Institute of Education

University of London

The Bhutan Vocational Qualifications Framework:

Is it a case of 'putting the cart before the horse?'

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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the

European MA in Lifelong Learning: Policy and Management

Word count: ***21,901***

Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Michael Young for showing interest in my work when I often doubted myself. His wisdom played an important role in inspiring me to take up this topic and his brilliant supervision has helped me greatly to get through this writing process.

I am forever grateful to the European Union and Erasmus Mundus consortium for giving me this opportunity and the necessary support during the programme.

I would like to thank my colleagues in the Ministry of Labor and Human Resources for their support, sharing information and providing clarification with regard to the BVQF implementation system. I am also very grateful to Professor Chris Aulich, University of Canberra for his constant guidance and feedback during the writing process. I would like to thank my MALLL course mates; both for their friendship and extending keen ears to listen, comment and share ideas when needed.

And lastly, I thank my family and friends for their unconditional love and support.

Abstract

Currently, most countries around the world are introducing national vocational qualifications framework (NVQF) to improve relevancy, flexibility and quality of their education and training system. Policy makers are attracted to this model as it claims to solve issues in education, skills development and employment through; provision of transparency, visible learning pathways promoting lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning. These claims and rhetoric have influenced many developing countries in to introducing NVQFs as a reform tool in their education and training system, since it is widely endorsed by the international and donor agencies. However, research has revealed problems with the design and implementation that countries seeking to adopt this policy might face and there is little evidence of NVQFs meeting its goals. It suggests that NVQFs do not provide quick fix or simple solutions to the complex problems countries face in relation to education, skills development, and employment. Bhutan is also in the process of introducing Bhutan Vocational Qualifications Framework (BVQF). While the benefits claimed for the NVQFs have caught the interest of policy makers in Bhutan, there has been a lack of critical enquiry in to this policy. In view of the critical debates around NVQFs, this dissertation argues if there are too many assumptions in introducing the BVQF in Bhutan, which may have been overlooked leading to unintended consequences. The intention is not to dismiss the concept and idea of the BVQF, rather to analyze issues surrounding the policy and the problems that it gives rise to. The purpose is to deepen the understanding of what is involved in introducing a BVQF in Bhutan and its use at both the policy level and in practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Recent ILO research papers (Allais, 2010; Young et al, 2011) reported that over 100 countries have initiated development of qualification frameworks in some ways since their development in the 1990s in the industrialized Anglophone nations. EU countries also are adopting national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in vocational education under the influence of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EU countries although different in terms of 'industrialization, provision of education, living standards, population sizes, and so on' are yet adopting a similar policy mechanism (Young et al, 2011:6). This global spread of qualifications frameworks is not an isolated phenomenon but is closely linked to changes associated with globalization in which national economies are becoming more interdependent than ever before, creating a situation where national government have less control over them (Raffe et al, 2009:6). Every nation is trying to achieve quality, relevancy and flexibility in their education and training system and qualifications framework have been recommended as a useful tool to achieve these goals.

Many developing countries are now adopting this policy to reform their education and training system as it is widely endorsed by the international agencies through donor aided development projects to become 'modern' and improve their 'economic competitiveness' (Young, 2010a:2). This indicates that the need to fulfill international obligations apart from the need to reform their education and training systems (Raffe, 2009) also contributes to this trend.

NVQFs originated with attempts to reform vocational education and training in the hope of overcoming skills shortages. In 2009, the ILO launched its Qualifications Framework Research Project to study the impact and implementation of NQFs in developing countries to help fill the knowledge gap and to be able to provide more evidence-based advice to member states (Allais et al, 2009:v). However, ILO research studies have found little evidence of the impact of NVQFs but reveal issues with the design and implementation that countries seeking to adopt this policy might face (Young et al, 2011:7). The research also revealed that NVQFs do not provide quick fix or simple solutions to the complex problems countries face in relation to education, skills development, and employment and there is little evidence that NVQFs meet their goals (Allais, 2010:2).

Young supports this argument in saying that the UK's NVQ Framework 'continues to be the most widely known, widely copied and most heavily criticized model [...] in the world' (Young, 2010b:2). Most often, the borrowing country tend to replicate and sometimes adapt from the countries of origin convinced by the claims but often ignoring crucial information about whether or not these claims have been achieved (Raffe, 2009; Chakraun, 2009). Despite having little concrete evidence of its success, this policy continues to be widely copied around the world today. Consequently, 'countries are investing considerable resources in a policy mechanism which is largely untested and under-researched' (Allais, 2010:1).

Bhutan is a small developing country in the eastern Himalayas which has also initiated the development of a qualifications framework for vocational education and training (VET) sector since 2003 with support from GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit). The initiative, known as Bhutan

Vocational Qualifications Framework (BVQF), seeks to achieve quality and relevancy in its VET system and overcome the mismatch of demand and supply of skills in the labour market. BVQF is seen by the government as the solution to reforming the VET system and as a means to assuring quality of skills through developing qualifications involving employers and training providers and at comparable international standards. Therefore, based on the claims of NVQF, the government in Bhutan through BVQF hopes to achieve the following:

1. Easy mobility among learners and workers to job market and to higher education and removing the stigma of TVET being the 'dead end' by opening possibility of progression within jobs or status, hence addressing issue of social equity;
2. Improving the quality of training as the curriculum is based on outcomes determined by stakeholders such as industry representatives and employers;
3. Recognition of informal or prior learning;
4. Transparency: the learner and the employer know the learning contents and at what level, increasing choices in learning programs and the types of jobs available against each level
5. Comparability: BVQF will also provide a basis for international comparability and transferability thereby promoting quality and mobility of human resource internationally; and
6. A change in learning paradigm, where the focus is 'learner-centered' and teaching is at the pace of the learner. This recognizes that every individual has a different speed and pace of learning.

The above expectations are based on the benefits *claimed* for a NVQF, rather than on any evidence of success in bringing about changes in skills development systems or about the actual use of the frameworks by employers, workers, and training providers.

1.2 Argument and purpose

While the advantages and benefits claimed for the BVQF has caught the interest of policy makers in Bhutan, there has been a lack of critical enquiry in to this policy and serious consideration of whether it can benefit the VET system in Bhutan. This is a crucial question to ask as this policy was conceived in industrialized nations quite unlike Bhutan. As in any developing nation there is little research capacity and knowledge in Bhutan to make any informed decision about such matters. This means that system designers' only option was to refer to reports and policy documents of donor organizations and their consultants who are sent as experts to Bhutan. There is a need to explore and analyze the key aspects of implementing a qualifications framework especially in a small economy, where people regard goodwill and trust as core feature in the value system of the community and society as a whole and where most education and training services are government-owned.

The argument of this dissertation is as follows: Bhutan's decision to implement a NVQF has been primarily driven by the rhetoric and claims submitted by its proponents rather than being based on the evidence that such goals have been achieved, grossly neglecting the contextual factors on which the success of the policy depends. The BVQF, even after being considered in policy discussions for some years is still not fully understood by stakeholders other than the core members responsible for its implementation. Most of the existing international

reports on NVQFs only capture part of the NVQFs story, almost always missing out on the limitations and complexity inherently in the concept as well as failing to understand the local issues, which influence its implementation.

My argument is based around the following questions in trying to understand the general principles on which qualification frameworks are based:

1. Are there too many assumptions in introducing the BVQF, which may have been overlooked leading to unintended consequences?

2. Does the implementation of BVQF lead to neglecting other priority issues in VET such as institutional and administrative capacity building of VET

3. Implementing the BVQF involves considerable resources and costs. However even in industrialized nations where more resources are available, NVQFs have not been successful
4. What problems arise from introducing the learning outcomes and assessment-led approach associated with NVQFs?

The purpose of this dissertation is to deepen the understanding of what is involved in introducing a BVQF in Bhutan and its use at both the policy level and in practice. The intention of the dissertation is not to dismiss the concept and idea of the BVQF nor to undermine the proponents of the system, rather to analyze issues surrounding the policy and the problems that it gives rise to and those it seeks to overcome. BVQF should not be a 'solution' looking for 'problems' (Young et al, 2011:8) but, instead focus on understanding the issues and problems in VET and how to overcome them. The paper discusses main elements of the growing debate in the literature of NVQFs and prevailing issues experienced by the first generation NVQFs, and the possible impact of these issues on how this policy might be

developed in the context of Bhutan. I also hope to suggest practical steps for Bhutan as alternatives to embracing a complex model that might lead to unforeseen problems.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology employed for the research is qualitative, mostly relying on published academic literature and official reports and documents from government (including unpublished papers) and international organizations on qualifications frameworks in general and particularly on NVQFs. References are mostly drawn from the works of the International Labour Organization (ILO), particularly from the 16 countries report (Allais, 2010) and a World Bank/ILO report on India (Young et al, 2011) in order to understand the experiences of different countries introducing NQFs/NVQFs. It also refers to the works of Young, Allais, Raffe and Wheelahan to understand the critiques of the first generation NQFs and to gain insight into the Anglophone experience where NVQFs were initially conceptualized and implemented. In a few instances, where relevant to the analysis, I have made use of excerpts from interviews with staff of the vocational training institutes in Bhutan.

1.4 Significance of the study

This research is significant for the following reasons:

1. Firstly, there has been no research of this nature undertaken in analyzing the role of BVQF in VET reform since its development. It is particularly significant as it examines the limitations of BVQF in achieving its goals and is unlike any of the literature on NVQFs that the Bhutan government has produced or accessed so far.

2. Secondly, owing to the small size of the country and its government, there is the possibility of the findings being heard, even if not taken in to consideration by relevant authorities. This will unveil the difficulties in implementing BVQF and hopefully lead policy makers to rethink and re-prioritise strategies for VET reform.
3. Thirdly, it will contribute towards the literature on VET policymaking and to issues around the policy 'borrowing', which is an under-researched area not only in Bhutan.
4. Finally, it is significant for me personally, as this research enriches me as a member of staff of the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR) responsible for planning and coordinating VET policy and programmes in Bhutan.

1.5 Structure of the dissertation

After the introduction, Chapter two presents the context of the study: a socio-economic description of Bhutan and history of education and VET in the country. It also presents details of the evolution of VET and the policy initiatives for VET reform and the emergence of BVQF as the reform model. Chapter three draws insights from the international debate and existing literature on NVQFs and NQFs, mostly focusing on the issues around its claims. The Chapter reveals complexity inherent in the policy model that requires wider attention in both scope and depth. Chapter four analyses the implications of these findings for Bhutan. Chapter five concludes the dissertation by highlighting the issues raised by NVQFs and their implications for the BVQF. It suggests alternatives that require attention prior to implementing BVQF as well as bringing some coherence to debates about the overall VET reform process.

1.6 Scope and limitation

The scope of this study is restricted only to a qualifications framework for vocational education and training sector in Bhutan with references to countries of first generation NVQFs. There are limitations with regard to the literature especially in the case of Bhutan as there is no existing researched and published work on the BVQF or VET in Bhutan. Therefore, most of the references are drawn from limited government reports and write-ups and from my own knowledge and experience of having worked for the last nine years in the organization responsible for implementing VET reforms including the BVQF.

Chapter 2:

Vocational Education and Training system in Bhutan - Setting the context

This chapter sets the context of the dissertation; it begins with the description of Bhutan as a country, its political and socio-economic situation and the origin of modern education and its development. It then describes the history and evolution of Vocational Education and Training (VET) to arrive at the current situation in VET facing the unique challenge of making it more effective and market responsive. It introduces Bhutan as a country, the history of its education system and evolution of its VET system. The purpose is to present the context of the study and how BVQF policy emerged in a country with a relatively simple structure of education and training and where government plays a dominant role both in planning and its implementation. It presents the rationale behind introduction of BVQF; the hopes and expectations that it would bring about reform in VET and labour market. It also examines the general policy interventions that the government undertook toward VET reform and the factors influencing the emergence of this concept. However, it does acknowledge that BVQF is a relatively recent initiative and it is too soon to crystallize any concrete conclusions in a debate on its outcomes or its impact in Bhutan.

2.1 Country profile

Bhutan is a small landlocked Himalayan country with an area of 38,394 square kilometers, situated between two of the largest nations in the world: India and China. It has a population of 672,425, a national literacy rate of 59.5% (an increase from12%in 1985). 30.8% of population is urban, and 69.2% population rural

(PHCB[1], 2005). The country has a labour force participation rate of 68.6% (LFS[2], 2010:3), but the country is still primarily an agrarian society depending on subsistence farming. There is no abject poverty as seen in the neighboring South Asian countries and although not highly placed in the United Nations human development index (HDI), the quality of life in Bhutan seems higher than it might be inferred from the HDI due to its small population and relatively equal distribution of land holdings. Bhutan has largely remained an isolated nation for centuries; the practice of interdependent webs of relationships within the community and the natural environment has sustained the livelihood of the community and has held society together although some argue that it is now eroding gradually.

Bhutan became a democratic constitutional monarchy in 2008. The country's socio economic development policy is guided by an indigenously developed philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as opposed to Gross National Product (GNP); it seeks to place the individual at the centre of all development efforts. This is pursued through adopting a holistic approach to economic development that recognizes a need to go beyond the pursuit of material well-being to embrace concerns for the conservation of culture, preservation of environment, promotion of equitable socio-economic development, and good governance; these four pillars on which the whole concept of GNH is based are outlined in the document '*Bhutan 2020: A vision for Peace, Prosperity and happiness*' (RGoB[3], 2000).

Tradition and culture still play an important role in the daily lives of the people and

[1] Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, Royal Government of Bhutan

[2] Labour Force Survey

[3] Royal Government of Bhutan

so attempts are being made to infuse these values into the development plans and strategies of the country, including education strategies. GNH in education is a recent initiative and has taken a high priority with attempts to understand how best it can inform reforms in curriculum and pedagogy particularly through the concept of holistic education. Concurrently, the country also believes economic progress must be achieved in order to enhance the living conditions of its citizens and to progress as a 21st century nation. In doing so, it faces severe challenges to strike a balance and follow the middle path in supporting the principles of GNH, and at the same time keeping up with the fast changing and globalizing world in to which it is rapidly being integrated. Education and human resource development are considered as key to development and thus huge resources and effort are being committed toward this endeavor.

Planned economic development in the past decades has brought about considerable changes in the structure of the economy as shares of the secondary and tertiary sectors in the GDP have increased. Between 1980 and 2004, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average rate of 7.0% per annum (UNDP[4], 2007:2). The biggest impetus to the economic growth still is through foreign aid, large hydropower projects and tourism. Economic growth has lead to significant growth in modern sector employment such as in construction, travel and tourism, manufacturing and business services. The economic development policy of Bhutan envisions 'a green and self reliant economy sustained by an IT-enabled knowledge society guided by the philosophy of GNH' and this will act as the apex policy and provide guideline for various policy interventions to stimulate growth and

[4] United National Development Programme

productivity for the nation (EDP[5], 2010:5). These policy interventions have a great bearing on the role of education to facilitate the economic growth so as to provide a pool of relevant skills and knowledge the emerging economic sectors demand.

