

Qualifications Frameworks:

What International Credential Evaluators Need to Know



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Could this question have come from your international admissions office?

“Our admissions office got an inquiry from a prospective applicant from New Zealand. She told us that she has a ‘Level 7 degree in engineering technology’. We weren’t sure what she was talking about, so we asked to see her documents. Her transcript shows information about “Programme Enrolments” and shows that her degree is a ‘Level 7 qualification’. We know what engineering technology is, but what does ‘Level 7’ mean?”

PROGRAMME ENROLMENTS		
Year	Code	Title
2005	AK3719	Bachelor of Engineering Technology

QUALIFICATIONS AWARDED	
<i>Any qualifications granted below were conferred by the Auckland University of Technology, originally established in 1895, recognised as a university under Section 162 (4) (a) of the Education Act 1989 in 2000. Prior to 2000, the institution was known as Auckland Institute of Technology recognised as a polytechnic under Section 162 (4) (b) (ii) of the Education Act 1989. Prior to 1989 the institution was known as Auckland Technical Institute.</i>	
Qualification:	Bachelor of Engineering Technology
Major(s) / Specialisation(s):	Mechanical Engineering
Date Granted:	20-Feb-2009
Level of Qualification:	Level 7
Official Length of Programme:	360 points, 3 year(s) full-time equivalent
Outcome Statement:	BEngTech graduates will have a comprehensive set of skills preparing them for employment as an engineering technologist in their chosen field of study. They will have the theoretical and practical skills to solve engineering problems and design engineering systems. They will understand project management principles and interpret general designs for construction, production or maintenance. Graduates will be prepared for progression to a professional engineering degree or postgraduate study in their chosen field.

The New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF)

This student is referring to the [New Zealand Qualifications Framework \(NZQF\)](#). The NZQF presents all of the completion credentials (“qualifications”) available from education and training programs in New Zealand, in a format laid out with “levels” on one axis and credential names with descriptive information on the other axis. This arrangement allows the user to see the full range of credentials relative to each other in the education and training landscape of New Zealand.

Work on the development of a qualifications framework (QF) started in the 1980’s, when changes in New Zealand brought to light a need to reorganize completion credentials in a way that would standardize the nomenclature and definitions of program input and

outcomes, in order to facilitate recognition of levels and competencies in the labor market, not just in the national context but in the international arena as well. The first product of this process was introduced in 1991 and subsequent development has resulted in the current iteration of the NZQF, in effect since 2010.

A textual presentation of the current NZQF with background information can be found in the brochure [“The New Zealand Qualifications Framework”](#). An online interactive version of the NZQF can be found [here](#). The NZQF serves as a tool for students and their families, education and training administrators, employers, the public and private sectors, and international recognition specialists. The NZQF is administered by the government body for education and training, the [New Zealand Qualifications Authority \(NZQA\)](#). It is tasked with developing and implementing policies and processes that ensure the quality and value of NZ qualifications within the country and internationally.

So what does “a Level 7 bachelor’s degree” mean in New Zealand? Why is this information relevant to an international admissions professional in the United States? The [interactive NZQF chart](#) shows three credentials at Level 7, a Graduate Certificate, a Graduate Diploma and a Bachelor’s Degree, each linked to a page with descriptive information about the credential, including purpose, entry requirements, outcomes, credit requirements, and relationship to other credentials. This type of information is invaluable to an international admissions officer or credential evaluator, whose task is to research and analyze precisely this type of information and compare it to what is required for admission to an institution or program in the United States, or determine the NZ credential’s comparability to a US credential.

The NZQF chart also shows a Level 8 credential called Bachelor Honours Degree. So there are bachelor’s degrees at both Level 7 and Level 8 in New Zealand? And the NZQF shows that there are both certificates and diplomas at Level 7 and Level 8 as well. How do these credentials compare to each other? What is the difference between the various credentials at the same level, and various credentials with the same name at different levels? By linking to the descriptive information for each credential, the reader will find information about NZ credentials that can be used to determine how each credential can be evaluated in a US context.

Qualifications Framework (QF) Fundamentals

QF's are found around the world in countries that have a centralized, government-regulated educational system. Generally they are created and monitored by a body dedicated specifically to the care and maintenance of the QF, but the QF generally is just one component of a larger structure, such as a ministry of education. The QF body usually interfaces with other organizations working to implement policies and goals in the spheres of education and training.

The NZQF provides an introduction to the concept and function of a QF. The paper [*An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks: Conceptual and Practice Issues for Policy Makers*](#) by Ron Tuck, published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2007, provides basic definitions of both “qualification” and “qualifications framework”.

- **Qualification:** A credential awarded upon completion of a program of education or training.
- **Qualifications framework (QF):** A structure for *defining, understanding, and presenting* education and training credentials awarded in a centralized educational system, relative to each other in terms of level and purpose. A QF is an *agent* as well as *product* of these processes.

The creation of a QF involves these processes:

- **Define** the qualifications
Names, types, levels, purposes, descriptions, standards for achievement, access/pathways
- **Understand** the qualifications
Analyze for content and function, determine or define relationships and synergies between qualifications
- **Present** the qualifications
Communicate clearly and transparently information about the definitions, content, and functions of qualifications

Qualifications Frameworks (QF's) Take Off

New Zealand was among the first countries to create a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), arising from needs identified through social, political and economic changes in the country at the time. South Africa is another example, where the end of *Apartheid* in 1994 and the establishment of democratic structures of government demanded the creation of new structures in education and training. In the United Kingdom (UK) economic, political and social changes in the early 1990's led to policies rooted in the goals of increasing access to

education, maximizing resources for education and training providers, and improving transparency in educational and administrative processes.

