

The United Kingdom European inventory on NQF 2018

The UK education and training system performs relatively well according to most EU 2020 benchmarks. Participation of children aged four and above in early childhood education and care has reached 100% and student basic skills are at a high and stable level. The percentage of 15-year-olds with underachievement in reading, mathematics and science is below the EU average (17.9%, 21.9% and, respectively, 17.4% in 2015). The percentage of students who leave school early has been decreasing and has reached the EU average (10.6% in 2017); unlike in most EU countries, it is higher among native students than among those born outside the UK. The employment rates of recent graduates are above EU averages for all levels of qualification. One of the main challenges in the school system is the availability and retention of teachers; the government has increased support for training, recruiting and retaining teachers in all parts of the UK. The tertiary educational attainment rate is among the highest in the EU (48.3% in 2017), despite concerns around the high levels of student debt. Two-year ‘accelerated’ undergraduate degrees have been proposed as a solution to reduce the time required to obtain a degree and thus reduce university costs. Participation in study mobility programmes abroad is relatively low at 3.2% of total graduates in 2016 (compared to 9% the EU average); 50% of it has been as part of EU programmes. Initiatives to develop vocational education and training (VET) are being implemented in all parts of the UK. Efforts are focused on developing apprenticeship programmes, improving the quality of provision, the attractiveness of VET and engagement with STEM subjects. Participation in upper secondary VET has increased over recent years across the UK. Mismatches in terms of qualification level and field of study, on the one hand, and job profile on the other hand are higher compared to the EU average. Adult participation in lifelong learning is above the EU average, at 14.3% in 2017, but it has been declining. Various policy measures and initiatives in all parts of the UK aim to support retraining and upskilling of individuals across the lifespan (European Commission, 2018).

Starting in the 1980s, several qualifications frameworks were developed in the UK, partly reflecting the fact that education and qualifications policy has been devolved to the four UK nations, and partly reflecting the different needs and interests of subsectors of education and training. Between 2008 and 2015, five qualifications frameworks were operational in parallel: the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; the national qualifications framework (NQF); the qualifications and credit framework (QCF); the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland

(FQHEIS), the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), of which the FQHEIS is a constituent part; and the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW), of which the FHEQ is a constituent part. The Scottish qualifications framework and the credit and qualifications framework of Wales are comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualification.

In October 2015 a new regulated qualifications framework (RQF) was introduced for England and Northern Ireland, replacing the QCF and the NQF ⁽¹⁾. The RQF covers all general and vocational qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) ⁽²⁾ and by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA Regulation) ⁽³⁾. The most significant change introduced by the RQF is the lifting of standardised requirements for the design of qualifications. RQF is a descriptive framework and uses the same eight levels (plus three entry levels) as the QCF but introduces some changes in the way qualification size is calculated.

While these developments show that frameworks develop and change continuously, they also show that the visibility and overall impact of frameworks depends on the political context they operate within. This is particularly visible in England and Northern Ireland, where the existence of parallel frameworks may have partly contradicted their ability to support transparency and learning progression. The introduction of the RQF addressed this problem.

The Scottish and Welsh frameworks contrast developments in England and Northern Ireland, operating as comprehensive frameworks and setting themselves ambitious targets for lifelong learning. Evaluation of the Welsh framework, published in 2014, pointed to the importance of better integrating it into mainstream education and training policies. While the CQFW is considered a useful tool, it tends to operate on the margins of the education and training system, not as a central entry and focal point. The abolition of the QCF has influenced the CQFW: starting from 2015, all regulated qualifications in Wales refer to the new RQF level descriptors, while non-regulated qualifications (the lifelong learning pillar) continue to refer to the original CQFW descriptors. The Scottish framework, in contrast, is considered a key tool for stakeholders and is increasingly emerging as the most visible and consistent of the UK frameworks.