With progress in the country's economy, the concept of wealth, values and priorities in the society are beginning to take a different meaning, as there is pressure to modernize, change and catch up with the rest of the world. This poses a threat in undermining the indigenous ways and practice, as they cannot establish parity with international standards. Thus there is an inexorable push toward following international trends and practice of development and to join the knowledge society bandwagon. However, this is rather an ambitious target with literacy rate at only 59.5 percent. The tenth five-year plan envisage Bhutan developing a knowledge society compelling it to focus on developing competent youth to face the challenges of global economy apart from meeting the national needs (NHRD[6] Policy, 2010). The modern Bhutanese society also places high value on education and qualifications as currency to obtain decent jobs and most importantly as a means to climb the social ladder.

2.2 Education, economy and job market in Bhutan

Monastic education has existed in Bhutan since the 8th century together with different forms of home-based, informal, oral and ritualistic learning. The local festivals in the villages formed an essential part (and still do) in people's lives to inculcate values and morals that were regarded as intrinsic traits of a learned person in the community. In the past, the few Bhutanese who were educated in modern

[5] Economic Development Plan

[6] National Human Resource Development

sciences studied in India with some going to Tibet to study Buddhism and traditional medicines. Informal learning existed in the communities through master-apprenticeship arrangement but formal learning outside of monasteries was almost non-existent. It is not known if any form of credentials (similar to those provided by the guilds in medieval England) existed among craftsmen other than local repute spread through word of mouth.

A rudimentary form of modern schools existed as early as 1915, but it was only in 1961 upon the introduction of country's first five-year development plan that a massive expansion of modern schools began. This was also the time when the country opened up to the outside world, receiving overseas development aid and embarking on the path of socio-economic development (Thinley, 2009:4). The net primary enrolment rate at 93.1% is well on track toward achieving Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) (Education statistics, 2010: xvi). Today, Bhutan is mid-way through the implementation of its 10th five-year plan. With the introduction of a modern education system, vocational education and training has also grown rapidly in recent times. Rapid economic development has led to the expansion of vocational education and training to meet the growing demand for skilled human resources at both technician and professional levels. The effects of globalization, and the changing demand of the skills needed in the job market have also led the policy makers to re-think how VET can become attractive, robust and relevant to the changing need of the job market. The challenges of bridging the gap between demand and supply of skills in the labour market has lead to rethinking theory, practice and policy of skills development in Bhutan.

The labour market structure also gradually changed, demanding policy shifts and

reform in the education and training sectors. The increased school enrolment rate resulted in growing number of students leaving compulsory schooling (11 years of schooling) system and government is left with the need to encourage for gainful employment for the increasing number of youth seeking to enter the labour market each year from the school system[7]. The issue of demand-based training, relevance of knowledge and skills taught in the schools and training institutions to the job market are also being questioned. Pressure from the growing rate of youth unemployment also propelled the government to re-look at existing policies, asking for a better understanding of the job market and the changing needs of the society; as Kinga (2005:35) concludes; 'the challenge of youth unemployment also subtly reveals the fundamental change Bhutan has been undergoing from a traditional society to a modernizing economy'. Further, with the introduction of democracy and the adoption of neo-liberal policies such as attracting foreign direct investment, the need for a clear, stable and transparent economic policy framework was deemed necessary along with a comprehensive set of incentive packages to boost growth and to avoid the growth of the number of jobless. Therefore, the recently formulated Economic Development Policy attempts to encompass major economic reforms including the restructuring of the macroeconomic base, which includes hydropower, service industries (tourism and business), organic farming and an IT-enabled knowledge society. These priority sectors were chosen bearing in mind the comparative advantages Bhutan has in the region for being peaceful and having a politically stable environment despite being small with limited infrastructure and having rugged and mountainous terrain. Furthermore, Bhutan has a vibrant and living culture of its own and a pristine environment, as well as an open access to

[7] Primary: 6-12 years, Lower Secondary: 13-14 years, Middle Secondary: 15-16 years, Higher Secondary: 17-18 years, Diploma/Undergraduate/Degree levels: 19 years and above

emerging Indian markets. The fact that English is widely used as a language of communication and writing is also seen as another economic advantage. It is expected that all these aspects will make the country attractive to investors.

The government is in the process of reforming educational policies to develop and promote skills and competencies in line with the new economic policy, taking the view that a highly educated and skilled workforce will contribute to a more advanced and competitive economy. Having achieved many of its basic education targets, there is now a need for the government to focus more on the post-compulsory education and training requirements in order to impart employable skills to job seekers.

The major economic sectors apart from sustainable farming are electricity and construction and these are vital source of hard currency and major contributions to employment generation. However, most workers in these sectors are foreigners especially in highly specialized and low skill work while the mid-level and the management level jobs are occupied by the Bhutanese.

The employment structure in Bhutan used to be relatively simple: all graduates from education and training institutions (government-owned) were directly employed in the civil service. The civil service is still the most sought after jobs and has traditionally absorbed all kinds of employment with the most attractive career prospects, along with social prestige and benefits; this has meant that demand for public sector jobs is high despite limited job growth in the sector. Human resource development in the past was targeted mostly to the needs of the civil service. Lately, with the growth of the private and corporate sectors the trend is changing and there is a proliferation of different types of qualifications in the

market and the government now has responsibility to regulate standards to assure availability of quality human resources in the country. Until about few years ago, there was no unemployment among VET graduates[8] as they were all recruited by the government or corporate sector. With limited job growth in government, and increase in school leavers and correspondingly from Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs), the issue of unemployment is emerging as a potential problem. There has been a concerted effort to promote growth of the private sector but it hasn't been successful in generating attractive jobs and hence there is an issue of mismatch in demand and supply of skills.

2.3 Post compulsory school education in Bhutan

Basic or compulsory education in Bhutan extends from pre-primary to class 10 accessible to every citizen in the country. After 11 years of compulsory education, most proceed to two years of higher secondary schooling in government schools with some attending private schools. Those who do not qualify take the vocational education track or enter the job market (see *figure 1*). Vocational education is introduced only after 11 years of basic schooling although certain schools offer some vocational classes as extra-curricular activities through clubs and associations, mostly limited to areas such as carpentry electrical wiring or photography to name a few. A large number of Bhutanese also study abroad for their post-compulsory education.

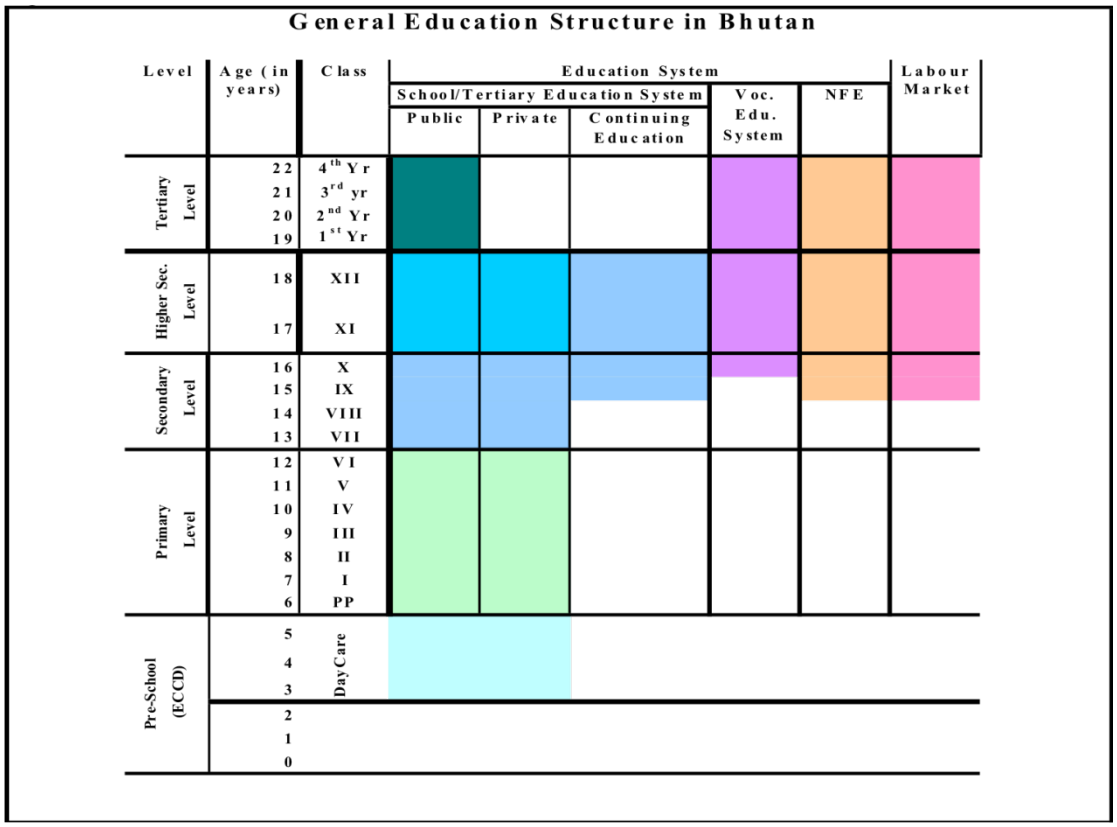
Post-compulsory schooling in Bhutan especially at higher secondary level, is a tracked system in terms of all dimensions: content and process, system architecture, delivery, and government and regulation (Raffe et al, 1998:173). VET

[8] students after post compulsory school, completing 2 years vocational training from VTI (Vocational Training Institute)

(limited to certificate level courses) is under the administration of Ministry of Labor and Human Resources (MoLHR), diploma courses in VET are under the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) and general academic schooling is with Ministry of Education (MoE). There are no overlaps or exchanges of learning or of regulatory processes, hence making it very difficult for those in VET to progress to other fields both horizontally and vertically. They all seem to function independently, making it a rigid and inflexible post-compulsory education system despite all being under the umbrella of the same government.

In addition to MoLHR, other ministries such as Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture also provide vocational education and training to school leavers for their own purpose; they employ all the graduates upon completion of the training.

Structure of Education in Bhutan*-Figure 1*



(Source: Education Statistics, 2010)

Post compulsory education comprises the following routes based on the principle of merit:

1. First option: transition to government schools from higher secondary schools
2. Second option: join private higher secondary schools (fee-based)
3. Third option: vocational courses which lead to guaranteed jobs in the government
4. Last option: join Vocational Training Institutes and private training institutes for various skills training

Recognition of certificates and qualifications in the job market has not been much of an issue in the past. It is the growing unemployment among VET certificate holders and the issue of not being able to upgrade qualifications due to not fulfilling the entrance criteria for polytechnics and other colleges that has raised questions about qualifications. There are also cases with no relevant options if one wants to study further in these institutes. So, through BVQF (and eventually a NQF) the government, as in Australia, is trying to introduce 'a nationally coherent, 'industry-led' training system based on competency-based training frameworks, with nationally recognized and portable qualifications (Wheelahan, 2009:107). A system for registering all training institutions (public and private) is also being promoted for the purposes of transparency and credibility.

It is interesting to note how general education in Bhutan has evolved over the years despite starting very late in modern development. Late entry caused immense pressure to prioritise education and expand its facilities rapidly so as to catch up with the rest of the world. The other reason was to gain support from international donor agencies by performing well in meeting the targets. On the other hand, VET seems to have taken lesser priority in the educational development resulting in it being the least preferred route by young people. As a result, the country faces acute shortage of skills in the technical and vocational field at all levels.

Until recently, government was the sole provider of both general and vocational education and hence there was no issue with regard to the use and award of qualifications. However, many private players are now entering the education and training market and both users and providers of training look to government for

guidance and for regulations to make their qualifications more marketable either through affiliation or official endorsements of certificates.

To be able to understand issues and problems of VET in Bhutan, it is worth exploring the history of how VET evolved from relatively a more unified system of the past to a tracked system today.

2.4 VET in Bhutan: its history and evolution

The first ever certificate level courses in VET was introduced in May 1965 with the establishment of Don Bosco Technical School which had combined the role of junior technical school and industrial technical institute and was later renamed as the Royal Technical Institute (RTI). The students matriculated in technical subjects and craftsmen in trades such as electricians, carpenters, and auto mechanics etc (Gowlagi, 1976:32). Certificate level programmes were for five years and included a component of general education up to Matriculation level set by the North East Indian State Board. Therefore, graduates were awarded two certificates, one for trade (limited to automobile, mechanical, electrical, civil, carpentry and tailoring), the other for Matriculation in general subjects. This provided graduates with the option to choose either a technical or academic route for higher education or to enter job market.

At that time foreigners, mostly from India, occupied most of the technical positions in the government offices and private enterprises, since graduates of RTI were not able to meet the growing human resource needs in terms of both quantity and expertise. In 1970s, the RTI was placed under the administrative control of the

Technical Education Cell[9] (TEC), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Development. The National In-plant Training System (NITS) was introduced in 1980s with students required to study for 3-6 months depending on the complexity of the course and the capacity and willingness of the local industries to take in trainees. Technical inspectors from TEC monitored this programme. In addition, many aspirants for VET were sent to India and Colombo Plan countries especially at higher levels, notably to Singapore, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and United Kingdom primarily in the fields of engineering and largely for short-term specialization courses.

Such training facilities were concentrated mostly in urban regions, so the government decided to expand training centers in different catchment areas depending on regional needs. These centers offered skills training for villagers, mostly in carpentry, plumbing, masonry and house wiring on a pilot basis in temporary shelters; makeshift buildings. It was expected that school leavers[10] would attend the training but most often villagers ended up attending the training because the school leavers showed very little interest in the program and had other alternatives to either take up farming or jobs in the civil service. These centers, however, had to be closed down for lack of sufficient participants farmers could participate only during off-farm seasons and very few seemed to have utilized the skills they acquired. This strategy more or less turned out to be supply driven and hence failed to succeed as expected, so it had to be discontinued. Failure to sustain such initiatives could signify lack of proper planning or may be such interventions were not appropriate for the size and nature of Bhutan's economy at that time.

[9] Cell is used to refer to a section in a division of Department of Education
[10] School leavers are those leaving school at all levels due to failure to progress further.

