new forms of recognition beyond the more traditional routes based on unilateral, mutual recognition agreements, and trade agreements. Through qualification frameworks an increased emphasis is being placed on transparency, currency and portability facilitated through the use of outcomes-based learning. This new “technology” that is being introduced through qualification frameworks is at odds with the more traditional routes that are by and large time-based and inflexible. (*Ibid*, 68)

It is argued that the drive towards creating relational views of components within education and training systems, which is occasioned by qualifications frameworks, also promotes a shift towards explication and the meanings of qualifications. Yet a comparison between the conceptual models underlying qualifications frameworks and credential evaluation seems to suggest that the two constructs remain disconnected and relatively incompatible (NQAI 2010). Qualifications frameworks are a recent phenomenon, influenced by competency-based and outcomes-based thinking and represents the new “technology” available to recognise learning, while credential evaluation practices have remained largely unaffected by recent developments, remaining tied to traditional process-orientated approaches that are proving inadequate to transcend modern challenges. The South African example is a case in point (also see Isaacs 2010). Despite the location of the credential evaluation function within SAQA, the approach followed (based on the Lisbon convention and as outlined above) remains largely unaffected by the nqf and outcomes-based thinking, despite the close proximity. This situation is not unique to South Africa, as pointed out by the Centre for International Recognition and Certification in the Netherlands that calls for a shift in evaluation processes to evaluate also outcomes of educational processes (NUFFIC 2010:5):

There is a need to shift the focus from evaluating educational process to evaluating outcomes of educational processes, e.g. defined in terms of competences... A more competency-based assessment and recognition methodology will offer a solution for people who lost disposal of their credentials, who obtained their credentials a very long time ago, or who have gained learning experiences which cannot be included in a credential evaluation according the current system...

Similarly, in the broader European context there is increasing consensus that professional directives and diploma supplements, which have historically formed the basis for the recognition of

credentials have become outdated, as it is acknowledged that the European Qualifications Framework is introducing new methodologies that warrant serious consideration (NQAI 2010:16):

In many ways, since the [European] Directive was introduced, qualifications frameworks have changed the way that many stakeholders think about education and training in Europe...

As a last point, it is important to note that qualifications frameworks are by no means confined to or constrained by outcomes-related thinking. Increasingly interpreted as instruments of coordination, collaboration and communication (Parker & Walters 2008), qualifications frameworks can also assist conceptualisation of credential evaluation by providing important information on the extent to which qualifications are valued by the systems within which they originate.

Positioning credential evaluation

Links between qualifications frameworks and credential evaluation have been argued. Based on some of the more recent developments in the field of qualifications frameworks, the following key areas are put forward for further deliberation and are discussed below: (1) closer alignment with occupational classification systems, (2) the use of learning outcomes, (3) rethinking the concept of qualifications, and (4) the increased codification of learning.

An important development in the area of qualifications frameworks is the shift towards the closer alignment with *occupational classification systems*, many which are based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations developed by the ILO in 1988 (examples include the Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations, European Taxonomy of Skills, Competencies and Occupations and the Organising Framework for Occupations in South Africa). In a related development, albeit for educational classification, the International Standard Classification of Education, originally developed by UNESCO and the OECD in 1997 is currently being reviewed and is due for completion in 2011.

Focus	Educational programmes	Qualifications	Occupations
Examples	ISCED 2011, Classification of Learning Activities (CLA)	NQF, EQF	ISCO 88, SASCO, ANZSCO 2005, OFO, ESCO
Purpose	Classifies educational programmes with a standard set of concepts and definitions	Classifies and regulates (at national level) qualifications and increases	Classifies occupations and groups of occupations

Focus	Educational programmes	Qualifications	Occupations
		transparency and mutual trust, promotes credit transfer, mobility and accumulation	
Scope	Formal, non-formal and informal learning programmes	Formal qualifications	Occupations and sets of occupations
Organisations involved	UNESCO (& OECD), European Commission, Eurostat	Government (SAQA), regional agency (European Commission)	ILO, Labour Ministries, Statistical Departments
Trajectory	Since late 1990s, revised 2006 and 2011	Since late 1990s, 3 rd generation NQFs are widespread, regional QFs developed since 2005	Since late 1980s, have received a lot of attention in recent years
Conceptual base	Neutral classification	Outcomes-based	Skills and sets of skills
Use	Mainly statistical and research	Integral part of education and training systems	Mainly statistical, but increasingly as complementary system to QFs
Main critique	Do not take outcomes-based developments into account	Outcomes-based methodologies remain limited	Filing system with limited relevance

Table 1: Overview of classification systems

This shift towards greater alignment between qualifications frameworks (such as the SA nqf and the EQF) and established classification systems is important for credential evaluation practices as it provides another important example of the impact of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks on existing practices. Increased engagement of credential evaluation agencies in the international classification systems is critical, more so as the systems are being revised for many of the same reasons that credential evaluation methods are seen as being limited and outdated.

