



The Birth and Growth of the Degree Qualifications Profile

In 2009, speaking to the Congress in his first State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama announced a critical national goal: “By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” Later that year, Lumina Foundation released its first strategic plan, one focused on a “big goal,” that by 2025 at least 60% of Americans would have earned “a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential.”

These independent but closely aligned challenges had in common two characteristics. First, both were ambitious relative to present accomplishment. Second, both required appreciation for a critical phrase: “high quality.” Either goal might easily have been accomplished through the relaxation of standards and the easing of educational rigor, but credentials reflecting such compromises would have contributed neither to the well-being of society or to the competitiveness of the nation. For the pursuit of Goal 2025 to have genuine significance, the degrees and postsecondary credentials earned would have to be of “high quality.”

In the absence of a widely accepted definition for quality in postsecondary education, Lumina took a lead role in the framing of one. In July 2009, the Foundation invited to a facilitated discussion in Washington, DC, prominent US and European educators, association leaders, government officials, and postsecondary education executives. Meeting in breakout sessions and plenary discussions, participants debated what approaches might lead most effectively to a useful understanding of “high quality.” The commissioning of white papers and the convening of regional meetings were among the suggestions advanced and discussed. Finally, the meeting arrived at a consensus that there was an obvious priority, the need for a framework, or profile that would define what degrees signify in terms of what students should know and be able to do. While informed by an awareness of European models, in particular those mandated by the Bologna Process, the US framework would be distinctively American in its values and emphases. It would acknowledge the credentialing objectives established by Goal 2025, reflect the diversity of American postsecondary education, and establish a benchmark for curricular evaluation and improvement.

At a second meeting, in January 2010, a smaller group of strategic thinkers debated what might be the most effective means of developing this framework. Again, various approaches were considered: the publication of an RFP to the scholarly community, the commissioning of expert opinions, substantive consultation with associations and other organizations, and the like. But again a consensus emerged: the Foundation would appoint a small panel reflecting considerable breadth of expertise and experience. It would instruct the panel to consider useful models in proceeding expeditiously to a preliminary draft that would be circulated widely for comment. The panel would then consider recommendations from the field in revising the document for publication. In less than one year, the process moved from discussions in DC to the publication of the beta *Degree Qualifications Profile*.



Released in January 2011, the DQP reflected the commitment of its authors and advisors to learn from earlier efforts to define and describe learning outcomes. The influence of the *Essential Learning Outcomes* published by the Association of American Colleges & Universities was especially pronounced. Indeed, the two documents, while they address different objectives, remain closely compatible. But it was also clear that the DQP was meant to point towards a new direction for US postsecondary education. For instance (paraphrasing the current edition of the DQP):

- The student—what students should know and be able to do as they move through progressively higher levels of postsecondary study—is the primary reference point. Not the institution.
- The *DQP* presents outcomes for three levels of degrees by articulating increasing levels of challenge for student performance for each of the learning outcomes it frames.
- While clarity concerning outcomes is a clear goal, the *DQP* does not attempt to “standardize” US degrees. The “profile” signals the expectation that faculty responsible for fields of study and programs will provide specific expectations for student accomplishment in their areas of specialized knowledge.
- The DQP’s learning outcomes are written using active verbs [so as to emphasize] what students actually should do to demonstrate proficiency through assignments.
- The DQP provides a qualitative set of important learning outcomes—not quantitative measures such as number of credits and grade point averages—as the basis for awarding degrees.
- DQP proficiencies are intended not as statements of aspiration for some, but as descriptions of what every graduate at a given level ought to know and be able to do.

With the publication of the beta document, the process of developing a second iteration began. The DQP authors and others, working with institutions and associations making use of the DQP, carefully noted concerns and suggestions. The analyses and opinions of European and US experts were sought and considered. Employers joined the conversation. Over a three-year period nearly 400 institutions engaged in sponsored and independent projects involving the DQP and many experts provided commentary.

Simultaneous with this information gathering, it became apparent that the focus of the DQP on academic degrees, while critical, was not sufficient. Hence a complementary but independent effort emerged, one focused on credentials other than degrees. The result of this effort is a beta credentials framework. “Connecting Credentials” advances competencies as common reference points for comparing and understanding more fully the levels and types of knowledge and skills that underlie certificates, industry certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, badges and other credentials. Together, the DQP and “Connecting Credentials” represent an emerging platform for a comprehensive understanding of all US postsecondary education credentials.

The story will continue. As more and more institutions and associations use these documents, the paths to making them even more useful will become clear. The DQP may expand, other perspectives will be sought and considered. And the next chapter will appear.