

Subtheme 4: **National Qualifications Frameworks and their Links to QA**

Topic: **“Assessing the Degree Qualifications Profile for Quality Assurance in American Higher Education Accreditation”**

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### **Abstract**

A cohort of 23 colleges and universities accredited by the Higher Learning Commission is testing the proposed Degree Qualifications Profile to develop a new approach to accrediting higher education institutions focusing on quality assurance through innovation for improvement in learning outcomes. This paper focuses on the collaboration model being used by the stakeholders in American higher education to develop, test, and implement the proposed national qualifications framework. The research explores how integrating a national qualifications framework into accreditation might serve as a quality assurance mechanism to benefit students, graduates and the society at large. The participant observation analytical approach will be used to conduct the research for documenting and analyzing the performance of the collaborative model and for assessing the policy and practical components of linking the qualifications framework to the system of accreditation to improve higher education quality.

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The higher education accreditation system in America is under pressure from the federal government and the public to assure the academic quality of the nation’s colleges and universities. The public and legislative demand for outcomes-based accountability is driven by a need to protect consumers and to justify taxpayer subsidies to higher education. Accreditors have seized this moment of concern over accountability to challenge educational institutions to also meet accreditors' quality assurance demands as they attempt to hold themselves accountable to the public for the proficiency of their graduates.

The demands of increased accountability and improved quality assurance have also placed pressure on accreditors to provide better information and greater transparency in the peer-review process that underpins accreditation. The need for change in the accreditation system is even more critical because of federal government policy that is shared by prominent education foundations to dramatically increase the percentage of Americans who hold postsecondary credentials. Some argue that America’s future depends on reaching the national goal to increase educational attainment while ensuring quality.

America’s fondness for independence has produced a higher education system that is known for its diversity and variety of institutions. It is also a system with no central planning and no uniformed requirements for outcomes or quality. Against this historical context of independence and the expectation to educate more Americans quickly the Lumina Foundation for Education launched its Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) outlining a shared definition of educational quality focusing on student learning outcomes. The DQP is likely to become the national qualifications framework for the United States.

Lumina describes the DQP as the response to a fundamental shift in defining and assuring educational quality that will give meaning and relevance to American college degrees. This shared definition of quality is the start of a framework for clearly defining learning outcomes. Building on the research of educational policy organizations and the efforts of universities in three states to conduct tuning in the disciplines, Lumina commissioned higher education researchers and policy experts to draft the qualifications framework that it prefers to call a profile.

The DQP outlines competencies in integrative knowledge, specialized knowledge, critical thinking and other intellectual skills, applied learning, and civic learning that describes what college graduates should know and be able to do. Realizing the need for external validation of the learning outcomes and to encourage higher education institutions to adopt the framework to define the competence of their graduates, Lumina gave grants to refine and shape the proposed framework. With those grants, the DQP is being tested by faculty-led teams at more than 100 institutions in 30 states representing every sector of American nonprofit higher education. The goal of the Lumina project is to forge a truly shared definition of quality in higher education.

A cohort of 23 colleges and universities accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is testing the proposed DQP to develop a new approach to accrediting higher education institutions focusing on quality assurance through innovation for improvement in learning outcomes. The 23 pioneer institutions are part of a larger experiment by the HLC in transforming accreditation. These institutions represent 15 of the 19 states in the Commission's region. Of the participating institutions, nine are two-year community or technical colleges. The others represent the diverse membership of the Commission and include both private and public institutions ranging from baccalaureate liberal arts colleges, small and large masters-level institutions, and doctoral and research universities.

The HLC cohort is testing the DQP in areas related to their institutional initiatives and academic programs. The most common projects are mapping and comparing their current learning outcomes to the DQP learning outcomes as a means for a gap analysis and improvement of the defined outcomes. Others are testing the DQP on progressive learning across and between associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees to see how the pedagogy, curricula, and learning from one degree aligns with and leads to the next degree level, or is built upon the previous degree. Some are linking learning across the curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular college experiences to assess their contributions to formation of the DQP competencies. Yet others are developing assessment plans and methodologies to tie all areas of the DQP to assessment of selected academic disciplines and general education requirements.

The American experiment with a qualifications framework is based on partnership among private philanthropic organizations (Lumina Foundation), higher education research and policy organizations, regional accreditors, regulatory agencies, higher education professional associations, higher education institutions, assessment organizations, and students. The HLC established an electronic Collaboration Network to facilitate conversations among the cohort participants and across DQP initiatives and to share findings and best practices with higher education institutions in the other accreditation regions that are also testing the DQP.

This paper focuses on the collaboration model being used by the stakeholders in American higher education to develop, test, and implement the proposed national qualifications framework. The research explores how integrating a national qualifications framework into accreditation might serve as a quality assurance mechanism to benefit students, graduates and the society at large. The participant observation analytical approach will be used to conduct the research. As an HLC liaison to some of the institutions participating in the DQP project, I have unique access to observe the collaborative activities, interview the participants and stakeholders, and to analyze and assess the processes and documents associated with the experiment.

Research data will also come from interviews with Lumina Foundation personnel and the drafters of the DQP. The paper will present the responses obtained from all participants testing the DQP, lessons learned, suggested modifications to the framework, as well as an assessment of the grantmaking process as part of the collaborative model for testing and vetting the DQP. Data for documenting and analyzing the performance of the collaborative model will also come from debriefing HLC staff managing the project, and from discussions with HLC senior management about the policy and practical components of linking the qualifications framework to the system of accreditation to improve higher education quality.