Without exception, qualifications frameworks all use *learning outcomes* as a basis for qualification design (see NQAI 2010). In South Africa learning outcomes were introduced in the early 1990s through two main mechanisms: an outcomes-based format was required for qualifications to be registered on the nqf, and a revised national schooling curriculum was implemented based on a particular transformational interpretation of learning outcomes known as outcomes-based education (OBE). The latter was plagued with difficulties virtually from the outset, was revised and eventually replaced with a more traditional curriculum, although the outcomes-based approach has

remained. In the case of the nqf, outcomes were interpreted from a distinctly behaviorist perspective (Moll 2009), which resulted in challenges from a range of sectors with respect to the manner in which outcomes statements were being formulated. Here it is important to note that the same problem had been identified by Grootings & Nielsen (2009 in CEDEFOP 2009) as the shift to learning outcomes takes place in the European context. Despite the challenges experienced with the move to outcomes, both the South African nqf and schooling curriculum remain outcomes-based as the option of regressing back to a strictly inputs-based approach is not considered. Lessons from both the South African and European experiences show that the use of learning outcomes should be approached with caution, but also that this shift is conclusive, and that it will continue for some time to come.

What does this mean for credential evaluation practices? Despite the limitations of the outcomes-based approach, there is growing international consensus that the approach is better than the traditional models. Credential evaluation, particularly on the CRA level, cannot afford to ignore this shift. The determination of “equivalence” requires a thorough evaluation of the credentials be it for academic or professional purposes. Such evaluations cannot remain fixated on the qualifications and processes through which the qualifications were achieved, while ignoring the fact that the applicant may have many years of experience in the field and may be able to demonstrate the required competence. On the other hand the higher level “comparability” processes conducted by NICs, which is more administrative and advisory may be less directly influenced by the shift to outcomes. Acting in an advisory capacity, NICs should however guard against acting as gatekeepers that filter out eligible applicants based only on the duration of their qualifications. NICs can make a significant contribution by promoting an awareness of non-formal and informal learning by including broader criteria in their applications, and where applicable, by guiding applicants to assessment centers (see SAQA 2010b).

The third development that warrants further investigation is the changing *concept of qualifications*. In research by Bjornavold and Coles (2010) into the development of policies and practices linked to qualification and qualifications systems, it is concluded that ‘concepts of qualifications are diverse and dependent on deeply embedded social and cultural environments’ (2010:153). Importantly for credential evaluation practices it is found that the ‘power [of qualifications] to act as a metric for the performance of the education and training system’ (*Ibid.*) has increased, the extent to which qualifications function as the main way for people to progress in work has decreased, and the role of qualifications to support international mobility has increased. Importantly, Bjornavold and Coles

introduce the concept of “representation” as they explain the limitations of qualifications to provide information on current knowledge, skills and competences, aptitude in key competences, as well as potential/future competence. Representation, they argue, includes qualifications, but is not limited to qualifications. For example, representation may also include (*Ibid.*):

- the changing value of qualifications in certain settings
- occupational standards on which the qualification is based
- the extent to which social partners contribute to the design and assessment of the qualification
- the extent to which non-formal and informal learning is recognised
- the quality of the providing institution
- the extent to which learning has advanced since the award of the qualification

Representation is not necessarily a new idea, as to some extent, the notion of basing recruitment on curriculum vitae embody this broader description of an individual’s qualifications, prior experience and aptitudes. Similarly, the notion of including professional designations on an nqf, as “a title or status conferred by a professional body in recognition of a person’s expertise and right to practice in an occupational field” (SAQA 2010) has challenged the traditional notion of what a qualification is, and has opened the door for broader interpretations (see also NQAI 2010).