The second generation of NQF's spread beyond the English-speaking world. The Bologna Process in Europe created a new wave of QF's, including QF's at the national, regional and European levels, which have all gone through development processes since the 1990's. Countries as diverse as Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, the Philippines and Singapore began working on NQF's. The next generation has seen not only the development of more NQF's, but also outreach by established QF bodies to partner with other countries in developing a QF. There is also an increased interest in strengthening regional economic bonds through the development of Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQF's) that facilitate mobility of the academy and the workforce across borders within a region.

Why QF's Have Become So Widespread

The development of a QF is a process that supports national and regional political, economic and social goals. The first generation of QF's was created for many different reasons, depending on the needs to be addressed, such as:

- Responding to changes in the philosophy, system, or role of education and training within the social structure
- Changing, increasing, or improving the interface of education and training with other social structures (economy, employment sector, etc.)
- Providing clear information about the education sector; improving transparency
- Meeting sub-national, national, regional and global goals
- Meeting requirements of development and aid organizations
- Facilitating understanding and recognition of credentials outside the system

As the evolution of QF's has continued, some of the common roots and results of QF development include:

- Emphasis on “outcome-based” education (demonstrated competence) vs. “input-based” (mastery of content, accumulation of credits, grades and credentials)
- Emphasis on lifelong learning
- Improved interface with other sectors of society
- Better regulation of private education in areas that previously had none or had not allowed it
- Development of regional higher education areas
- Increase in mobility of students, graduates, instructors
- Increase in internationalization of higher education
- Development of regional economic zones
- Increase in mobility of potential workers

- International economic agreements and partnerships

QF's Around the World

The development of QF's has been a global movement among countries that have centralized education systems and value regional ties for economic strength and development. QF initiatives at both the national and regional levels can be found all over the globe, particularly in Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean and Asia-Pacific regions.

Higher education in the United States, which does not have a centralized system of education, has long had some components that have been adopted in educational reforms in other countries and are present in the components of frameworks. For example:

- Transcripts provide a transparent record of a student's educational history and achievement at an institution, including credits earned and grades achieved.
- Institutions publish catalogs that include program and course descriptions, making information transparent.
- Articulation and exchange agreements between institutions facilitate inter-institutional student mobility.
- Articulation and pathway agreements within a state public higher education system facilitate student progress from community college to university, based on the state's education policy.
- Lifelong learning in the form of adult education programs is a value in the US educational system.

Individual postsecondary institutions in the United States, or divisions of institutions, may undertake processes involved in developing a QF and some have developed outcome-based systems with frameworks. One example is [Alverno College](#) in Milwaukee WI (full disclosure: one of the author's alma maters), a pioneer in developing outcome-based education, which introduced its "Competence-Based Learning (CBL)" curriculum in 1973. This approach, which in addition to content mastery outlined competence-based performance expectations and assessment techniques across courses and degree programs, has evolved into Alverno's current "[8 Core Abilities](#)". Another US example is The Lumina Foundation's [Degree Qualifications Profile](#), which offers a process through which US institutions can engage in a process similar to that of the development of a QF.

What QF's Look Like

In general, a QF in its public-facing view is usually presented in a graphic format, such as a table, grid, circle, or chart. Some online formats have interactive components. A QF typically includes definitions or descriptors (credential names, levels, types, functions, structure, content, outcome expectations). However not all QF's are created for the same purpose and the user must be careful to note the scope of the QF. Some may only include academic qualifications and not vocational credentials, some may show only vocational and technical qualifications, some may only include higher education, while some show all levels and education and training (academic, vocational-technical, professional development, lifelong learning, etc.).

Some examples of QF graphics:

- [The Philippines](#): This report on the Philippine Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) System includes a traditional chart of the Philippine educational system (Figure 01, page 1) as well as a graphic presentation of the Philippine National Qualifications Framework (Figure 10, page 8).
- National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Turkey ([English page](#) / [Turkish page](#)): This QF includes only higher education credentials.
- [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#): In this QF of tertiary credentials, click on any field in the graphic to get information about the topic.
- [Irish National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#): In this interactive presentation, in the section below the “fan”, the user clicks on a credential or provider name. The appropriate section of the “fan” is highlighted in red and information about the credential or provider pops up in a red box within the “fan”.

Guidance for the Use of QF's for International Credential Evaluators:

International credential evaluators are encouraged to follow the principles of best practice in document review and analysis. This starts with a review of official documentation of all education completed, in conjunction with the student's or applicant's biodata and educational history, and includes confirmation of the data presented in the documents through research using reliable resources. Elements to be confirmed are:

- name, location, recognition status and level of the institution and program.
- descriptive information about the program of study: level, curriculum, course descriptions, expected outcomes or competencies.
- quantitative data such as credits, units or other measurements of workload.
- qualitative data such as performance assessments and grading.

- completion of program, graduation, continuing enrollment or discontinuation of the program.

When consulting a QF to confirm the above information, be sure to read the background information about the QF for a clear understanding of what it represents. Carefully note the scope of the QF, and the types, levels and functions of the credentials it shows. Compare the information shown on the QF to the education shown on the documentation. Note how the credential being evaluated fits into the context of country's educational system, in terms of type, level, scope and purpose. Using the QF and other reliable resources, determine how those components compare to the US system for the purpose for which the international credential is being evaluated.

In summary, Qualifications Frameworks...

- are not well-known in the United States.
- go beyond traditional “educational system charts”.
- differ from educational system to educational system.
- can reflect many dimensions of a country's education and training system.
- may be linked to quality assurance or accreditation systems for providers and programs.
- may be linked to regional and transnational frameworks.
- are generally well-documented.
- can be a useful tool in international credential evaluation if understood and applied properly in the evaluation process.