⁽¹⁾ Relevant documents: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework>

⁽²⁾ Ofqual: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about>

⁽³⁾ CCEA: http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do

Scotland

Introduction and context

The Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) was originally introduced in 2001 and has since been gradually revised and refined. It is maintained by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP), a company (and charity) set up in 2006, formally independent of national education and training authorities. The 12-level framework covers all types of qualification and seeks to provide people of all ages and circumstances with better understanding of Scottish qualifications and the role they play in lifelong learning and workforce development. Scotland rarely uses legislation for matters related to education and the SCQF is not a regulatory framework; it currently underpins all Government policies and is fully integrated in the Scottish education, training and qualification landscape. Apart from providing a set of levels and level descriptors, the SCQF is defined through its qualification database ⁽⁴⁾, the SCQF credit system ⁽⁵⁾, arrangements for recognition of prior learning ⁽⁶⁾ and extensive guidance and support material for different stakeholders (employers, educators, learners, and parents) ⁽⁷⁾. The framework was referenced to the EQF in 2010, as a part of the overall UK referencing process. An updated report for referencing the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) to the European qualifications framework (EQF) was presented in December 2018. The SCQF is fully operational and a number of studies looking at its impact across different sectors have been conducted. SCQF levels are indicated in all qualification documents awarded. While playing an important role in promoting transparency of national (and international) qualifications, the SCQF is increasingly focusing on level descriptors as a product in their own right and as a tool for development, for example supporting recruitment and workforce developments.

⁽⁴⁾ SCQF qualification database: <http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/search-database/>

⁽⁵⁾ SCQF credit system: <http://scqf.org.uk/media/1118/credit-point-explained-march-2017-web.pdf>

⁽⁶⁾ Arrangements for the recognition of prior learning: <http://scqf.org.uk/more/rpl/>

⁽⁷⁾ Guidance and support material for employers: <http://scqf.org.uk/employers/>

Policy objectives

The SCQF is seen as ‘an absolutely dependable single reference point for everyone, no matter where they are from’⁽⁸⁾. It aims to support lifelong learning by:

- (a) helping people of all ages and circumstances to understand how to progress through appropriate education and training over their lifetime, to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential;
- (b) clarifying entry and exit points for qualifications and programmes of learning at all levels;
- (c) making transparent the level and credit (size) of different types of qualification;
- (d) enabling credit transfer between qualifications or learning programmes to assist learners to build on previous successes.

It also aims to enable employers, learners and the public in general to understand:

- (a) the full range of Scottish qualifications;
- (b) how qualifications relate to each other and to other forms of assessed learning;
- (c) how different types of qualification can contribute to improving the development and utilisation of workforce skills;
- (d) how Scottish qualifications relate to those in other countries;
- (e) how using SCQF level descriptors can assist with qualifications development and benchmarking skills and experience in all sectors.

The SCQF addresses these objectives by making the overall system of qualifications and relevant programmes of learning easier to understand, and by providing a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities. As one of the oldest comprehensive national qualifications frameworks (NQF) in Europe (and the world), the SCQF illustrates the potential of frameworks as instruments for development and, to some extent, reform. The SCQF has gradually moved beyond a simple ‘communication’ role (Raffe, 2009 and 2011) and established itself as a reference for revision and renewal of education and training (*curricula* and standards) and for human resource development.

⁽⁸⁾ Quote from the Deputy First Minister at the *SCQF conference Linking the learning journey*, Glasgow, 22 February 2018. <http://scqf.org.uk/news-blog/news/successful-scqf-conference-linking-the-learning-journey/>

The SCQF is an ‘open framework’ in that it explicitly addresses the private sector and employers, and encourages these to have their training provisions recognised under the framework, through third-party credit rating. The benefits for employers and employees include ⁽⁹⁾:

- (a) national and EU-level recognition of in-house training and comparability with nationally recognised qualifications;
- (b) recognition of staff learning, linked to increased morale and retention;
- (c) increased credibility of the organisation, attraction of new recruits of high calibre, and competitive advantage.

In addition to its original objectives, more recent aims were set to promote fair work and social justice, reflecting policies in these areas ⁽¹⁰⁾. The SCQF provides tools and resources to recognise prior learning, support progression and improve social inclusion.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The SCQF is a comprehensive framework covering all types of qualification including general education, higher education, and vocational education. It also covers a range of non-formal programmes from all sectors and providers, including community learning and development, social partners, employers, professional bodies and public services. Some international qualifications, such as those from Microsoft, are also included. The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS) is a constitutive part of the SCQF. As is also the case in the other UK countries, the Scottish approach is unit-based, supported by credit points, and allows for the inclusion and levelling of qualifications of differing character and size. This also explains the high number of qualifications included in the SCQF database (around 11 500). One SCQF credit point corresponds to a notional 10 hours of learning, based on the time judged to be required for an ‘average’ learner to achieve the learning outcomes.

