

# Recognising teacher qualifications in the Commonwealth

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## Introduction

How can a teacher's qualifications be adequately recognised when he/she migrates to Canada from, say, the UK? Or decides to move from Barbados to New Zealand, or from South Africa to the Cameroon? Increasing numbers of teachers are migrating between countries in the Commonwealth, often in search of greener pastures, but more recently with the global economic downturn also returning to their countries of origin. As a result, a deeper understanding of the qualifications that give these teachers the right to practise has become essential.

This article draws on the findings of a recent research initiative on teacher qualifications in the Commonwealth undertaken by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat (Keevy and Jansen, 2010). The study followed on from initial research completed in 2006 (Morrow and Keevy, 2006).

Based on the findings of the initial study, the Commonwealth Steering Committee on Teacher Qualifications recommended that a 'teacher qualifications comparability table' be developed. The main purpose of the comparability table was:

- A. To provide migrating teachers with the necessary pathways for the attainment of qualified teacher status; and
- B. To clarify the responsibility of the employer in the recruiting country to provide dedicated programmes that will enable teachers to achieve qualified teacher status (Morrow and Keevy, 2006:98).

The comparability table was subsequently piloted (SAQA, 2007). While the results of the study proved useful, the theory of action that underpinned the research was of particular interest in that the language of comparison had to be explored and further developed within the specific context of teacher qualifications, often within the broader context of national and/or regional qualifications frameworks.

The primary focus of this article is on the development of the theory of action that formed the basis for the comparability table.<sup>1</sup>

## The theory of action

A theory of action makes explicit what is often assumed or poorly conceptualised about implementation. The theory of action that underpins efforts at understanding the comparability of teacher qualifications in the Commonwealth can be summarised on two levels.

1. **On a national level**, a country defines a qualification in terms of learning outcomes that provide a common language to compare qualifications. In an attempt to build mutual trust,

a country commits to a process of quality assurance, while the qualifications are placed on a qualifications framework to ensure consistency in meaning and interpretation. The employer or provider can then receive the learner with his/her qualification with confidence that the qualification and its associated learning outcomes are comparable to what is required for work or further study.

2. **On an international level**, a regional qualifications framework (such as the European Qualifications Framework) can be developed that specifies the learning outcomes, achievements and credit specifications for specific qualifications. An individual or country can then reference a local qualification against the regional qualifications framework to confirm compliance or identify any gaps. In turn, the reference process enables a judgement to be made about the transferability of a qualification across borders. The clarity of specification minimises confusion and contributes to trust across national borders when it comes to comparing and assessing foreign qualifications.

This theory of action cannot be faulted where qualifications frameworks are in place and information on qualifications are readily available. However, there is also no doubt that even under ideal circumstances, the comparability of qualifications remains a limited endeavour. Limitations include acknowledging that learning outcomes are inadequate proxies for educational quality, as there is often a lack of evidence to back up the claim that outcomes have been achieved. While more information on notional hours, internship, credits and content areas is clearly of value, this also adds to the process of evaluation becoming bogged down by data that lies beyond owning a specific qualification. In addition, some information is not amenable to direct observation and cannot be easily retrieved.

The limitations imposed on the theory of action are therefore very real and raises the question: Is it really possible to compare qualifications on a sufficient level of transparency that will build trust and acceptance across borders?

The response to the challenge in the context of the Commonwealth teacher qualifications has been to make a modest attempt at prising open what to date has been a 'black box' of comparison, steered in part by national information centres and competent recognition authorities.<sup>2</sup> The comparability table was developed to provide teachers with the necessary pathways in order for their qualified status to be recognised within and between Commonwealth member states.

## Refining the language of comparability

As the need for recognition becomes more important, similar qualifications offered across countries need to be compared to

ensure fair treatment of migrants, and also to avoid unnecessary disregard of valuable skills within the receiving country. In order to do this, a common format, or instrument, is useful to enable judgements to be made about the 'sameness' of qualifications. In this respect, qualifications located within national and/or regional qualifications frameworks are usually formatted in a similar way, and in most cases are based on learning outcomes. Drawing on the characteristics of such qualifications, a range of criteria can be used to compare the qualifications, such as assessment statements, the level at which the qualification is registered on the particular framework, and status of the awarding body.

The amount of information needed to compare qualifications within this format poses significant challenges on a number of fronts, more so when some qualifications are not located within qualifications frameworks. As noted by UNESCO (1997, revised in 2006), it becomes virtually impossible to directly assess and compare the content of qualifications following this approach in an internationally consistent way. UNESCO concedes that 'international curricula standards' are not yet available to compare qualifications in such great detail, and suggests a route that is more pragmatic using a format called the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

## Identifying a meta-framework

The seven ISCED levels developed by UNESCO and the OECD in 1997 and revised in 2006 (UNESCO, 1997) proved useful as one part of a framework wherein the comparability table could be developed. Each level is further defined by the typical entry requirements, typical duration and general characteristics.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note, however, that ISCED levels are not entirely problem-free. The main challenge in the application of the criteria is that they are very wide and open to multiple interpretations. In short, ISCED is a blunt instrument that has not been designed to make fine differentiations. ISCED levels are very useful when considering the (limited) transparency of qualifications on the level of comparability, but when increased transparency is required (on the level of equivalency), ISCED will undoubtedly fall short.