The TEC was upgraded to the Technical and Vocational Education Division (TVED) with a remit from the Department of Education to emphasize skills development. However provision of general education was still the primary concern of the government at that time as it led to guaranteed jobs upon graduation. There was no need to cater for specialized fields of study since it did not justify the costs involved for specialization and the demand was few. The TVED began a new initiative: the National Trade Training Institute (NTTI), providing certificate level courses in plumbing, carpentry and masonry which also could not be sustained after three years of operation, yet again re-enforcing the fact that VET was either not attractive to the Bhutanese youth or signaling it as too supply-driven. In contrast, courses in RTI were doing well in terms of student numbers and had their first intake for girls as well by mid-1980s. Participation of women in VET was still limited during those days even though Bhutanese women do not suffer from formal gender discrimination. Bhutanese women have equal political status with men and enjoy the same level of freedom under the law. Traditionally, inheritance laws favour women with most households headed by women. The RTI courses were still doing well because students had the option to take the academic route, unlike the NTTI courses, and there was still a route to access better job opportunities and prestige in society.

The RTI, in the mid 1980s, made some reforms to the syllabuses aiming to introduce ‘specialization’ of skills for different vocations as the job market began to signal demands in specialized fields. However this narrowed the job prospects for graduates, since it had eliminated academic aspects from the syllabus and so didn’t prove popular. This clearly indicated that the job market was not ready to

have both narrow and special skills but preferred graduates with broad generic skills and knowledge along with some specific trade skills. As a result, RTI reverted to the earlier version of the syllabus.

However, Bhutan still lacked an appropriately skilled national human resources base since many foreign workers were recruited in the technical sectors. The Royal Bhutan Polytechnic (RBP) under the Department of Education offered diploma level courses and was one of the major further education destinations for most RTI graduates, to upgrade from certificate level to diploma. This provided a route to upgrade to diploma and bachelor of engineering on a merit basis with scholarships from government. RTI received international aid through ILO, UNDP, British Overseas Assistance and GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit). Through this support institutional facilities and capacity of VET instructors were upgraded to improve the quality of training and reduce the mismatch between the demand and supply of skills in the job market.

The first Asian Development Bank (ADB) project for expansion of TVET was approved in 1990 to strengthen the institutional capacity of TVED and the Royal Bhutan Polytechnic through instructor development, curriculum upgrades, instructional materials development, the rehabilitation of existing buildings and construction of new buildings. The overall objective of the project was to improve the quality of TVET and be able to supply quality human resources for both government and the private sector. This project focused more on the diploma level courses and little at the certificate level. GTZ was also involved in the capacity development of RTI around the same time and supported provision of teaching and learning tools and equipment, constructed workshops and sent several instructors

for skills upgrade training to neighboring regions and to Germany. Different government agencies at that time were involved in their own skills development and provided training programmes in order to cater for their own need. Skills development and training during those days were not centrally coordinated and took place in an ad-hoc manner with in-house certification arrangements. This didn't lead to any issue then, as there was no problem of recognition since the training provider was, in effect, also the employer.

There were no central coordination agencies to facilitate VET, apart from the TVED in the department of education, which focused only on the engineering sector and to a lesser extent on the art and craft sector. The private sector involvement in skills development and training is a recent initiative and there was little planning for skills development, skills standardization, testing and certification and accreditation (ADB RRP, 2001). In the late 1990s, the pressure of the skills shortage and growing urban unemployment among youth led the government to re-think and re-organize the institutional capacity for effective coordination and implementation of a national VET system. The TVED lacked institutional capacity to be dedicated toward meeting this goal and hence the National Technical Training Authority (NTTA) was established as an autonomous body in May 1999. The charter of NTTA mandated it to plan, formulate policies, register and authorize all VET providers (including private training providers) and coordinate with the general education system to promote and support VET, maintain a national system of skill standards, testing and certification of skilled workers and develop partnerships between and among industries and VET providers. Through NTTA, the Basic Skills Development Project (BSDP) was

launched and was jointly funded by ADB and GTZ and the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) to facilitate its goals in enabling school leavers[11] and other disadvantaged groups to have easier access to training and employable skills *(*see *Appendix 1).*

The BSDP was so far the largest project both in terms of funding and administration in the history of VET in Bhutan. The government's Human Resource Development (HRD) Master Plan (1997-2002) recommended the development and implementation of short-term technical, vocational and professional courses in collaboration with employment and counseling services. The government's estimate of school leavers during this period was much higher than the training capacity of various training institutions in the country. The 9th five-year plan (2002-2007) document estimated about 28,000 Bhutanese joining the labour force and noted the need for more training institutions to be built. Since the number of school leavers began to increase and at the same time there was shortage of skills in the job market, the primary objective of BSDP was to support the expansion of training capacity through the construction of four new training institutes in four regions of the country along with development of relevant policies and strategies to effectively function and manage the newly established institutions.

The other major turning points in the evolution of VET took place when the RTI campus was taken over by Royal Bhutan Polytechnic (RBP), which had to be relocated for security reasons. This further weakened the certificate level courses as the diploma level courses took priority over the shared facilities and also caused some internal administrative glitches with two managements based on one campus.

[11] School leavers definition here is different from earlier usage as government now mandated everyone to complete 11 years of basic schooling which is equivalent to GCSC in UK and they are normally 16+ yr olds

The RTI was also relocated to four newly built institutions by sharing the staff, instructors and institutional facilities; this weakened the RTI capacity (both in quality and quantity). The RBP was later delinked from NTTA to come under the administration of the proposed Royal University of Bhutan and was subsequently upgraded to become Bhutan's first Engineering College. With the pivotal resource and practice facilities being no longer available, the trust and credibility institutionalized in RTI was lost. The certificate level courses in VET had to start building from scratch and required major re-design. In June 2003, the NTTA was subsumed under the new Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR). The NTTA were bifurcated into two departments in the ministry: the Department of Human Resources (DHR) responsible for implementation of VET and Bhutan Vocational Qualifications Authority (BVQA) later re-named as Department of Occupational Standards (DOS) responsible for regulatory aspects of VET, such as the development of skills standards, testing, certification and accreditation in the country. The newly established MoLHR then was responsible for the implementation of the BSDP, so there was a major revamp in the system with the need to develop institutional capacity both at policy and implementation level. This caused some chaos in the system, with initiatives happening in every field, but with limited staff and expertise even at the national level. A similar situation in Ireland was described as 'chaotic' by Granville (2003:261) with regard to the early providers of vocational qualifications in the context of formulation of Irish qualifications framework and the situation in Bhutan then was no better. The reform initiative was necessary but if there had been certain conditions in place at the start, the result may have been different.

VET was also extended to rural communities to equip them with income generating opportunities during the off-farm season and this is also administered by MoLHR under the *alternate skills development programmes*. The beneficiaries are villagers, juvenile delinquents, prisoners and the disabled community. Villagers in rural areas of the country do not have adequate skills to participate in development work especially as it now brings modern amenities into the community, which require construction and maintenance. The lack of basic skills may reduce the development impact of the government's physical and social infrastructure program, including rural electrification, roads extension, water supply, and primary health care services. Hence, such training opportunities were provided through mobile training facilities to improve the skills capacity in the villages. The MoLHR awards certificates upon completion of these training so that they can use it as credentials to practice the trade. Of late, the value of this certificate has risen as many people in the villages use it as a license to migrate to urban towns where job opportunities are better. However, this has caused ambiguity with regard to the level of this certificate and its comparison with the normal certificates being awarded in the Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs), underlining the need to have some standardization in qualifications. This would also enable the employers and training seekers to make sense of the levels of skills acquired and to use it as currency in the job market, thus promoting the need for standardization and unification of qualifications awarded by different bodies and at different levels.

Since the government has been the sole provider of qualifications in the education and training market, there is some prestige in holding qualifications from government institutions. However, private training institutions request the

government to endorse their qualifications to encourage competitiveness in the training market thus putting pressure on the government to intervene and regulate the standards of qualifications in the market.

2.5 Other external assistance to VET

Prior to the BSDP, the GTZ had been supporting the RTI for more than a decade supporting mainly infrastructure development and procurement of training equipments and technical assistance in curriculum design. UNDP was also involved in supporting skills development in Bhutan through the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) and the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also has been supporting VET through Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) in the past but now they are supporting capacity development programmes in the two VTIs. The Swiss Association for International Cooperation (HELVETAS), supported skills development program through MTI for 1997-1999 on a pilot basis. Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), and Save the Children (United States) have also contributed toward capacity development of VET system in certain ways. But, because the VET sector lacked a central coordinating agency before the establishment of NTTA in 1999, previous investments were constrained by unclear VET sector frameworks and mutual linkages. Hence the VET sector has remained uncoordinated and incoherent despite all the initiatives happening in various pockets of the government.

2.6 Government's policy initiatives toward VET reform

In Bhutan, VET gained importance a little more than a decade ago as a necessary policy intervention to resolve the issue of mismatch between demand and supply of

skills in the job market. Since then there has been growing youth unemployment in the country, and the need to expand and improve quality of VET has never been as acute. Accordingly, the government and international donors made major shift on skills development agenda (McGrath, 2002:414) thus, relooking at the curriculum, pedagogy, infrastructure and the nature of job market. The national labour force survey (1999) estimated an unemployment rate of 16.1% for age group 15-19 in urban areas compared to 1.5% in rural areas, as agriculture and forestry sectors are more readily able to absorb unemployable youth as family labour. Although, an average unemployment rate of 1.5% seemed relatively acceptable, the urban youth unemployment indicated a disturbing trend that needed immediate attention. VET was adopted as an important strategy to generate substantial job opportunities for the youth by equipping them with relevant skills for the job market. The MoLHR had the mandate to develop strategies and implement programmes such as planning, administration and building of Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs), regulation of private training institutes, Instructors development, curriculum development and production of occupational standards for different economic sectors. The ADB component of the project focused on the infrastructure and capacity development, while GTZ mostly focused on development of quality assurance system. The major breakthrough was made in the year 2006 (through BSDP initiative) with the endorsement of VET policy with support from GTZ, which emphasizes on a major shift from supply based to demand driven system. The participation of private sector and stakeholders other than government agencies was identified to be one of the key factors in the development of this policy.

2.7 VET Policy

A diagnostic analysis made by the Project Planning Technical Advisory (PPTA) committee in 2001 for the Basic Skills Development Project (BSDP) revealed a lack of coherent VET policy associated with employment policies (ADB RRP, 2001). Lack of qualified staff, skills and management system to develop and administer the employment-oriented skills training system, and mechanisms to maintain linkages with the private sector and to deliver the training programs through various modalities were also identified. One of the problems contributing toward poor output from VET was the outdated and inadequate facilities in the existing training institutes. Weak inter-ministerial coordination to institutionalize the TVET system as part of the national human resource development framework and lack of capital necessary to develop new training programs and facilities were also diagnosed as issues surrounding the provision of VET. Hence a VET policy was developed with support from the GTZ component of BSDP encompassing *quality, relevance, partnerships, sustainability, access* and *culture* in order to fulfill the vision of VET system. These overarching goals of the policy are no different from what the countries around the world are trying to achieve, to develop a flexible and quality education and training system. *(See Appendix 2 for VET policy objectives)*

In order to move from the past toward the future, the existing vocational training programmes were considered insufficient and needed gearing to the economic and social demand both in terms of quality and quantity. Since private sector participation in VET was weak, the government initiated the establishment of public-private partnerships, industrial training committees, and a labour market information system to ensure quality in VET. Simultaneously, efforts in VET

advocacy programmes were well underway to attract young people to take up vocational training. Apprenticeship training programmes in collaboration with private companies were introduced. The concept of competences, outcomes, assessment and certification were introduced through re-designing the existing curriculum. It is not known when it was decided to introduce BVQF, but the aforementioned initiatives comprised some of the elements on which the concept of vocational qualifications framework depends. It is hoped that the framework will provide a basis for monitoring and regulating the competence of skilled workers and therefore enhance quality of the vocational training provision (BVQF report, 2006).

The MoLHR currently has support from DANIDA for the 10th five-year plan (2008-2013) and the principal focus of this support is employment promotion by focusing on enhancing quality of VET and skilled workers. It supports capacity development of staff (teaching and non teaching), curriculum development, and technical assistance (TA) to develop quality assurance strategies. This aid is a continuation from where GTZ left in developing quality assurance systems. Through this support, Competency Based Training (CBT) was introduced and it is expected to introduce a transparent system resulting in the provision of relevant training, reducing the mismatch in skills and hence promising gainful employment for school leavers. However, whether this will be realized is questionable, as experiences in other countries have not produced any evidence yet.

2.8 Why a Bhutan Vocational Qualifications Framework?

The VET policy (2006), Section 10 states:

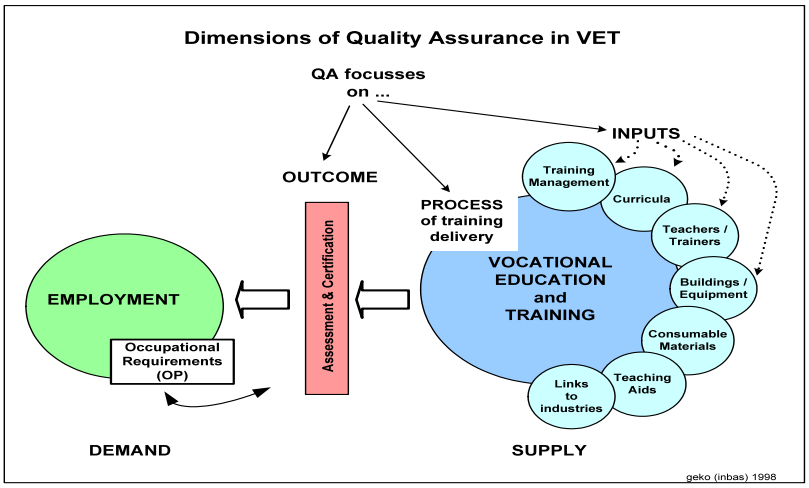
> All occupational standards, testing and certification will be embedded in the BVQF, which will cover an increasing number of occupations

from semi-skilled, to skilled persons up to supervisors and overseers. In addition, the ministry will create opportunities for further advancement through higher-level certificates and a bridging arrangement into higher education.

The policy enshrines the BVQF model as the tool to ensure standards of training and qualification progression. It is hoped that establishment of BVQF will help to set approved national occupational profiles and standards with well defined qualifications as well as assessment of trainees and accreditation of VET programmes and institutions. At the core of the BVQF are occupational standards, which define the competencies required for a specific occupation in the workplace, which are assumed to be demand-based since employers and experts are to be involved in developing these standards.

The VET policy states that quality in VET will be assured through Bhutan Vocational Qualifications Frameworks. In principle, quality assurance is intended to focus on the following (BVQF, 2006:6) as illustrated in *figure 2* below:

***Dimensions of quality assurance in VET**: Figure 2*



(Source: BVQF concluding review, 2006, MoLHR)

1. The inputs to training (e.g. curricula, teaching aids, competence of trainers and mangers, training equipment etc.), impact on curriculum and pedagogy;
2. The process of training delivery (i.e. how well training is conducted);
3. The output or outcomes of training (i.e. the competences of graduates with regards to the requirements of employment).