⁽⁹⁾ SCQF (no date). *Maximise workforce potential: an employer’s guide to the SCQF: assisting employers with recruitment and selection, learning and development, and recognising in-house training*. <https://scqf.org.uk/media/1115/scqf-employer-guide-mar-2017-web.pdf>

⁽¹⁰⁾ An example of such policies is the *Fair work convention* (website currently under reconstruction).

The framework has 12 levels ranging from entry at SCQF level 1, up to doctorate at level 12. The first three levels are seen as important in addressing individuals with particular learning needs and as an important part of an overall lifelong learning strategy. For some, these levels can function as a way back to formal education and training. The different levels indicate the level of difficulty of a particular qualification; increases in levels relate to factors such as:

- (a) the complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding;
- (b) links to associated academic, vocational or professional practice;
- (c) the degree of integration, independence and creativity required;
- (d) the range and sophistication of application/practice;
- (e) the role(s) taken in relation to other learners/workers in carrying out tasks.

Learning outcomes have been used in Scotland since the 1980s, even before the adoption of the SCQF. However, the introduction of the SCQF has promoted the use of learning outcomes in learning programmes in different sectors. To be included in the framework and in the SCQF database, all qualifications, programmes and units of qualifications have to be described in terms of learning outcomes and to be credit rated: they must have a level and credit value allocated. The Scottish level descriptors were revised in 2012 though not as a radical departure from the past; revision can be seen as part of continuous evolution of the framework based on experiences gained. The level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeric skills; and autonomy, accountability and working with others.

The SCQF has also been instrumental in the creation of recognised pathways, allowing learners to move more flexibly from one sector to another. The Scottish Government has recognised that repeating levels and duplication of SCQF credit is not efficient for the learner, nor for the system. Maximising the multiple entry points of the four-year Honours Degree at SCQF level 10, both from school and from college, is seen as one way to ensure smoother transitions across sectors and a priority for improvement in the short to medium term ⁽¹¹⁾. The credit rating of programmes, and the use of one set of level descriptors and one credit system across all sectors, has already helped to increase trust and reduce barriers between sectors. For example, someone completing a higher national certificate at SCQF level 7 in a vocational college would anticipate entering the second year of a related university degree; similarly, someone

⁽¹¹⁾ Scottish Government (2018). *The 15-24 learner journey review*.
<https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00535273.pdf>

completing a higher national diploma at level 8 would enter the third year. Although important progress has been achieved over the last five years, there are still some sectors and institutions which are less proactive.

According to the SCQF Partnership ⁽¹²⁾, the SCQF level descriptors are also used to provide a broad comparison of foreign qualifications, and UK-Naric take note of the SCQF levels in their recognition work. The UK and Ireland national contact points also produce a document ⁽¹³⁾ showing the level-to-level broad comparisons of UK and Irish qualifications, as well as how UK and Irish qualifications frameworks relate to qualifications frameworks in Europe. SCQFP has also used level comparison to complete formal referencing reports to both the Hong Kong and Bahrain frameworks ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Scottish framework was first proposed in the 1998 Government green paper *Opportunity Scotland: a paper on lifelong learning* ⁽¹⁵⁾ and was introduced in 2001 via stakeholder agreement. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP), responsible for the development, quality assurance and promotion of the framework, was set up as a company (and charity) in 2006, aiming to do the following ⁽¹⁶⁾:

- (a) ensure that, where appropriate, all assessed learning and qualifications in Scotland are included on the SCQF;
- (b) extend recognition of informal and non-formal learning;
- (c) develop and promote the SCQF as a lifelong learning tool;
- (d) develop relationships with other frameworks internationally.

Being formally independent of national education and training authorities, the SCQFP has ensured active engagement with the framework of a broad group of

⁽¹²⁾ European Commission; Cedefop (2018). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].

⁽¹³⁾ QAA Scotland et al. (2017). *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*.
<http://scqf.org.uk/media/1105/quals-can-cross-boundaries-2017-final-web.pdf>

⁽¹⁴⁾ More information is available at: <http://scqf.org.uk/services-partnerships/ bespoke-workshops-and-study-visits/examples-of-bespoke-services/>

⁽¹⁵⁾ Scottish Government (1998). *Opportunity Scotland: a paper on lifelong learning*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20100309211722/http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library/documents-w1/lllgp-00.htm>

⁽¹⁶⁾ <http://scqf.org.uk/about-us/the-scqf-partnership/>

stakeholders, including qualification authorities, quality assurance bodies, universities and colleges, as well as employers. The partnership has a board of directors representing the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Universities Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, and the College Development Network. There is also a director representing employers.

