

Towards the Development of a Qualifications Framework for the Caribbean

The Inaugural Meeting of the **Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC®)** was convened in Barbados in January 1973. That post-colonial era was characterized by demands for the recognition of a Caribbean identity and right to self-determination, passion for Commonwealth Caribbean integration and for “... the improvement and liberalisation of secondary education in the Caribbean” (Archibald Moore, then Education Advisor in the Commonwealth Caribbean Regional Secretariat). The Rt. Excellent Errol Barrow, late Prime Minister of Barbados , explained that the institution of the Council gave Caribbean teachers the opportunity “...to take over fully the education of the young people of the Caribbean in the same way that the Caribbean Community [*was*] taking its economic destinies into its own hands.”

In the ensuing 40 years, CXC developed and gained regional and international recognition for its flagship Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC®) and Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE®) programmes and the CXC Associate Degree. Other successful products developed in the same period - in response to stakeholder demands - include the CSEC Business Certificate, Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence (CCSLC®), Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ®), and Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment (CPEA). Today, in a transformed environment, CXC strives to ensure the global human resource competitiveness of the Caribbean through the provision of quality assurance in education and certification. Education is recognised as a pre-requisite for sustainable development, and educators, government, and its social partners share the responsibility for education, training and economic health. Ndahi (2011), Eastmond (2011) and Payne (2011) identify the convergence of the following factors to create the new and global environment in which CXC operates:

- Regional and international economic unions and trade agreements
- Technological changes
- Workplace and industry changes
- Increasingly competitive business environments
- Demands for decent work
- Demands for equity in access for all learners including those who are differently able
- Demands for parity of esteem for traditional academic programmes and other non-traditional education and training options and qualifications.

Amidst global financial constraints, demands for more highly skilled labour and sustainable development make it imperative for education providers - including examining bodies - to resist focusing only on maintaining product specifications and standards over time; evaluation of the relevance and fitness for purpose of these products must be a priority. Providers, in collaboration with employers, need to anticipate market needs and plan for the systematic development and validation of relevant, high quality, flexible and portable education/training products - **in a configuration that provides seamless alternative pathways for lifelong learning.**

Cognizant of its responsibilities in a changing environment, CXC continues its product-revision, and the development of relevant programmes. The CCSLC, which was developed to be the foundation Competency-Based Education Training and Assessment (CBETA) qualification in post-primary education, is described as representing "...integration of knowledge, competencies and affective qualities critical to the dynamics of lifelong learning, global competitiveness and sustainable development in the region..." (CCSLC Handbook, p3). The CVQ product which was introduced in 2005 is also built on a CBETA foundation, and CXC Registrar, Dr Didacus

Jules, submits that “*Investment in TVET must be seen as an essential component of any plan for reengineering moribund economies and shaping new economic opportunity that contributes to improved standards of living for all.*” (p5, 2012). CARICOM has authorized CXC to award the CVQ to secondary learners in the region; vocational certification across a range of levels is also available from other providers including HEART Trust/NTA of Jamaica and several other regional and extra-regional providers.

The liberalized environment that was only a dream in 1973 is today’s reality, and with significant increase in the number types of education and training products from familiar and unfamiliar providers, it is important for everyone to be able to make informed choices; learners need to know what they are getting and where it can take them and other stakeholders need to know what the qualifications mean and what they are worth. Key criteria should include relevance, affordability, portability and articulation with new and existing products. In this context, programme developers, learners, employers and accrediting councils would benefit from the development of an integrated **Caribbean Qualification Framework (CQF)** which defines qualification levels and provides guidance about regionally accepted and internationally benchmarked standards. The CQF would facilitate end users’ evaluation of statements about programme outputs, and the comparison of qualifications within and between the economic and political unions.

While most emerging qualification frameworks facilitate standardization, there are differences in their philosophical underpinnings and scope; consequently, their content and formats vary. For example, the European, Hong Kong, Australian and South African frameworks are integrated and describe educational outcomes while the General Framework for CXC Qualifications

(GFCQ), the Regional Qualification Framework (RQF) adopted by CARICOM for vocational qualifications, and the United Kingdom frameworks (National Qualifications Framework, Qualifications and Credit Framework, and Framework for Higher Education Frameworks) exemplify the traditional focus on inputs and names of certificates. In designing the CQF, quality assurance lessons from CXC, regional universities and other regional certifying and accreditation agencies should be considered alongside best practice from recent international qualification.

Five design features that are worthy of consideration will now be considered.

Design considerations for a Caribbean Qualifications Framework

I. Inputs versus outcomes

The 2010 GFCQ identifies inputs which include length/duration of programmes and the type if institutions that provide instruction. Other inputs which may be considered in qualification frameworks include policies, regulations, curricular resources, assessment guidelines, finance, and stakeholder participation. Frameworks which emphasize inputs may not always provide sufficient detail about intended outcomes to facilitate monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the education or training provision. This may be contrasted with the results-based management model employed by the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) as a means of improving “management effectiveness and accountability by involving stakeholders in defining realistic expected results, assessing risk, monitoring progress towards the achievement of expected results ... and reporting on performance.”