The *figure 2* outlines the process of ensuring quality in VET. It suggests that depending on the philosophy of quality assurance, the focus may be on only one of these aspects (e.g. outcome only, as in the case of strictly Anglophone NVQ systems) or on all three aspects, as it is the case with the German Dual System of VET (BVQF, 2006). The report advocates the importance of all three aspects for delivering quality VET and recommends BVQF as the model to achieve this. But the German model has been leading the world in VET without a qualifications framework.

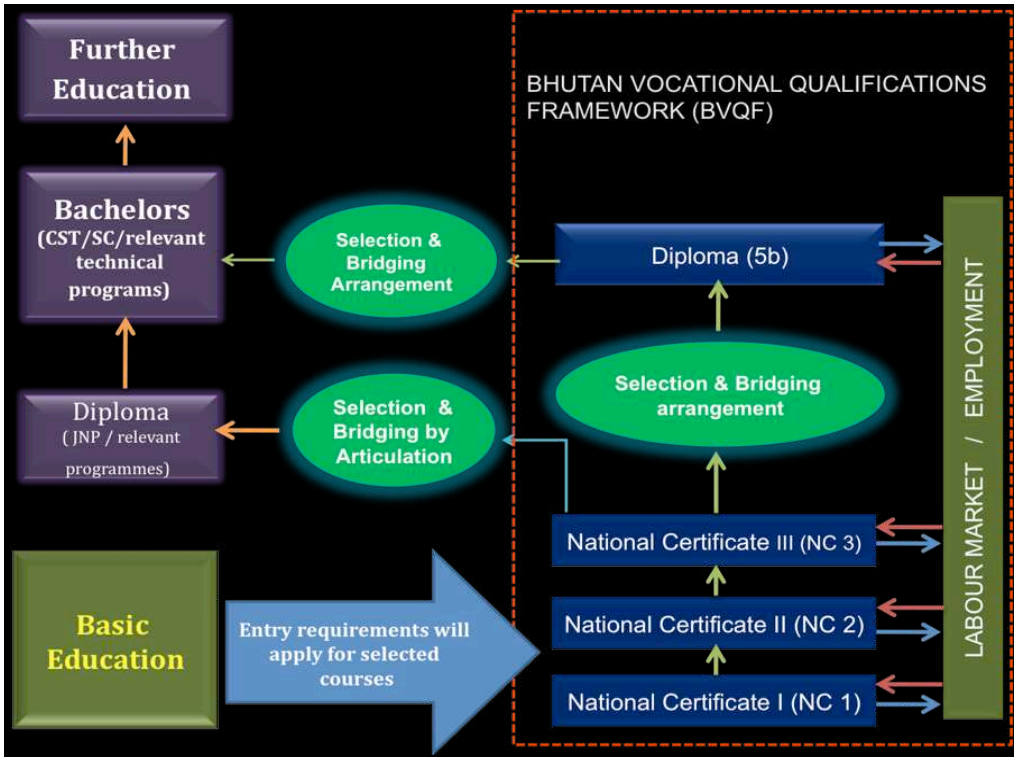
The BVQF is also being promoted to facilitate progress from low-level to higher-level qualifications and assumes that there will be recognition of qualifications by employers and educational institutions. It is perceived and accepted as a solution to the deteriorating quality of skills and lack of mobility among the workforce as VET certificate holders are at 'dead end' with no opportunities to progress further. It is hoped that BVQF will also provide basis for international comparability and transferability thereby promoting quality and mobility of human resources.

The government expects that BVQF will ensure the following in achieving quality VET:

1. Stakeholder participation; development of occupational standards, curriculum and active involvement in assessment leading to resolve the issues of relevance
2. Training providers concentrating on best possible outcomes and competition with provision of modular training course
3. Certification process which promotes transparency
4. Opening up access to training and employment through recognition of prior learning (RPL)

These expectations are derived from the literature available from various international and national reports but not on any substantive evidences of them being achieved.

Structure of BVQF within the entire education and training system- *Figure 3*



(Source: BVQF report, 2006, MoLHR)

The above illustration of the BVQF structure depicts educational pathways and link with the labour market. Currently, there is no movement between the certificate level and diploma level under the jurisdiction of Royal University of Bhutan. The basic schooling is under the Ministry of Education. It is expected that once the proposed National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is established, the bridging arrangements enables cross-sectoral linkages for smooth horizontal and vertical movement in the qualifications ladder and job market. *(Refer Appendix 3 for BVQF levels)*

It is hoped that such pathways will enable lifelong learning and up grade the qualifications of those who otherwise might be falling out of the qualifications ladder and marginalized from knowledge and qualifications to progress socially and academically. The National Certificate (NC) levels are supported by level descriptors elaborating range of processes and responsibilities and learning demand against each level. The BVQF also 'aspires to become the 'national language' Raffe (2003:239) for describing qualifications and the relationships between different level of certificate in VET, to reduce barriers to access and progression and to promote a culture of lifelong learning. This is a radical break from the earlier system as it 'gives neither practitioners and those involved in design any benchmarks to test new ideas against their experiences' (Young, 2009:2919). Further, the issues of expertise, human resources and funding is crucial to make these initiatives successful.

The MoLHR began to aggressively educate stakeholders and trained standard developers, assessors, promoting certification of assessment centers and developing a system for registration of all training providers in the country. 'Administrative

difficulties are most frequently expressed in the proliferation of new agencies and committees concerned with the quality assurance, standard setting and assessment that NQFs invariably generate' (Young, 2009:2918), and this has been the case of Bhutan. Capacity development was a pre-requisite as a whole range of new expertise and knowledge had to be developed. Despite having ventured in developing BVQF since 2006, it is still not yet able to implement the system effectively (even on a pilot basis) due to lack of institutional capacity. The other factor hindering the finalization of BVQF remains negotiation with the Royal University of Bhutan and Ministry of Education in linking the route from certificate level courses to diploma and degree level courses as it requires recognition and acceptance from organizations under different jurisdictions. Although, there have been quite a number of occupational standards developed in different sectors they have not been used by the institutions. Thus, the concept of policy breadth as suggested by Raffe (2003) was superficial or almost non-existent in the case of Bhutan. 'Policy breadth describes the extent to which the establishment of the framework is directly and explicitly linked with other measures to influence how the framework is used' (Raffe, 2003:242). There is a need for a well-defined coordination system between different organization responsible for promoting pathways and progression.

The urgency to develop and reform the VET system in the country compelled the government to uncritically adopt the BVQF policy. Although some research were carried out on how the system could be best taken advantage of by a small developing economy like Bhutan, it derived much confidence from reports by international and donor agencies.

Chapter 3

International debate and impact of NVQFs

In this chapter I introduce the rationale underpinning the uptake of national vocational qualifications (NVQFs), which have proved to be so popular around the world in recent times.

NVQFs claim to provide flexibility, mobility and transparency of qualifications through standards and learning outcomes and provide route for progression and lifelong learning. While NVQFs are believed to resolve the problems most countries face with the traditional system of qualifications, there are also some significant criticisms pointing to inherent flaws in the NVQF system. Many countries that introduced the policy still face problems with it and are still not able to provide any significant evidence of its success. Despite these criticisms and lack of evidences of its success, the trend of adopting NVQFs around the world, especially in developing countries is increasing. One of the significant drivers for the recent spread of the NVQF model is the role donor agencies and major international organizations play in supporting it as the desired policy in education and training reforms.

I argue that although NVQFs aim to solve real problems in VET and the labour market, it is more the rhetoric and unchallenged claims of NVQFs that lead most countries to adopt this policy rather than being convinced by its evidence-base. Most developing countries decide to adopt this model, ignorant of its flaws and the underlying assumptions, either knowingly or unknowingly, and apparently more influenced by the take-up of the policy by others following after a full evaluation of its merits. The chapter begins with a section outlining the nature of the NVQFs and

examines their claims against the problems with traditional qualifications. It also discusses experiences of first generation NVQFs in Anglophone developed nations and critically discusses the debate about NVQF (or NQF) and identifies the claims typically associated with it. Finally the chapter concludes with a brief discussion that emphasizes the impact of NVQFs in developing countries. It also attempts to question the extent to which countries following this trend understand the issues and institutional barriers associated with it.

3.1 What is a NVQF?

A qualifications framework comprises a set of qualifications, defined in terms of outcomes and standards and are treated as independent from the ways and process of achieving them. It is supported by level descriptors (the number of levels varies from country to country and also from types of framework[12]) across different occupational and knowledge fields (Raffe et al, 2009:5). The purpose is to establish equivalence between qualifications, create pathways and seamless transition horizontally and vertically, ensuring that different jurisdictions and stakeholders are able to recognize them at a glance. These features of qualifications stand in 'stark contrast to traditional qualifications systems', which are based on specific inputs such as tenure in the school or institutions or as an apprentice (Young, 2005:8). According to OECD (2007:13) 'Qualifications frameworks can then be seen as official ways of regulating and listing the available qualifications in a country/sector/region'. Qualifications frameworks aim to provide a common qualifications language nationally and internationally for mutual recognition, driven by the free movement of skilled workers around the world as a consequence

[12] Frameworks are characterized as lose or tight, weak or strong, partial or comprehensive, enabling or regulated (Young, 2005)

of globalization. NVQFs are essentially defined in terms of 'outcomes, demonstration and assessment instead of the learning process leading up to them' (Eraut, 2003 qouted in Mulder et al, 2007:73) making learning independent of where it takes place and more of an assessment of behavior as per the criteria set in the standards. NVQFs are also developed to improve the image and attract youth to be skilled, qualified and employed.

3.2 Claims of NVQFs

In what follows, I examine the claims of NVQFs with references to what traditional qualifications lack. Every national and international policy document on qualifications framework promote similar goals despite the countries being different from each other socially, economically and culturally.

The NVQFs claims can be summarized as follows:

1) Provides *transparency*
2) Visible learning *pathways* to promote *lifelong learning*
3) *Portability*
4) *Recognition of prior or experiential learning*
5) All the above leads to improve *quality* of education and training

Transparency: NVQFs claims to be transparent to all users on what learners have to achieve, teachers are expected to teach and employers are getting in terms of skills and knowledge. NVQFs aspires to improve understanding of all kinds of qualifications, informing employers and learners the competences a learner must possess as per the learning outcomes and standards. This aspect was missing in the traditional qualifications, which usually consisted of a course title, a syllabus and a transcript and provision of certificate upon final assessment. 'The old system

depended entirely on the professional judgment of the teachers and examiners and lacked any set of standards and formal criteria' (Young, 2003:225). Thus NVQFs became an attractive model for employers, institutions/colleges and those seeking to study and acquire qualifications as it gives clear information about what they can and cannot do. And that's why it is assumed people will be informed and be encouraged to be qualified.

NVQFs is also considered to be an excellent tool for communications about qualifications systems and a means to regulate and create certainty about the value of qualifications. One reason why NVQFs are assumed to bring about transparency is they depend on the linkages between different sectors of education and training system, industries and labour market, which was not a requirement in the traditional system.

Progression and lifelong learning (LLL): The idea of NVQFs is often contrasted with societies of the past in which learning was largely associated and restricted to initial education and training (Young, 2003:224). NVQFs provide progression by minimizing barriers, unlike in the traditional system, through establishing routes between VET, world of work and higher education.

Traditional VET qualifications lead to '*cul-de-sacs'* (Young et al, 2011:25), with no opportunities for higher level vocational or degree level programmes. Through accreditation and certification, the NVQFs model is supposed to offer possibilities for recognizing skills and knowledge acquired either formally through colleges and institutions or informally in work place. NVQFs supports life-long learning and facilitate involvement of different stakeholders in VET, unlike the traditional system, which is considered as provider-led. It also aims to convey the relationship

between different qualifications by identifying common skills and knowledge through the concept of equivalence. This concept is used to build pathways within and across occupations and different education and training sectors promoting seamlessness. Frameworks lead to 'creating more bridges and ladders between academic and vocational routes, and hopefully bringing about ... "parity of esteem" between them which has proved so elusive in the past' (Ainley et al, 1996:53). Since the NVQFs is learner centered, the learner is solely responsible for his or her progression, at their own pace assuming it to be a meritocratic system.

Portability: NVQFs, in order to contribute to increasing mobility, cooperation and exchange as well as intercultural understanding and mutual recognition, claimed to establish more 'portable' qualifications linked together by rules of the framework, unlike the traditional qualifications. Through the certification process based on standards and learning outcomes, NVQFs claimed to help employers identify suitable employees through portable credentials and aim to provide the learners with the freedom to move nationally and internationally.

In addition, 'a framework of standards provide the reference grid within which different forms of learning provision can be related' (Jessup, 1991:12) to allow for the integration of LLL provision into a coherent system in order to ease the transferability and transportability of skills and competencies from one area to another. The traditional qualifications system were tracked and provision of certification was also independent from each other, which made it impossible for VET certificate holders to progress in to higher-level qualifications.

Recognition of prior or experiential learning: the claim that NVQFs allow recognition and accreditation of skills acquired outside formal institutions appealed

to policy makers, and they hoped this would stimulate and enhance the reach and scope of education and training and encourage Lifelong Learning. Traditionally, to possess a qualification, one must enter in to specific programmes for a definite period in educational institutions. Therefore, individuals possessing skills and knowledge through workplace and community practice were not recognized as qualified. This often created barrier for them in entering or re-entering the formal learning system. Traditional qualifications tended to restrict learning to particular contexts such as colleges and schools, and age. Recognition outside formal learning was not possible. In contrast, a NVQF defines learning independently of where it takes place and offers the possibility of certification. The assumption here is that there is high-level learning happening outside the schools and colleges, mostly based on skills and competences derived at workplace. Because of problems with the traditional qualifications system many countries saw the claims made by NVQFs as a welcome solution in the reform of their education and training system.

3.3 Emergence of first generation NVQFs

The origins of national vocational qualifications frameworks owe much to the inspiration offered by a key discussion document produced by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in UK in 1981 titled *A New Training Initiative*: *An Agenda for Action* (Ainley et al, 1996:45) and the 16-plus Action Plan, implemented in 1984 in Scotland (Raffe et al, 2007).

The first vocational qualifications frameworks were introduced in five countries: New Zealand, United Kingdom, Scotland, Australia and South Africa. As ‘early starters’ in the development of qualifications framework they are referred to as

'first generation NQF[13]' (Raffe et al, 2009:1; Allais, 2010:1). These NQFs/NVQFs[14] have since been used as models for the development of frameworks around the world despite limited evidences of their success.