In addition to pegging teacher qualifications at ISCED levels, a set of agreed criteria are applied. These include contextual data, professional requirements for teaching, duration of the qualification, practical/workplace component included in the qualification, entry level of the qualification (expressed as an ISCED level), and the qualifications pathway wherein the qualification is located.

## Overview of the main findings

Data on initial teacher qualifications from 35 Commonwealth countries was entered into the comparability table. The subsequent analysis of the data proved valuable to improving the transparency of teacher qualifications across the Commonwealth, but only on the level of comparability.

It was apparent that initial teacher qualifications offered in the 35 participating Commonwealth countries varied greatly on a number of levels, including the duration, levels and emphasis on practical components. This was to be expected considering the range of different contexts in the countries. What was also evident was that largely due to the Commonwealth legacy, a number of commonalities exist.

The majority of qualifications are pegged at ISCED levels 4 and 5, while most countries offer at least two pathways to qualified teacher status, and include three different qualifications across these pathways. The duration to qualified teacher status ranges between 2.6 to 3.8 years for primary teachers and 2.9 to 4.1 years for secondary teachers. The practical components included in the qualifications pathways range from 11.4 to 20.4 weeks for primary teachers, and 12.0 to 21.0 weeks for secondary teachers.

### What the table shows us

- In 19 of the 21 countries (91%) that offer the Bachelors Degree, an additional professional qualification, such as a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (4 countries), or a Graduate Diploma in Education (3 countries) forms part of the qualifications pathway. Only two countries (Bangladesh and Mauritius) regard a Bachelors Degree on its own as sufficient.

## Main qualifications offered across participating countries

Qualification type	Qualification	Average duration (years FTE)	Average practical component (weeks)	ISCED level in the majority of countries	Number of countries that offer the qualification
<b>Academic</b>	Bachelor Degree	3.43	0.71	5A	21 (60%)
<b>Professional</b>	Diploma in Education	2.07	15.2	4B	16 (46%)
	Certificate in Education	2.08	11.5	4A	16 (46%)
	Bachelor Degree in Education	3.57	15.8	5A	26 (74%)
	Graduate Diploma in Education	1.20	10.2	5B	5 (14%)
	Associate Degree in Education	2.13	12.5	4A	5 (14%) <sup>a</sup>
	Postgraduate Diploma in Education	1.00	9.5	5B	6 (17%)
	Postgraduate Certificate in Education	1.9	16.5	5B	3 (9%)

- The Diploma in Education on its own is regarded as sufficient for qualified teacher status in 12 of the 16 countries in which it is offered (75%). Likewise, the Certificate in Education on its own is regarded as sufficient for qualified teacher status in 14 of the 16 countries in which it is offered (88%).
- The Bachelors Degree in Education is the qualification offered in most of the participating countries (26 out of 35, 74%), although with some variations in the nomenclature. In 23 of the 26 countries, the Bachelors Degree in Education on its own is regarded as sufficient for qualified teacher status (89%). In 5 countries, the Bachelors Degree in Education forms part of a qualifications pathway that includes other qualifications.
- The Graduate Diploma in Education, the Associate Degree in Education, the Postgraduate Diploma in Education and the Postgraduate Certificate in Education are offered in only a few of the participating countries.

## Conclusion

A regional or transnational qualifications framework may offer many of the benefits of the conceptual framework developed during the study. In effect, there are many similarities between the broadly defined ISCED levels and the level descriptors of a regional or meta-framework. A regional qualifications framework is usually also based on voluntary participation and mutual trust, and provides at best a reference point for countries included in the region. The benefit of the ISCED-based framework, while in some ways similar to existing and emerging regional qualifications frameworks, is that it provides a neutral reference point removed from the context of a specific country or region.

It is important to note that data on qualifications can contribute to increased transparency, but complete transparency will remain largely out of reach using available technologies. Qualifications systems tend to change over time as local and global contextual factors impact on the country in general and the profession in particular; for this reason, the proposed conceptual framework encourages a flexible output in the form of a comparability table that can be regularly updated with the country-specific data in a manner whereby the data can be defended and improved as required.

The study provided an opportunity to rethink the notion of comparability and helped provide a response to the question of what it means to recognise qualifications across borders. It also showed that a high level of explicitness and transparency of what a qualification means across institutions and borders is a near impossible task. At best the relationship between two qualifications can be understood as an approximation of a meaningful comparison. Despite the obvious limitations of the study, and the continued need for new technologies in this area, the Commonwealth teacher qualifications comparability table offers policy-makers and migrating teachers at least an approximation of the different pathways to qualified teacher status that exist in Commonwealth countries.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the research report and accompanying comparability table (Keevy and Jansen, 2010 and 2010b) for a detailed country-specific analysis of the initial teacher qualifications offered in the participating Commonwealth countries.

<sup>2</sup> See the Lisbon Convention of 1997 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See UNESCO 1997 for a detailed description.

<sup>4</sup> The Associate Degree in Education is offered only in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

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