The question is what does representation mean for credential evaluation practices? Here it is useful to return to the earlier discussion on the differences in function of the NICs and CRAs: NICs operate mainly on the broader advisory level of comparability, while CRAs perform detailed evaluations that determine equivalence of qualifications. In effect, representation adds another level in the evaluation that moves beyond an agreed level of minimum criteria, beyond more contextualized criteria, to a situation where not only past learning is evaluated, but also current and potential competence is considered. Representation also points towards an expanded view of credential evaluation, a view that includes mechanisms for recognising non-formal and informal learning. The question here is rather whether the evaluation of representation is feasible within the credential evaluation context? Will it add to transparency? Will the extent to which skilled migrants are able to contribute in jobs that are commensurate with their current and potential competence be improved?

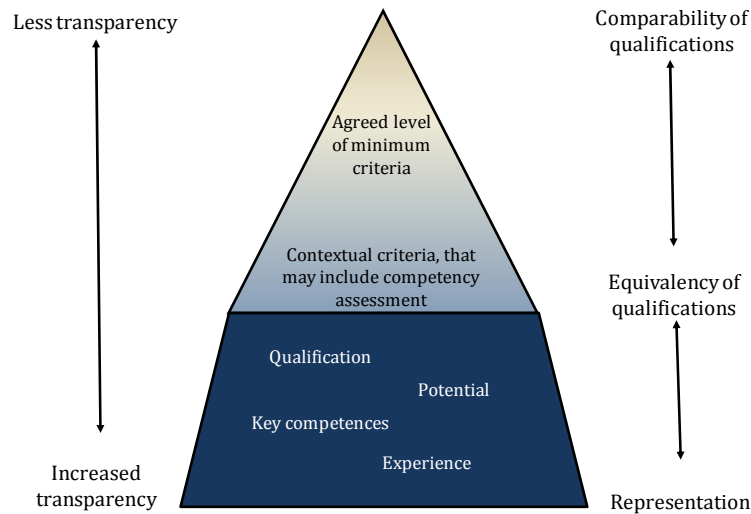


Diagram 3: Levels of evaluation, including representation (including aspects contained in Bjornavold and Coles 2010)

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. It is argued that representation is the ultimate objective, but the extent to which the evaluation of representation can or should be undertaken by credential evaluation agencies is debatable. Bjornavold and Coles develop the concept in the context of recruitment processes, and maybe this is where it should remain, at least for now. Even in the case of recruitment agencies, it is highly unlikely that the capacity will exist to evaluate representation as it will require specialised assessment and pedagogy better situated in the realm of education and training providers. In any event, representation warrants closer scrutiny as it has the potential of impacting on the current credential evaluation practices in the near future.

Drawing on the South African experience, another qualifications framework related development that has relevance to credential evaluation practices is the notable *shift towards contextualized learning at the expense of codification* (Keevy 2010). While this shift to contextualization has occurred in part as a response to the critique of the overly behaviorist approach within the original nqf, it has become a concern that the extent to which learning can be codified will be limited. Stated differently, the emphasis on context, represented mainly through communities of practice, may limit the extent to which learning can be recognised, and as a result, also the extent to which learning is transparent and internationally transferable. There are also implications for credential evaluation practices, as the recognition of increasing volumes of uncoded learning will add further weight to the need for credential evaluation to move beyond qualifications to representation.

Concluding comments

Qualifications frameworks have become an indispensable feature of our education and training landscapes (Parker & Walters 2008), yet they do not offer immediate solutions or radical insights to the challenges of credential evaluation practices (Cort 2010). On the contrary, qualifications are limited in the extent to which they represent the previously acquired competencies and skills of individuals, outcomes are inadequate proxies for the quality of learning, and qualifications frameworks can probably only make modest contributions to the challenges of cross-border recognition of qualifications. Considering these limitations, this paper has attempted to make a case for closer cooperation between credential evaluation and qualifications agencies by arguing that credential evaluation practices can be improved by engaging with the new technologies being introduced through outcomes-based qualifications frameworks:

There is a need for increased dialogue within countries, between people in the recognition world and those engaged in qualifications frameworks – this would, inter alia, allow for a deeper understanding of how frameworks can better support international recognition (NQAI, 2010:12).

While it may be true that credential evaluation is not an exact science, some things can be done to improve credential evaluation methodologies to ultimately enable skilled migrants to obtain jobs commensurate with their qualifications: It is argued first, that the relational approach occasioned by qualifications frameworks is important for coherence within education and training systems, and the mobility of individuals within and across countries. Second, credential evaluation is seen as important for increasing this mobility. Third, traditional credential evaluation methods need to be maintained and further developed to increase transparency. Lastly, it is suggested that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning be incorporated into traditional credential evaluation practices.

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