The history and origins of these frameworks became important for 'later starters' to study in terms of understanding their aims, experiences and issues in implementation and performance. However, in most instances the contextual factors in which NVQFs originated are 'easily forgotten or unknown' (Raffe et al, 2009:1) and policy makers around the world often treat NVQFs as a 'magic wand' (Young, 2005:32), to quick fix issues surrounding education and training. Although 'first generation NQFs' differed from each other in terms of their form, scope and breadth, the policy makers in these countries shared a common vision of achieving relevance, quality and flexibility in their education and training systems in building highly skilled and flexible workforce. Initially most NVQFs started with low-level vocational qualifications (Young, 2003:224) in order to give qualifications to the unqualified; this is one reason why NVQFs continue to be associated with low skills and why higher education bodies are reluctant to be associated with the model.

NQFs can be seen as part of a global trend toward 'unification' of post compulsory education and training systems (Raffe et al, 1998:240). In the case of UK (excepting Scotland), the aim was to overcome the jungle of existing vocational qualifications and to build a unified structure (Ainley et al, 1996:46). 'Since the mid-1980s, national qualifications frameworks have been developed by a growing

[13] NVQF and NQF are used interchangeably (based the literature referred) in certain instances as they essentially function under the same concept and principle.

number of countries, which suggests that they are responses to global rather than just country-specific pressures' (Young, 2003:223). They originated mainly in countries that are economically advanced and industrialized with well-developed educational institutions and relatively high levels of educational achievement. The political and economic contexts have played an important role in the decision to adopt the idea of unifying qualifications and giving priority to transparency and portability. The aim was to make the system more demand-oriented (Young, 2005:5) using outcome statements as the 'basis of assessment and the recognition of achievement' (Jessup, 1991:134). This new model was assumed to be more in line with the needs of labour markets unlike in the past when employers and other stakeholders had limited or no role in determining inputs to education and training systems. The NVQFs' claims appealed to most policy makers, for example in the UK, a senior Manpower Services Commission official was quoted as saying:

> It (NVQ) looked and, if you'll allow me to say so, was credible. Any government of the day, indeed all of us, might have adopted that. We might have tinkered a bit at the edges, but it's the implementation of it afterwards that's led to…difficulties (Raggatt & Williams, 1999:1).

The trend in adopting NVQFs in the past five years has dramatically increased 'over 100 countries at the last count' (Young et al, 2011:6). Another factor encouraging this trend is 'emergence of regional frameworks in Europe, Southern Africa and in the Caribbean, which aim to help employers and institutions of higher education recognize the equivalency of qualifications earned in different countries and hence are supported by multilateral and bilateral agencies' (Raffe et al, 2009:v). This is further augmented by

endorsement of the ILO, which says:

> The ILO's new Recommendation No. 195 on human resources development: education, training and lifelong learning, adopted in June 2004, recommended the adoption of an NQF as a means of promoting the development, implementation and financing of a transparent mechanism for the assessment, certification and recognition of skills (*foreward* by Jane Stewart (ILO) in Young, 2005:iii).

At this rate, the number of NVQFs are expected to continue to increase as countries look to reform their VET. NVQFs have set a trend as the *way forward* and seemed to have secured the confidence of the international community as a desirable policy reform tool. But, there has been a growing literature on the lack of reliable evidence on the success of NVQFs in achieving their stated goals; this research literature points to the many implementation problems involved.

3.4 Critiques of NVQFs

It has been argued that the UK's NVQ continues to be the 'the most widely known, widely copied and most heavily criticized model...in the world' (Young, 2010b:2). A critical debate around NVQFs start with the nature of NVQFs itself and the assumptions they make about how qualifications work. The idea of an NVQFs is based on the assumption that 'stakeholders' buy-in to the policy and the fact that they have agreed on something means that it is beyond criticism; criticizing can be seen as opposing to democratically-taken decisions (Allais, 2003:316).

In the following section I examine some of these criticisms of NVQFs and the outcomes-based model associated with them.

3.5 Tension between intrinsic and institutional logics

In trying to understand the nature of NVQFs, the rationale and the purposes they aim to fulfill and the reasons for the difficulties in their implementation, David Raffe (2003) uses the concepts of intrinsic and institutional logics. These two concepts point in contradictory directions; intrinsic logics tend to be dominated by the institutional logics in which they are embedded. In the case of NVQFs, this limits their effective implementation. The 'intrinsic logics' may seek to encourage flexible pathways, portability and parity of esteem; however the institutional logic is likely to 'perpetuate existing divisions and barriers' (Raffe et al, 2007:481). Institutional logics refer to resources, policies of different educational institutions, and the linkages among them, the opportunities and constraints and the role of stakeholders, which invariably are 'at odds with' the support needed to realize the intrinsic logic of a NVQF. Hence, NVQFs may be ineffective if they are not complemented by participation from vibrant industries, well-resourced institutions, competent VET teachers, curriculum and stakeholders to ensure that they contribute and benefit from this policy.

There is a tendency for qualifications frameworks to be treated as ends in themselves, 'a self sustaining mechanism, relatively removed from real aspirations and intended outcomes', according to Raffe (1992). This may help to explain the implementation difficulties and their failure to achieve their objectives. Raffe et al (2007:481) go further on to suggest that barriers to implementation are the unintended consequence of the dynamics of how institutions, funding, regulatory systems and the labour market work. The lack of necessary conditions within the institutional logics has a powerful impact on the qualifications framework and its subsequent development (Wheelahan, 2009:115). The unification agenda of

NVQFs frequently leads to resistance from different political, social and institutional groups to protect their own interests for sound educational and economic reasons (Young, 2010a:9)

Raffe et al (2007:481) illustrates the barriers posed by 'institutional logics' below:

> For example, an institution may be reluctant to give credit to a student who has completed modules elsewhere if this results in timetabling difficulties or a loss of funding. The market value and portability of a qualification may depend upon factors which are not recognised by the intrinsic logic, such as where and how the qualification was obtained. The labour market may influence opportunities to learn, for example, by providing fewer opportunities to progress up the ladder of work-based qualifications than are described by the intrinsic logic. Institutional logics not only provide barriers which are not recognised by the intrinsic logic of a unified framework; they also vary across different institutional sectors, such as schools and colleges, or between school-based and work-based learning. This makes it harder to design a single framework to cover these sectors.

Young (2001) makes use of the 'intrinsic' and 'institutional' logics distinction to argue that a qualification framework based on learning outcomes that neglects the institutional logic within which it is to be implemented has little or no chance of playing a real role in the social organisation and acceptance of qualifications (quoted in Bouder, 2003:347-348). Young also argues that 'outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are often ineffective if they are not 'based in the shared values of practices of …"communities of trust"'(Raffe, 2003:242). He highlights the importance of the contexts and environment in which NVQFs work and argues that it is the trust among various players that contributes to effective implementation rather than 'rules, laws and criteria' (Young, 2003:235).

The debate surrounding tensions between intrinsic and institutional logics provides both an insight and a perspective to assist in understanding why the first generation NVQFs have had poor success rate. On the other hand the growing popularity of this policy around the world, especially among developing nations is due to the decision being made entirely on the intrinsic logics; the 'institutional barriers' to change tend to be neglected.

3.6 Outcome-based approaches and the problem with functional analysis process

The underlying basis of NVQFs is occupational standards and learning outcomes, which attempts to list competences needed to be qualified at different levels. 'The basic building bricks that make up NVQs are 'elements of competence' and their related 'performance criteria'- areas and aspects of work in which individuals have shown themselves to be competent' (Ainley et al, 1996:37). The European Commission defines outcomes as: 'The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning' (European Commision, 2005:11). The structure of NVQFs unlike the input based traditional qualifications systems places emphases on describing behaviors (not on academic or technical elements) in the form of competences and standards that a competent worker needs to display in a given job (Debling, 1989). By this method of observing performance, workers who already possess skills through years of work experience or informal learning can gain qualifications (Jessup, 1991); this essentially reduces the NVQF to an assessment and not a learning system (Grugulis, 2003:460). NVQFs assume that specifying outcomes

but not content or input would provide freedom to providers and flexibility in developing curriculum content (Allais, 2003:312). There may arise problems with regard to lack of consistency in assessment when the entire system hinges on the outcome of assessment only and moreover it might lead to undermining the input and process of learning which are equally important.

The functional analysis method is used to develop standards and competences by engaging training providers, industries and other stakeholders (where necessary) as 'the basis of formulating and awarding NVQs' (Stewart & Sambrook, 1995:100). Because they engage stakeholders, functional analysis claims to be 'scientific' and 'neutral' and not influenced by training provider alone. In practice, this is not possible as the rules of functional analysis are arbitrary, depending on the level of skills and expertise of the committee and lack a 'theory' and judgments are still dependent on subjective interpretations (Raffe et al, 2009:190), thus weakening the system.

Tremendous trust is placed on the outcome-based approach by many countries since the process of defining outcomes is assumed to be reliable and transparent therefore the 'trust in "experts" is thus replaced by trust in following the correct procedures' (Young, 2010b:13). Procedures are like technical rules in a machine handbook to be followed by anyone. However learning is not a machine as it requires a clear shift in the dominant thinking within most educational institutions. For instance, when an educational institution decides to adopt an outcome-oriented approach, it has to accept flexibility in many aspects: programme delivery, student adaptability, staff organisation, and most of all openness to external influences (i.e. the world of work). This understanding only gradually penetrates into societies

where learning has been predominantly a thing of mutual trust and understanding. However, 'outcomes cannot grasp the nature of bodies of knowledge and the complex processes we describe as transmission, pedagogy and curriculum through which they are acquired and renewed' (Young, 2005:33). Determining the meaning of 'competence' relies on the specification of standards, which makes it difficult to encompass 'an association with qualities owned by individuals' (Steward & Sambrook, 1995:98) as they cannot be standardized and cannot be assessed objectively in absolute sense. The outcomes-based approach is used to justify the shift from provider led qualifications and is assumed to be demand-oriented.

Jessup (1991), the pioneer of NVQs in the UK says the overall model stands or falls on how effectively we can express statements of competence and attainment. 'Outcome statements must accurately communicate their intent. For accurate communication of the outcomes of competence and attainment, a precision in the use of language in such statement will need to be established, approaching that of a science' (Jessup, 1991:134). Jessup further advocates that competence should include abilities to perform a job effectively, including the abilities to plan and organize work, cooperate with colleagues, cope with change and transfer skills and knowledge in different contexts. If these aspects of competences are not developed and effectively communicated in the standard, the achievement of quality is doubtful as education and training are now pegged against statement of outcomes and they can be only as good as these statements are (Raffe et al, 2009:19). Further, Young (2007:450) also adds this as a separate point about outcomes, that the outcome of NVQ only 'recognise what someone already knows (for qualification), and do not promote new learning'. There is a risk of developing a system, which

promotes learning only to what is already known, missing out the opportunity to create new knowledge and skills.

3.7 Implications for developing countries

Many countries around the world are undergoing major changes in their education and training system in order to meet the rapidly changing skills demand both nationally and internationally. Ever since the emergence of NVQFs in the mid 1990s they have gained popularity as the most recommended policy tool to deal with real political, economic and educational problems. Most developing countries have either developed or are in the process of developing some form of qualifications framework to reform their VET. But as discussed there is an already growing international debate on the role of qualifications framework as a driver of VET reform (Raffe et al, 2009; OECD, 2007). In what follows, I examine the implications of NVQFs for developing countries in relation to context, culture and resources and why the motivation to use it as the driver of education and training reform process.

Qualifications framework as driver of the education and training reform process

Despite few reliable studies on the impact of NVQFs, there is growing global spread of NVQFs (Johnson & Wolf, 2009). NVQFs in most developing countries have been introduced as policy reform tool in vocational education and training aiming to unify the education and training system; not surprisingly they tend to be based on a consensus of intrinsic logic of a NVQF (Young, 2003:226). The claims made for NVQFs on improvement of 'curriculum, delivery of education, and the access and transferability of qualifications' (Young, 2010a:2) are the driving force for countries adopting this policy. Some of the proponents, for example, the

Commonwealth of Learning argues that NQFs 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 for policies (Commonwealth of Learning and South African Qualifications Authority, 2008; in Young, 2010:2). Spreen (2002:54) submits that the drive towards outcomes VET is associated with 'aspects of neo-liberal economic policy' taking education toward 'market oriented orthodoxy' thereby giving a new perspective on the purpose and meaning of education (quote in Raffe et al, 2009).

The design of NVQFs in most developing countries is increasingly shaped by political and ideological factors. The role of development partners (multilateral and bilateral donor agencies) strongly contributes to this decision. This is supported in the analysis of the Asia-Pacific region by Comyn (2009:266) who reveals an 'almost pervasive role of donors and international agencies in the development and implementations of NQFs and NVQFs'. Most developing nations lack knowledge of the model and they have little alternative but to accept what is on the offer. They neither have the capacity to make well informed and researched decisions about such affairs nor posses the power to influence such decisions. The urgency to resolve issues in VET and unemployment rates often lead government and policy makers to make such decision quickly and with little consideration. The long-term investments in infrastructure, financing and other policy measures as conditions for a qualifications framework to work as intended are given least priority; most often it is assumed they will fall in place. Some developing countries like South Africa associate the introduction of outcomes-based education with the democratization of South African society. Outcomes-based qualifications frameworks in South Africa

were used to change the centralized input-driven and unequal apartheid-based system that lacked critical debate. The NQF was a radical attempt to break away from the past and transform the education system. It resulted in a comprehensive new system, but is widely criticized in South Africa as failing to meet its meet its noble goal (Allais, 2007). Young (2005:21) also argues that a radical break 'gives neither practitioners nor those involved in design any benchmarks to test the new ideas' hence, it is not known if there has been any progress or achievement. He further argues that:

> Out comes rarely, if ever, stand on their own; new forms of trust in the outcomes and the standards have to be developed as a result of usage over a period of time; this leads us back to the importance of institutions, especially in a developing country where there may be few traditions of trust to build on, other than those associated with local communities (Young, 2005:16).

An NVQF promises learning pathways horizontally and vertically within education and training sectors and the job market which open up access not only to higher qualifications but also socially, and as a consequence will remove the stigma VET suffers in most countries. However, there is little evidence of NVQFs successfully raising the status of VET from the experiences of first generation frameworks. 'It is unlikely that NVQs and GNVQs will help raise the status of vocational education until they are well known and understood' (Ainley et al, 1994:52). It was assumed that by equating VET qualifications at par with non academic qualifications society will change its view about VET (Allais, 2007) .The problem of low status and

image on VET deserves more attention than just introducing pathways as this problem is much more complex and entrenched in culture and society.