Stakeholders should be disinclined to accept general statements about how well given programmes articulate simply because one may address enabling competencies for another. Like them, educators who have heard unsubstantiated reports about falling

standards should recognize the value of specifying outcomes that could be used in monitoring and evaluating programmes and qualifications.

II. Framework integration

Decisions about the number of frameworks and their relationship to each other should be informed by (i) the underlying philosophy about the comparability of the different types provisions (for example traditional academic versus vocational), and (ii) the number and discreteness of the educational pathways desired and the consequent need for vertical or horizontal articulation. It is important to devise a structure that would not distort or complicate the message to be communicated to the stakeholders.

Given ongoing concerns about parity of esteem for vocational and traditional academic offerings in the Caribbean (Eastmond, 2011; Jemmott, 2011; Ndahi, 2011; Payne, 2011, Jules, 2012), a strong case could be made for using an integrated framework which ensures that the same number of levels and comparable progression options are at least conceptualized. An integrated framework would support the “articulation between different levels and types of qualifications...” and the “seamless education system [*with*] multiple pathways to success in a context of continuous education envisioned by Jules (2011).

III. Number dimensions and levels

Important outcomes from education and training programmes include positive changes in learner characteristics. In qualification frameworks, level descriptors, or profiles of the learner, are sometimes provided. The number of dimensions considered in describing outcomes or learner competence at different levels varies across frameworks and should be informed by the intended purpose and user of the information and by the number of

levels to be considered. The configurations of four relevant frameworks are compared in the table below.

Framework	Dimensions reported on in level descriptors	Number of levels
South African	Scope of knowledge; knowledge literacy; method and procedure; problem solving; ethics and professional practice; accessing, processing and managing information; producing and communicating information; context and systems; management of learning; accountability . (10)	10
Hong Kong	Knowledge and intellectual skills; Processes; Application, autonomy and accountability; Communication, IT and numeracy. (4)	7
European	Knowledge (theoretical and factual); Skills (cognitive and practical); Competence (in terms of responsibility and autonomy) (3)	8
Australian	Knowledge; Skills; Application of knowledge and skills.	10

The 2010 GFCQ and RQF are complementary and both define five levels which do not extend to the upper part of the range covered by the frameworks considered above. It is therefore conceivable that the CQF will comprise more than five levels, even if a decision is taken to distribute these levels across a family of shorter contiguous frameworks as in the UK model.

III. Quantifying programme demand

The Hong Kong framework exemplifies how the definition of a credit system - which is dependent on the breadth and depth of the programme – could facilitate the comparison of products. Communication with stakeholders is also simplified. Weighting programme credit according to the level of the programme also facilitates: a) the bundling of modules or products from different levels for the award of group certificates, and b) the modularization of programmes for flexible lifelong learning with minimal repetition and duplication.

A systematic approach would be required for successful implementation of a credit system. For example, the current indication of the notional 120 hours of learning time (required by an *average* learner) per CAPE Unit could serve as a useful foundation for comparing CXC qualifications. However, there is no similar specification of learning time for the CSEC or CCSLC programmes and in the 2010 GFCQ, mitigation of this deficiency is achieved by specifying the maximum number of credits from a lower level that will be accepted for a group certificate and any given level. A more rigorous definition of credits and a weighting system could provide a more elegant solution for the GFCQ and the CQF.

IV. Quality assurance mechanisms

Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives. William Foster, N.D.

It is conceivable that, most education and training providers have internal quality assurance mechanisms that (i) facilitate efficiency, continual improvement and product development, and (ii) reduce the likelihood of errors and discrepancies that would be deleterious to their

reputation and market share. The CXC quality assurance mechanism is elaborate and extends from programme design through syllabus development, development and administration of assessments, processing of scripts and award of grades, appeals, the award of certificates and the preparation of individual and aggregated performance reports. A wide cross section of stakeholders and a series of independent technical advisory bodies are involved in the hierarchical system that is enshrined in its articles of agreement and delegation of powers. The process is informed by independent research and complemented published detailed performance data.

In the context of qualification frameworks, quality assurance mechanisms may go beyond the validation of products to span process details and administrative considerations such as naming and reporting conventions. The United Kingdom, South Africa and Europe are examples of regions that have developed qualification registration systems to complement their qualification frameworks. In the CARICOM, concerns about quality assurance in education and training catalyzed discussion about a Regional Accreditation Mechanism and some national and regional training agencies and accreditation councils have been commissioned. International standards such as ISO 17000 and 9001, and best practices distilled from CXC, Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP), regional universities, and similar international providers and agencies should inform the design of the Caribbean Qualifications Framework. In addition, they should influence the development of policies, legislation and specification of resources for the effective functioning of a quality assurance mechanism to undergird it.