Despite, growing criticism around the world NVQFs are a global phenomenon and many countries are investing huge resources in implementing them. The issue lies not in the decisions of countries to adopt this policy but in recognizing and understanding the policy in the true sense: understanding the underlying assumptions of NVQFs and their its institutional and intrinsic logics as a basis for making it a success. Countries that have made deliberate attempt to overhaul their education and training system such as South Africa, with grand designs have often led to difficult situation of not being able to meet their goals. Past experience (Young, 2005; Young et al, 2011; Allais, 2010) suggests that it is advisable to begin with partial frameworks as building blocks to what already exists in the country, an approach followed in Scotland one of the few successful cases of introducing a NVQF with little attempt to replace their old systems. 'Countries that have been most successful have been those which have treated the development of frameworks as complementary to improving institutional capability rather than as a substitute for it or as a way of re-shaping institutions, and have seen outcomes of qualifications and programmes leading to them as intimately related rather than separable' (Allais, 2010: 4). An outcome-based qualifications framework cannot be seen as an end in itself but as a more complex phenomenon requiring several other systems such as well-organized sectoral partnerships, good systems of assessment, teacher development, and a stable socio-economic structure (Young, 2005).

Chapter 4

Learning from international experiences: implications for Bhutan

In this chapter, I outline the implications Bhutan may face in trying to implement the BVQF. The discussion that follows will be drawn from the previous chapter on criticisms of the early starters' experiences. Bhutan as a small developing nation cannot compare in terms of industrialization, living standard or population sizes with industrialized Anglophone nations where NVQFs emerged. However, it can learn significantly from experiences of both success and failures in these countries and learn especially what not to expect from this system. It will also draw comparisons from the case studies of 16 country report by ILO (Allais, 2010) and the ILO report on India (Young et al, 2011).

Bhutan is seeking to keep its growing unemployed youth engaged and productive, through addressing the mismatch between demand from the evolving job market, and supply from an education and training system that is robust and coherent. Just like in many other developing countries, the global policy context and international organizations played an important role in shaping the decision to introduce BVQF apart from its own aspiration to achieve a highly skilled workforce for the country. The policy has been initiated by the government as part of an overall basic skills development project and has been supported by all stakeholders. There were no similar countries to look at or copy from other than reports from international and donor agencies and they often obscured a deeper understanding of the policy. Bhutan, like many other developing nations also 'unambiguously assumed it as a good thing and confused their hopes for a NVQF with the reality of what a NVQF

can achieve' (Young, 2010a:7). Therefore, the unintended consequences of the policy have not been understood nor anticipated.

In Bhutan, the government did realize the institutional logics inhibiting the successful implementation of BVQF. The proponents of BVQF hoped that this feature of BVQF would lead to acquiring legitimacy over other institutions and stakeholders will cooperate and work together in establishing the necessary support, linkages and resources to achieve its goals. However, the process was assumed to be much simpler than it really is: organizations perform in a fairly complex manner with different priorities of their own. The issues of power balance and institutional interests inevitably get in the way. All though there is commitment from the government to resolve the institutional barriers the reality is more complex and there is a 'danger of assuming that qualification can be reforms on their own' (Young, 2002:48).

The situation of VET and the reasons for adopting BVQF as an overall VET reform process in Bhutan has already been presented in Chapter 2. The goals of BVQF are not different from the ambitious expectations expressed by many early starters of qualifications framework. Cleary most of the early starters of NVQF began from the concerns arising in the VET sector and rising unemployment, which is also the reason for Bhutan's decision to adopt BVQF. In the rest of this chapter, I consider the extent that the BVQF can overcome the key problems within the realms of VET provision in Bhutan and if the supporting strategies and policies necessary for the success of this policy are in place. I identify the issues that the country is likely to face if it uses the BVQF to 'lead' and shape the VET reform rather than supplementing the reform process. I begin by analyzing the purpose of introducing

BVQF and how it can be achieved or not based on the international criticisms and inherent limitations of the policy. I illustrate my argument based on the principles of Raffe's (2003) intrinsic/institutional logics distinction and focusing on the tendency to overlook institutional barriers.

4.1 Rationale behind introduction of BVQF in Bhutan

NVQs were designed to be 'employer-led' (Jessup 1991), to describe accurately the level of competence needed in the workplace (Debling 1989; Mitchell 1989). The primary reason to adopt BVQF was to achieve a relevant, efficient and effective VET system, much of the decision has been based on what the policy *intends to do* rather than *what it has done* so far. There is also a strong belief that the intrinsic logics behind NVQFs will resolve the issues VET is facing in Bhutan. This reform has been developed along side other policy initiatives based on market-driven approaches to an otherwise strongly supply oriented system. Thus, making yet another assumption that through the BVQF, 'qualifications based on employers' needs will be developed, moving forward and breaking away from rigid, supply driven, ad-hoc system of the past and achieve transparency and relevancy in VET.

It has already been argued in Chapter 3, that the Bhutan's VET policy (2006) recognizes the three dimensions of achieving a quality VET: the input to training (Curriculum, equipments and buildings, teachers etc), process of training delivery (pedagogy) and outcomes of training (standards, competences and assessment). Clearly, the government recognizes the importance of 'input to training' as an important element to achieve quality training. However, it believes that with a focus on outcomes and competences, qualifications will demand a certain standard of inputs in training, which the training providers in the country must meet through

accreditation. But, there is no evidence of this belief becoming true even in the first generation NVQFs. The BVQF is taking rather a lead role in the VET reform process and is in the process of determining exhaustive lists of qualifications and levels in various occupations in VET sector including those in art and craft which up to now have been practiced informally. The BVQF involves stakeholders in developing occupational standards which training providers can use to develop curriculum. An assessment system must be in place that assesses learners based on learning outcomes and criteria of the standards leading to certification (awarding qualifications) as per the levels in the framework grid *(refer Appendix 3)*.

However, the reality is VET in Bhutan is still new and under developed in many senses: institutional facilities (buildings, equipment), VET teachers, expertise on curriculum development, training materials and teacher development, on which the success of VET rests upon still need to grow and develop.

In discussing the purpose of introducing the BVQF in Bhutan, there are some underlying assumptions it makes, which need consideration.

4.2 Assumptions about BVQF

> Occupational Skills Standards is one of the base pillars in the BVQF and is the first step in its implementation…VET system based on OSS shall ensure that training is of a high quality and relevant to the needs of the labour market. As a result, the future VET graduates will be better equipped to meet the needs and expectations of the industries and employers. This positive impact on the employability of VET graduates will enhance the reputation of the vocational education and training and make it attractive to school leavers (*Foreward* by Minister of MoLHR (OSS for Mechanic), 2009:3).

The above excerpt is considered as a pillar of BVQF and the driver of quality assurance in VET. The primary reason for placing confidence in the BVQF is that since it is based on occupational standards developed by committee representing employers and experts, the training is demand-based and market driven. However, Young (2003:235) argues that;

> Despite the association of NQFs with neo-liberalism and market-driven reforms, it is arguable that markets and qualifications are based on fundamentally different principles. Whereas markets may depend on institutions, their core basis is competition; in contrast, qualifications of any kind depend on trust and therefore on cooperation not competition between designers, assessors, learners and users.

The government assumes that a model based on criteria and standards identified by employers and experts will be of quality and relevant to the market and also trustworthy of its users.

A qualifications framework assumes that employers can articulate the demands of work in such a way as to meet not only their own interest but that of employees as well, which Grugulis (2003:471) says is a 'highly unitarist interpretation'. She further states that the 'workplace is a contested terrain (Edwards, 1979) and the immediate and short-term needs of an individual employer may not be what is best for worker nor for the state, nor even for the individual employers themselves'. As Penn (1999) also points out, employers generally respond only to short-term skills needs, usually in an ad hoc way (Grugulis, 2003:270). Hence, it shows that there is a huge gap between what is aspired through BVQF and the reality of its implementation in workplace and institutions.

BVQF assumes that employers would have time, commitment and expertise to develop standards and assess trainees. The whole idea of involving employers is with the hope that because employers design and own these standards it would be in their interest to participate in this process. But, in reality this becomes difficult because employers find it time consuming and bureaucratic and often fail to participate in standard development and assessment process workshops, thereby hindering the implementation of BVQF. Private employers have important tasks to make profit and not indulge in bureaucratic process of designing qualifications. And in Bhutan, most of the companies are small or micro in size and it is neither economically viable nor sensible for them to get involved in this process, which they are unsure of how it might benefit them. They consider this process as a cost and a hindrance to their daily business rather than contributing toward building a system that benefits all, even though they welcome the idea of being able to contribute toward standards and qualifications. Cully (2005:8) says that 'employers are aware of VET, but they find it too complex. This is a particular problem for small and medium-sized firms, but even large firms find it difficult to navigate the system. Those that are most successful in doing so are firms with staff who had formal responsibility for training' (Wheelahan, 2009:98).

Effective implementation of BVQF is costly, time consuming and demands a high level of professional capacity amongst staff (Allias, 2010:107) for a small country like Bhutan and especially in the field of VET. The available resources are being spent in undertaking the bureaucratic process of developing occupational standards, training assessors, building infrastructure and technical capacity to conduct assessment process, in the hope that all stakeholders will participate willingly to

this system. It was discovered that 'in Lithuania, each school would have to contract assessing institutions to conduct assessment for each training programme. In addition, it could lead to inefficiencies and perverse consequences, such as lack of coordination among the different systems' (Allias, 2010:107). This can apply to the case of Bhutan as Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs) are also identified as assessment centres. There have already been issues and concerns on not being able to conduct proper assessment due to lack of adequate tools and equipment and not being able to provide a situation as close to the real work place as specified in the standards. This further leads to the issue of wasting time in assessment and taking away the focus from teaching to assessing what has not been taught.

Therefore, effective implementation of BVQF is based on the unrealistic assumption that the important stakeholders will have shared understanding and commit and participate voluntarily in the system.

4.3 The issue of progression for VET in Bhutan

Qualifications frameworks reflect a break away from the traditional link of qualifications with institutions and formal learning and opening access to wider social groups especially those excluded from institutions (Jessup, 1991); they are thus associated with the idea of progression and lifelong learning. However research has failed to produce any evidence of this being achieved over years of introducing the policy by first generation NVQFs. One of the drawbacks of VET that BVQF is expected to help resolve is the issue of progression for VET certificate holders in Bhutan. VET starts and ends with just a certificate qualification with no further possibilities for qualifications up-grading, and correspondingly to higher positions at work. The BVQF has four levels; NC1,

NC2, NC3, NC4 and level *n,* a provision to link to the future NQF and Higher education *(see appendix 3 for more details)*. This may be debated as creation of an artificial progression and to graduate the students earlier and enter the job market to only realize they may need additional skills and knowledge in order to progress in real sense.

Currently, in Bhutan there are no means of acquiring higher qualifications for those who have not taken the academic route, even though they display expertise and skills at higher levels through work experience. Higher-level jobs are fixed to particular qualifications, which demand diploma/degree certificates and which is possible to attain only if one has taken the academic route. This reinforces the public preference for academic routes over VET. The issue of progression in Bhutan gained importance about few years ago due to growing number of youth leaving schools and the corresponding increase of graduates from VTIs leading to jobs and qualifications with dead ends. On the other hand there is increasing unemployment, making it a typical situation of mismatch in aspirations and availability of opportunities. Progression is considered to be an option to attract learners to take up VET. However, the reason for low status, 'as in the UK, is the very fact that TVET and skills training has been associated with creating opportunities for disadvantaged groups has contributed to its low status and lack of recognition' (Young et al, 2011:12). And like in India, and presumably in most developing countries, the fragmented means of provision; different initiatives by different ministries with limited or no relationship with each other also contribute to lack of progression between programmes (Young et al, 2011:12). Further, there is a huge coordination problem among stakeholders such as Ministry of Labour and

Human Resources, Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of agriculture, Royal University if Bhutan (RUB), Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Business Association groups who are all involved in VET in some form or another.

The current problem with progression is that there is no provision in the Jigme Namgyal Polytechnic (JNP), the only polytechnic college in the country to accept certificate holders from VTIs[15] and similarly leading from the Polytechnic to an Engineering College. The other reasons for lack of progression for VET are that different programmes are often prepared separately and the entry requirement to higher level programmes are different and restrictive- again favouring only the academic route.

A qualifications framework maps out the various routes between education and job market, which in reality may not exist in a direct and simple manner as illustrated in the framework, 'in other words, the qualifications framework is a castle in cyberspace - a list of qualifications and unit standards with very little relationship with the real world of educational provision' (Allais, 2007:532). Developing a framework may act as part of the solution to this problem but will not itself improve progression on its own. 'If a problem for policy makers is that certain programmes are dead-ends for students, this problem is unlikely to be solved by changing the specifications or requirements of qualifications; improving progression possibilities for students requires detailed and hard work on the curriculum and pedagogy of educational programmes' (Young et al, 2011: 9).

[15] In the past when the JNP was under the administration of NTTA, there was a system to accept certificate holders from RTI on merit basis, so there was a system of progression. This system was discontinued with restructuring and change in administration of the respective institutions (details in chapter 2), which makes it a problem of coordination.

Bhutan lacks an active employer community in the private sector and the corporate sector is still growing, hence, government initiates most of the policy related to skills, employment and qualifications. Well-articulated pathways can be achieved with better coordination and cooperation with different organizations overseeing schools, VET and HE. It requires redesigning curriculum to provide bridging and progression from one level to another and this cannot simply happen by stakeholders agreement on design of the framework alone. The focus should be in building partnerships between educational providers, employers, professional associations, and increasing involvement of the industries and institutional capacity (Young et al, 2011:9). This is an achievable and an important target for a small country like Bhutan with relatively less complex systems but which needs further development, especially in the capacity of the institutions to impart quality training. The issue is more about improving the infrastructure of institutions and capacity of teachers within a well-coordinated and coherent system of education and training rather than radically changing the qualifications from the traditional system. The lack of progression between different agencies responsible for VET and HE is 'primarily an issue of provision rather than of qualifications' (Young at al, 2011:11). Finally, the emphasis on progression and pathways may implicitly imply that the way toward acquiring knowledge and learning is only largely through acquisition of higher qualifications via formal learning. This undermines vocational training and other forms of learning which are important but do not feature highly in the level grid, and are nonetheless very useful to the society.

4.4 Challenges of informal /traditional learning and recognition of prior learning

The BVQF claims to recognize prior or experiential learning through accreditation and certification based on the learning outcomes and standards in order to provide access to qualifications to those who missed opportunities from formal training and also to recognize short term informal courses. The objective is to provide an opportunity to engage in lifelong learning process. To what extent, value is added to this process of accreditation is questionable. Research and experience show despite the understanding that people do acquire considerable skills and knowledge through informal ways, informal learning is still seen as inferior as opposed to different form of formal learning and they are not valued equally. 'When people do get formal qualifications through recognition of prior learning (RPL), such qualifications are rarely recognized as equivalent to those obtained by formal study' (Young, 2005: 28). Even in developed countries, where this system has been tried and tested for decades there is little evidence as to how effective accrediting informal learning is.

In Bhutan, most of the traditional skills in art and craft were acquired informally through apprenticeships-like arrangements between the learner and the expert. Hence, it is likely that most of the highly skilled craftsperson do not hold any qualifications that can be equated to modern day qualifications. With the BVQF system, it will demand every one with skills but no formal qualifications to get accredited and certified. The two National Institutes of Zorig Chusum[16] in the country offers courses on traditional art and craft ie, wood/slate/stone carving,

[16] Zorig Chusum means 'thirteen traditional art and craft' in Dzongkha

traditional painting, embroidery to name a few, based on the traditional methods of teaching with the course duration ranging from two to six years. There were no written curricula, long hours were spent on teaching the basic principle of art and free hand drawing. However, with the introduction of competency-based training there is a radical shift toward outcome-based approach, as the old input-based system is considered inadequate and inefficient; the long duration for such training is considered a waste of time. This accusation to certain extent is true, as teaching methods needed to evolve without losing the essence of culture and art and to be relevant to the current needs of the market. However, 'Curriculum design is a complex matter, and it is even more complex in vocational or professional qualifications which do not only teach pure disciplines. The point here is that knowledge organised in a curriculum cannot be derived from outcome statements, but has to be sourced and organised according to other principles, which are only available to experts within the knowledge domains' (Allais, 2007: 540). Although craft knowledge is different from disciplinary knowledge and is mainly tacit, in the sense that it is not written or spoken, it similarly requires sustained and systematic study, and is also not easily disaggregated (Gamble, 2004a; 2004b). Such knowledge can be seen as less suited to outcome statements than disciplinary knowledge, because it is tacit (Allais, 2007:540). Hence learning in Zorig Chusum is at risk of sacrificing its spiritual orientation by aligning it to the world of consumerism, which may go against the country's vision of GNH that seeks to promote holistic education.

The Competency Based Training (CBT) approach brought in by BVQF system in art and craft training may be good in resolving the issue of documenting traditional

means of teaching, which might be dying skills and craft. However, the system of reducing learning to outcomes and behaviors may undermine the depth and breadth of the knowledge and skills of such crafts, especially through ineffective translation in to Dzongkha[17] during the analysis process, in the attempt to identify outcomes and competences. 'The more serious and rigorous the attempts to specify the domain being assessed, the narrower and narrower the domain itself becomes, without, in fact, becoming fully transparent. The attempt to map out free standing content and standards leads, again and again, to a never-ending spiral of specification' (Wolf, 1995:55 in Allais (2007:533)).

In Bhutan, most teachers of Zorig Chusum are traditionally trained and are craftsmen themselves and do not hold any formal qualifications. The process of unification and standardization poses threat of alienating people from traditional ways of learning. Significant resources are being spent on changing the old system to new which could otherwise be diverted to re-thinking on how best these traditional methods of teaching can be made efficient while retaining its old methods rather than directly adapting to a new model of teaching and learning. RPL can be a challenge in Bhutan considering the need for resources to assess and certify individuals and especially if the trust in qualifications has not been established. The other challenge most likely to occur is in informal sectors such as subsistence farming. In Bhutan such occupations cannot be encompassed in the overall BVQF but may still be relevant in the local context, which might create a situation of undermining these occupations and sectors if at all the BVQF is to meet all its stated objectives.

[17] Dzongkha is the national language and most often during the analysis process, facilitators need to translate from English to Dzongkha as English is official language but traditional art schools are taught in Dzongkha.

4.5 Problems with outcome statements and weak stakeholder involvement

The development of occupational standards and their learning outcome statements are the pillars on which BVQF is built. Tremendous trust is based on the outcomes as it is assumed to follow a scientific procedure of involving experts, employers and standard developers; 'trust in "experts" is thus replaced by trust in following the correct procedures' (Young, 2010b:13). This is the main basis of transparency and legitimacy to provide relevant and quality training. In Bhutan, experiences have shown that during the technical advisory committee (TAC) meetings to develop and endorse occupational standards, most often un-informed personnel are nominated to attend, which undermines the quality of the product (standards). Since the industries are not yet developed and lack highly skilled people, it is a typical case of 'a labour market characterized by low skills, and qualifications based on the current situation may simply reflect and reproduce existing weaknesses' (Grugulis, 2003:458). Further,

> The outcome statements must accurately communicate their intent. For accurate communication of the outcomes of competence and attainment, a precision in the use of language in such statements will need to be established, approaching that of a science. The overall model stands or falls on how effectively we can state competence and attainment (Jessup, 1991:134).

However, in Bhutan there is a risk of developing a standard, which may lack accuracy and precision particularly in those occupations where the experts consulted are not literate (predominantly in occupations such as auto mechanics, traditional carpenter and craftsman etc). They may demonstrate better than

communicate in the right language, so the quality of outcome statements is limited to how best a standard developer and other stakeholder communicate their intent during functional analysis workshop.

In the UK, as intended, NVQs were based on standards set by employer-led industry lead bodies. However, as Raggatt and Williams (1999) point out, few UK employers were interested in either enabling their employees to gain vocational qualifications, or using these qualifications for recruitment. As a result the lead bodies were far from representative and the NVQ framework became employment-led rather than employer-led, and over-dependent on consultants employed by the lead bodies to develop the occupational standards. The trade unions, though broadly more supportive of NVQs than employers, played only a marginal role in the UK context for reasons already mentioned; the anti-union political climate of the time and the high levels of unemployment gave them very little leverage on policy' (Young, 2005:5).

The learning outcomes approach also masks the risk implied by weakening institutions and underestimate the learning process itself. For instance, Allais et al (2009:5) argue that 'a reform approach which is designed to challenge education institutions and providers is likely to have a dramatically different effect in countries where these institutions are weak or non-existent'. Concerns about the shift to learning outcomes are also related to the risk of neglecting learning processes. 'Outcomes cannot grasp the nature of bodies of knowledge and the complex processes we describe as transmission, pedagogy and curriculum through which they are acquired and renewed' (Young, 2005:33). This indicates that there is a risk of not recognizing those aspects of skills, knowledge and attitude which

cannot be explicitly stated as outcomes and can only be demonstrated under contexts which may or may not be available during assessment. Furthermore there is a tendency by users to arbitrarily interpret the learning outcomes as it best fits them to make themselves understood.

There are incidences and actions in every day working life that cannot be described but we can show ourselves to be knowledgeable of: standards and learning outcomes cannot describe these. Further, outcome based approaches depend on assessment and neglect the process of learning which could form an important aspect of learning experience; however the assessors' judgment is final in the competence-based system. This could pose as a serious issue in Bhutan if we intend to implement the assessment as proposed because we impart training in certain trades, which lack experts at the highest standard and most often lack right assessment tools and environment. Because standards are thus embedded, they argue, we often have a sense of standards without being able to articulate them clearly. Conversely, articulating standards does not make them clear to people who are not already part of a knowledge area or practice (Allais, 2007:539).

4.6 BVQF will not overcome mismatch of demand and supply of skills on its own

One of the core reasons for introducing the BVQF is to resolve the issue of mismatch between demand and supply of skills in the job market through improved communication among stakeholders. However, the ILO research has found mixed evidences on this being achieved (Young et al, 2011:9), although most of the countries in ILO case study were in their early stage of introducing a NVQF and any substantial impact was too soon to be realized. The ILO report also reveals that NVQF aim of involving industries in developing qualifications has not led to any

concrete evidence of improving this communication in the manner it hoped for. It is known that NQF in itself can generally do little to stimulate demands for skills and knowledge. For instance Young (2005:34) says the South African government is increasingly aware that chronic problems of unemployment and poverty cannot be solved in a free market by simply by establishing a qualifications framework that only encourages people to become better qualified but for what purpose? Qualifications are not in end in themselves.

The BVQF is a concept, which is accepted but hardly understood by many in Bhutan. It is accepted based on its intrinsic logic and claim toward building a transparent and relevant training system, which is a change from the old system. And it attempts to impart a sense of ownership among stakeholders, which seems to make it objective and demand oriented. But, international experiences do not provide any evidence that this will solve the problem of quality and employment as intended. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, many new qualifications were created, but very few used. In the United Kingdom, NQF led to qualifications that had to be successively revised, never achieved high take-up and offered few progression opportunities for those achieving them (Young, 2010b:13) undermining genuine skills development and knowledge acquisition due to less time devoted to ‘learning time’ and ‘understanding’. In Bhutan too, there is a risk of creating qualifications, which may never be used and which does not reflect read demand.

4.7 Problems with assessment

In Bhutan, vocational training institutes still need to be adequately equipped but are the only best option for assessment centers. This might lead to situation of poor

standards and lack of credibility if 'the credibility and "success" of standards depend on well- resourced workplaces and employers with a relatively long-term view of Human Resource Development' (Young, 2010b:18). Small enterprises and industries do not even have annual HRD plans, let alone long-term HRD strategies, and it is because the whole employment sector other than the civil service and major industries (few in number and mostly demanding only low skill jobs) are not yet formalized. The government although is advocating companies with certain threshold of employees to have an HRD plan with committed funds, this in reality is very difficult to monitor.

NQFs are often introduced with the language of 'autonomy' and 'empowerment' of VET institutions. But 'autonomy' without increased capacity, without increased financial support, and with a series of new 'accountability' requirements may turn out to be rather less empowering for institutions than is claimed, and governments may not get the desired results (Allias, 2010:108). Vocational training institutes (VTIs) do not generate any funds and are fully supported by the government. The linkage between institutes and industry is still weak owing informal nature of industries available. In addition, there is an acute shortage of staff and teachers in the institutes and headquarter organizations responsible for administering this policy. And most often, while developing assessment criteria, the assumption is that 'most assessors will know exactly what to do and therefore results will be consistent and reliable' (Allais, 2003:314). However, in reality, ways of testing vary depending on the context, ways of phrasing questions (Wolf, 1993), which makes it difficult to standardize assessment and testing.

4.8 Quality assurance and monitoring and evaluation

Quality assurance is an important feature in the implementation of BVQF. Training providers in Bhutan (both government and private) will establish their own quality management systems as acceptable to the MoLHR through registration and accreditation. Quality assurance in training became important as private training providers emerged in the education and training market (Young et al, 2011:31) and it is also the case in Bhutan. Due to increasing number of school leavers entering the education and training market, private institutions emerged and they had to compete for fully funded students by the government to deliver market oriented training. Quality assurance became a concern due to different types of qualifications proliferating in the market. MoLHR has now developed and proposed a set of 15 processes as guidelines to be observed by all training institutions as quality assurance tool for VET. The guidelines are to be used as manual by officers in industry, private and non-governmental training institutions and stakeholders of VET sector in Bhutan. It has a provision for monitoring and evaluation of BVQF implementation and its contribution to the national skills development. However, it is still in a draft stage and has not been used, so it cannot be reviewed at the moment for its effective use and impact.

Most of the training institutions in Bhutan are government owned or linked through support either in HRD or funding the students. Since government also is the regulatory body, it creates a situation of trust and the credibility of the system being undermined. Instead, an autonomous agency overseeing the assessment and certification may seem to be more credible and objective. In order to assure quality of training worldwide, Bhutan has also become a member of Colombo Plan Staff College (CPSC) and of APACC (Asia Pacific Accreditation and Certification

Commission. The APACC is a body established by CPSC with an aim to ensure VET institutions among member countries has internationally recognized quality standards and systems. It seeks to achieve greater workforce mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications in Asia and Pacific region through registration and accreditation as per their guidelines. (http://www.apacc4hrd.org/about_apacc/philosophy/).

The government has committed to two systems of quality assurance processes, national and international (APACC). This requires monitoring and evaluation, which often demand huge resources to develop indicators and ensuring that responsible authorities are able to collect and use the information as intended. Considerable capacity will be needed in the government for the BVQF if it intends to get meaningful evaluation and quality assured training programmes (Young et al, 2011:33). The ILO report also states that monitoring and evaluation of NVQF can be complex as it impinges on many other aspects of the system and that the current situation in Bhutan of embedding the overall monitoring and evaluation process in the ministry, may not be adequate and a separate team may be recommended for this task.

4.9 Policy learning instead of policy borrowing

There are international debates with regard to growing concerns about the complex issues of the borrowing and lending of vocational training policies and how the global discourse in VET reform have impact on national policies (Chakroun, 2010:199). Bhutan, like many developing countries is no exception in borrowing policies from developed countries and often applying them out of context. To avoid unquestioning borrowing and getting too drawn by the rhetoric surrounding the

policy, the borrower must have the knowledge and capacity to question the risks, costs and benefits of the policy. Developing countries are often faced with a situation of making choice on the policies that have been tried and implemented in the economically developed nations and especially so when the policy comes with a development aid or a grant. It is understandable to copy what has worked successfully elsewhere; normally official policy documents do not capture the debates, conflicts and problems experienced in the country being borrowed from and the policy borrower does not see the problems, 'often what is borrowed is a snapshot of a moving target' (Allias, 2010:210).

BVQF is a model that is often only understood by staff of the organization (MoLHR) promoting and implementing it. There is a risk of introducing a policy that isn't well understood truly by the stakeholders who also may not understand its relevance to the context it is being implemented in.

While it is worth borrowing and copying policies that others have successfully implemented, it is also worth learning more about the context, timing, goals and associated problems and experiences of these policies in countries where it was originated. It is important to remember that an NVQF is never just 'another policy' as it is part of a new approach to the whole TVET system, its relationship to the different employment sectors and the role of different stakeholders in the system. If this is not recognised, a NVQF runs the risk of becoming 'just another policy', something that just complicates the system further instead of reducing complexity, as was the case in South Africa and Mexico (Young et al, 2011:13).

NVQFs have emerged in countries, which were industrially advanced with relatively high education levels among the stakeholders. While Bhutan has low

literacy levels and its private sector and industries are nascent a BVQF model that need to depend on substantial involvement from industries is likely to pose major challenges in implementation. However, the tourism and hospitality sector in Bhutan may be one sector ready for such a policy as it has vibrant private sector participation.

Bhutan has a small industrial base and producing occupational standards in such a context for such a industry may not prove practical and useful. Another drawback Bhutan faces is poor industry-VET institute linkages; resolving this issue first may be a better alternative as a starting point rather than investing in a complex policy, which may complicate the system and isolate the stakeholders further away. Policy learning can be a better option for Bhutan. One cannot deny that qualifications frameworks have benefits as well occupational standards and learning outcomes are useful for career guidance and employment agencies for information dissemination (CEDEFOP, 2010), and is therefore inherently a good policy. However, Bhutan needs to understand the contexts and the breadth of related policies, which must exist for the BVQF to be implemented and to achieve what it aspires to. Hence it is important to understand that introducing BVQF alone without understanding the contexts and influence of other factors may run the risk of having introduced just another policy which may not be relevant and useful for the country. The only way of understanding this is by investigating how it has been used and how effectively by countries which implemented this policy (Raffe et al, 2009:4).