Case for a Caribbean Qualifications Framework

In relation to the OECS Economic Union, Payne (2011) queried,

How will this freedom of movement of “workers” with their differing employable skills be meaningfully facilitated? What existing mechanism will allow these workers’ skills to be quantified, qualified and certified for gainful employment within the Economic Union Area?

A case has been made for the development of a Caribbean Qualification Framework to facilitate the comparison of qualifications, and it may be posited that the most important application of this framework would be in facilitating movement of workers within CARICOM and the OECS Economic Unions and across the new and global environment in which we operate. However, in facilitating the design of appropriate qualifications, and the recognition of prior learning and achievement, the framework will also contribute to the sustainable development of the human resource capital of the region, to economic growth and to social security.

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APPENDIX I: CARIBBEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (DRAFT II)

Qualification Levels	Knowledge	Skills & application	Autonomy and responsibility
(Cumulative)	(Theoretical & factual)	(Cognitive, practical & communication skills and the context for their application)	(Including team role)
I	Elementary general knowledge of a field of work or study	Skills: Elementary general, logical and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Routine, repetitive situations Communication: Read and write limited types and lengths of materials; understand and follow simple instructions; identify and report facts.	Needs direct supervision and detailed guidance to complete routine, repetitive tasks.
II	Foundational factual and operational knowledge of a field of work or study	Skills: Foundational, logical and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Defined, routine, structured Communication: Extract information from specified range of sources; produce simple written documents using templates; take part in discussion.	Needs some supervision and clear instructions in order to perform on structured assignments and achieve set goals.
III	Knowledge and understanding of, and ability to, apply foundational facts, principles and established processes of a field of work or study	Skills: Fundamental logical, and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Defined, non-routine but predictable assignments and contexts Communication: Extract information from range of sources; summarize information in written or graphical format; take active part in discussion.	Can accept responsibility for completing assignments provided that goals are outlined. Can implement decisions with limited to no supervision; can help guide/supervise others in simple undertakings.
IV	Core knowledge and understanding of concepts, rules and processes of a field of work or study	Skills: Defined range of logical, intuitive and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Non-routine and unpredictable assignments and contexts Communication: Summarize research findings using appropriate formats and registers; provide status reports in appropriate formats; take informed position in discussion.	Can work autonomously with limited supervision or guidance; can supervise others in undertaking tasks; take responsibility for organizing self and others once objectives are known; comfortable taking decisions of a routine nature and appropriately escalating more complex challenges.
V	Comprehensive knowledge and understanding of general and specialized areas of a field of work or study	Skills: Broad range of logical, intuitive and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Complex assignments in wide range of contexts Communication: Develop and communicate plans; analyse and synthesize information from range of sources; transmit information and skills to teams using appropriate formats; lead discussions	Autonomous worker capable of multi-tasking, team supervisor, can adapt behavior and methods; comfortable investigating and solving problems, making process improvements and contributing ideas before escalating more complex challenges; capable of coordinating and/or managing multiple assignments.
VI	Advanced knowledge and understanding of theories, rules, processes, understanding of the limits and having the ability to integrate knowledge	Skills: Comprehensive range of logical, intuitive and practical skills Type of activity/ Context: Requiring design of solutions in broad range of unfamiliar contexts Communication: Communicate improvement plans and designs; prepare technical proposals and research reports; mediate discussions with specialists audiences	Able to manage multiple, complex assignments in overlapping areas; applies intellectual knowledge and skills to solve problems, design solutions, or improve processes; sets and takes responsibility for meeting goals, team leader.
VII	Very specialized knowledge of a field of work or study with ability to critique and engage in research and contribute to deeper understanding of the area of specialization	Skills: Expert and specialized logical, intuitive and practical skills to solve complex problems Type of activity/ Context: Requiring research to devise solutions in related areas Communication: Communicate research findings, prepare and present instructional materials to specialists; mediate discussions with specialist and non-specialist audiences; make presentations for advocacy.	Transforms processes and develops new models and theories to improve organization or field of study; self directed, senior team leader, expects responsibility, sets strategic direction; excellent decision maker.
VIII	Specialized knowledge in the forefront of the given field or area of work and those related to it. Able to make original contributions to knowledge	Skills: Specialized skills logical, intuitive and practical skills to work autonomously create ground breaking solutions. Type of activity/Context: Requiring innovation to develop original solutions and new procedures for current and anticipated situations Communication: Publish technical and academic materials for peers and the community; make presentations for advocacy functions	Innovative and transformational decision-maker and leader; prefers independent and autonomous working style; defines groundbreaking models and theories for system improvement.

Yolande Wright: Thursday 17 May 2012

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