4.10 Costs of BVQF

BVQF requires huge commitment of financial and human resources. For a developing country like Bhutan it will lead to diverting resources from other priorities which may develop conditions on which BVQF can achieve its goals, such as investment in infrastructure, training of trainers, and curriculum thus crowding out accessibility to good quality training. The government through donor aided projects, finances the development of occupational standards and development of curriculum guides and assessment. These are expensive and are not sustainable; it is not known yet how revenue will be generated in the future to fund this process as the private industries are not yet developed to take up such costs. In other words, qualifications have no returns on its costs. The system is not promising enough to be able to be self-sustaining, although, the government hopes the market will pick up somehow despite its weak VET system and under developed industries.

The BVQF is an initiative with financial support from the GTZ since 2003 and after eight years, MoLHR is still struggling to implement it. It has now started the CBT training for NC1 and 2 for Electrician, Masonry and Carpentry courses in the VTIs. Since the introduction of CBT, the feedback reveals that the assessment has been a major issue due to lack of equipment and resources to meet the requirements of the standards. The other point, which was strongly expressed, is that too much time being spent on assessment and fulfilling administrative requirements and not much on teaching. Grugulis (2003:462) further supported by Hyland & Weller (1994); Grugulis (1997); Fuller & Unwin (2001) submits ‘teaching time is taken up with administrative necessities rather than substantive occupationally relevant knowledge’. However, the VTI Instructors take comfort in the fact that they are

able to dedicate time for individual learners to teach them what need to be assessed and believes teaching quality may have enhanced due to this. But this needs further research and evaluation. A Principal of an institute commented that maybe it is too early for such a system to be introduced considering the weak tradition of VET in the country and he said 'it is like building the roof without the foundation'. He also expressed the difficulties in realizing what appears really good 'on paper' in this case, the CBT and BVQF policy.

Although, stakeholders of VET in Bhutan appreciate the initiative and the opportunity to have a say in developing qualifications, the confidence and trust has not been acquired yet due to failure to provide any substantial outcomes from it. But again, it is too early to study the impact and outcome, since the BVQF qualifications have been awarded for about a year ago and in limited occupations. But, 'for an NQF to be really effective, hearts and minds, genuine and active support has to be won. Otherwise, there is a danger that education and training institutions and social partners will simply pay lip service to the framework. It is increasingly accepted that successful implementation depends on communities of trust' (CEDEFOP, 2010:29) and developing trust needs time.

Since the BVQF is here to say, and as the government has taken a sectoral approach in its implementation, there is an opportunity to learn from the pilot phase of implementation before it covers the entire education and training sector. Bhutan could take the BVQF as an opportunity to change the existing system of VET in the country. It is a worthwhile investment for the government to research such policies and investigate international experiences to understand all aspects of such a complex policy in depth, and to understand what is feasible for Bhutan and not to

depend just on the global discourses. A well-informed and home grown BVQF system may be possible in Bhutan owing to its small size and relatively less complex and uniform education and training system in the country.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

It is easy to understand why policy makers and mega international agencies recommend and adopt NVQF as an education and training reform tool. NVQF has clear and ambitious goals. It is an attractive policy for countries trying to gear their education and training system to be more responsive to their labour market needs. The demand for vocational education and training (VET) to be relevant and market driven makes NVQF appear to offer the perfect solution. The process of developing standards through employer participation claims to make it demand-based. It also seems objective as it breaks producer monopoly of the past by engaging employer and stakeholders in defining the qualifications (Young, 2010b:4). The availability of standards to be used independent of any specific learning route appears to make it flexible and transparent. Governments particularly advocate this model because it provides a basis for international comparability and transferability; it is measurable and hence makes accountability easier.

However, qualification frameworks do not stand alone as instruments of policy and it is wise to consider aspects of the policy that impact on the operations of frameworks, which often remains. Aside from all the technical considerations it is important to look at the requirements to manage and finance the introduction and operation of frameworks. Lessons from the early starters of NVQF show that it is not an end in itself but has several aspects, which need to be considered before it can meet its goals. Qualifications frameworks are often seen as a catalyst for wider systemic change (Coles, 2006:5), which is not always well understood and are often the reasons why there is little evidence of success among the early starters.

NVQF requires well-developed institutional and administrative capacity operating in a vibrant industrial economy with high level of trust among the government and the stakeholders. Most of the early starters of NVQF were rich industrialized Anglophone nations but even they have not been entirely successful in achieving their goals. Developing countries have other priorities of building institutional capacity in delivering basic educational goals such as literacy and numeracy levels; therefore it is a huge compromise on the resources to divert attention and focus on the bureaucratic processes required for a NVQF. The irony of this trend is that most countries adopting NVQF policy are found among developing and not developed countries (Allais, 2007). This trend can be attributed to the practice of policy borrowing mostly through recommendations by donor and international agencies.

The GTZ along with the Bhutan government initiated a VET reform policy that attempts to focus on the input, processes and outcomes, and BVQF was recommended as the instrument to drive this reform process. Initiatives to create a culture of partnerships with business associations, industries to influence provision, funding and input in the development of occupational profiles and standards were undertaken but it has not taken off as well as has been anticipated. However, the government believes it is only a matter of time and that once the private sector and industries mature, the value of qualifications will grow and the system will become robust. But international experience does not support such hopes. As Young (2002; 2003; 2005; 2007) reveals time and again, the importance of ‘trust’ between these institutions resulting in weak participation in the whole process.

Introducing the BVQF is no doubt part of a political and ideological agenda as the government opens up to modernization and there is also the pressure to integrate in the global community. The BVQF was seen as an opportunity to develop the institutional and administrative capacity of VET, but so far it is trapped in a situation where occupational standards cannot be used due to lack of institutional capacity in the VTIs. Assessment is an issue due to poor institutional facilities along with weak capacity of the instructors and poor participation from the industries. Although, Bhutan has been sensible enough to take a modest approach in beginning with the VET and in initiating a pilot phase with certain occupations, a full change from the old system is radical and that may make it difficult to implement.

Despite being around for several years the BVQF is still difficult to understand even for many staff of the ministry and is often seen as complex and difficult to make sense of. However, government sees this as an initial glitch, as is expected in all transition processes from an old to a new system. It believes the problem will be overcome once the concerned stakeholders become familiar with the system. In South Africa even after ten years of implementing the framework with much prominence and popularity, there is still much debate with problems such as time to register standards and qualifications, and due to complexity of the system there is a 'feeling of alienation from the proliferation of jargon and the burgeoning bureaucracy' (Allais, 2010:139). In Bhutan too, there is the same sense of alienation with the new model and its 'fancy' terminology and procedures to observe especially in the fields of traditional art and craft. The BVQF contain technical and specific terms that are only understood best by only a core people

associated with it. This is a real issue, which need further thinking if BVQF is to achieve its goals.

Despite lack of evidence on its success, reports show NVQF continues to be promoted as a model to the world for competence-based training and outcome-based learning (Young, 2010b:18). Scrapping the policy initiative knowing that it is bound to face barriers in the implementation process as experienced by first generation NVQFs is a tempting option but BVQF in Bhutan is already here and is likely to stay. Bhutan can only learn from the failures and modify the policy and make it suitable to the local context instead of replicating how it was implemented in the countries of origin. The international experiences reveal the following lessons recommended by Young et al for India in their ILO report, 2011, which Bhutan also need to consider and understand about what qualifications framework can and cannot do:

1. BVQF is not an end in itself
2. BVQF will not increase provision and progression and make VET attractive to school leavers on its own
3. BVQF will not overcome mismatch in demand and supply in the labour market
4. And most importantly BVQF can only play a supporting role in the overall VET development in Bhutan and not be the driver of the reform process

Bhutan should rather focus on real problems of strengthening institutional and administrative capacity through training of VET teachers, improving curricula and teaching learning resources. Building partnerships and linkages with local

industries and employers in a sustainable manner and most importantly sorting differences among different organizations responsible for VET and higher education in the country may contribute significantly in improving the issues in progression and VET. Such interventions for a small country like Bhutan are functional and achievable. I am not suggesting that these aspects are completely neglected in Bhutan, but too much focus on making the BVQF work can divert limited resources and capacity away from more significant issues on which the success of BVQF rests. BVQF attempts to standardize existing skills and occupations but if there aren't many occupations in the first place to standardize, it risks creating list of occupational profiles with no real demand. It is a typical situation of 'putting the cart before the horse', which leads to unintended consequences and new problems. Policy makers should be concerned first with developing the basic facilities for developing quality VET instead of becoming involved in the complexities of BVQF model, which promotes narrower qualifications relevant for short term gains and possibly leading to a situation that threatens its goals. This policy trend should be a matter of concern for policy makers as it risks introducing a consumerist approach to education, which contradicts holistic education policy and the country's vision of GNH.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Objectives and Components of BSDP

The BSD Project has the following objectives:

1) Strengthen the institutional capacity for policy making, planning, and coordination in the TVET sector, and for delivering basic skill training relevant to the market needs;
2) Increase access to basic skills training by expanding the TVET system to include community based programs and by rehabilitating existing and establishing new training facilities,
3) Improve the quality of basic skills training by increasing links with the private sector; and
4) Promote effective utilization of basic skills by developing employment guidance and placement services.

The project is implemented through following components:

Component 1: Institutional capacity building of NTTA and its Institutions
Component 2: Increasing access to basic skills training and employment
Component 3: Improving quality of basic skills training

Source: RRP:BHU 31317: Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors on proposed loan to the Kingdom of Bhutan for the basic Skills Development Project, May 2001.

Appendix 2

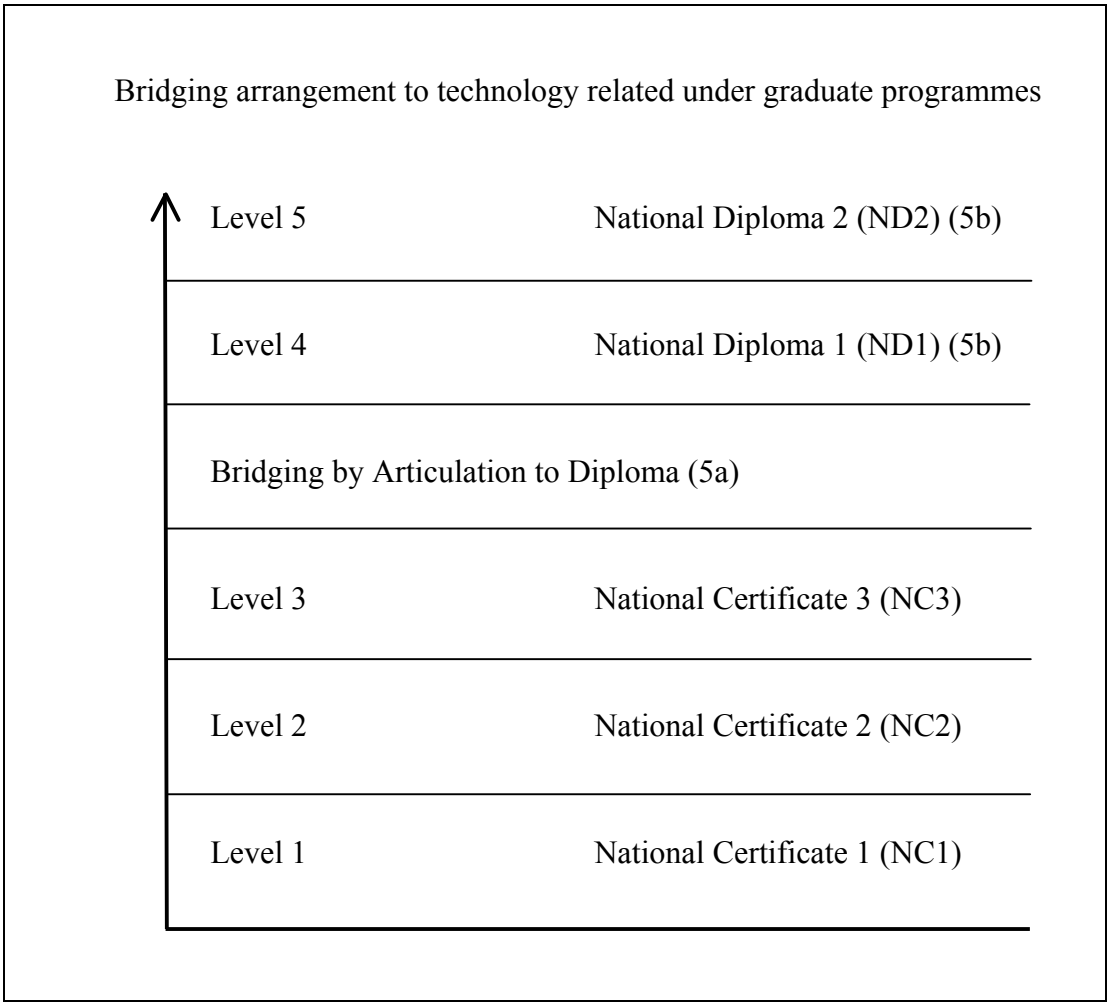
The VET policy proposed to address the challenges of VET as indicated below:

From our past		To our future
Supply-driven training, resulting in uncertain labour market opportunities	⇨	Demand-driven, guided by labour market signals. We will, however, pay attention to equity issues
Quantity-oriented	⇨	Quality-oriented
Ad-hoc approach to cover the most urgent needs	⇨	Systematic approach to create a skilled, productive labour force
Traditional learning, largely based on acquiring knowledge and skills according to prefabricated curricula	⇨	Learning geared toward acquiring competencies that are readily applicable in jobs
School-based system with minimum flexibility in delivery	⇨	Training system with multiple exit and entry points and flexible delivery
Government-sponsored training	⇨	Multiple-stakeholder approach
Isolated from standards in the region	⇨	Comparable to standards developed and applied in the region

Source: VET Policy, 2006

Appendix 3

Proposed Bhutan Vocational Qualification Framework (BVQF) levels and corresponding qualifications.



Source: Linking TVET to TE document- Promote life-long learning and seamless track for education & Training, 2010, MoLHR

In the workplace, NC1 co-relates to semi-skilled; NC2 to skilled; NC3 to highly skilled practitioners in the work place and ND1 and ND2 to foremen or supervisory personnel.

NC – National Certificate

ND – National Diploma