A degree of ownership can be observed with the SCQF in all sectors of education and training as well as among labour market stakeholders. This reflects the broad coverage within the framework of different types and levels of qualification. Between 2001 and 2006 the priority was to level and include in the SCQF the main general, vocational and higher education qualifications. Since 2007 the SCQFP has been working with both the government and social partners to widen coverage and to include non-formal and international qualifications. Around 11 500 qualifications are currently included in the SCQF database and around 1 000 of these belong to social partners, trade unions, employers and professional bodies. The SCQFP runs regular workshops aiming to help social partners, professional bodies and employers to understand the requirements for developing qualifications and learning programmes that can be levelled and can have credit attached (credit rated).

The framework is thought to have supported some difficult discussions around access and progression between sectors, offering a common language, and helping to promote trust and reduce barriers. In addition, the Quality Committee, which oversees the integrity and quality of the SCQF, has representatives from all sectors of education in Scotland as does the SCQF Forum, which meets regularly to discuss developments in the use of the SCQF. However, keeping all sectors and institutions in the loop is seen as a key challenge, especially given limitations in staff and budget within the SCQFP. The SCQFP consists of a core team of 12 staff, of which almost half are employed part-time. Budget is provided by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council and amounted to GBP 650 000 in 2017. Additional income was generated through consultancy work and through European qualifications framework (EQF) subsidies.

Engagement of employers and general education schools is considered to require more attention. To help, the SCQFP has introduced the School ambassador programme, which trains teachers and senior pupils to pass on information about the benefits of using the SCQF to other teachers, pupils, parents and carers. It has also developed and revised an employer engagement strategy, focusing efforts where they could add most value.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁷⁾

Scotland's approach to validation (referred to as recognition of prior learning or RPL) covers prior formal, non-formal and informal learning in all sectors. The principle of RPL is well embedded in the policies and guidelines of a number of organisations, including the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA Scotland), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). While there is no single policy or strategy on RPL in Scotland, and no single governmental body responsible for it, there are guidelines, tools and resources on the benefits, opportunities and procedures for RPL, mainly delivered through the SCQFP. They include: the SCQF Partnership's *Guide to RPL and RPL tool* ⁽¹⁸⁾, the *Facilitating the recognition of prior learning toolkit* ⁽¹⁹⁾, the *SCQF handbook* ⁽²⁰⁾ and the publication *Recognition of prior learning: national framework for Scottish higher education* ⁽²¹⁾.

RPL is closely linked to the implementation of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), which is intended to support both formative and summative recognition. The SCQF handbook recommends that the design and development of qualifications and learning programmes for the SCQF should support, promote and make as straightforward as possible the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning and credit transfer, to minimise any duplication of learning. One way to achieve this is by writing clear learning outcomes and assessment procedures for qualifications. The SCQF level descriptors are common reference points for recognising all learning that is outcome-based and quality-assured, irrespective of whether it is academic, vocational, non-formal or informal. The SCQF credit points support both flexibility and progression, and are

⁽¹⁷⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

⁽¹⁸⁾ SCQFP (2018). *RPL tool* is available at: <http://scqf.org.uk/guide-to-rpl/rpl-tool/>

⁽¹⁹⁾ SCQFP (2010). *Facilitating the recognition of prior learning toolkit*. Glasgow: SCQFP. https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/RPLToolkitUpdatedDecember2010.pdf

⁽²⁰⁾ SCQFP (2015). *SCQF handbook* is available at: https://www.scqf.org.uk/media/1125/scqf_handbook_web_final_2015.pdf

⁽²¹⁾ QAA Scotland (2014). *Recognition of prior learning: national framework for Scottish higher education*. Glasgow: QAA Scotland. http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/enhancement-and-development/recognition-of-prior-learning---framework-for-scottish-he.pdf?sfvrsn=ae7cf581_10

the building blocks for credit transfer. Three types of RPL are described, and the four stages of validation – identification, documentation, assessment and certification – are likely to be used to varying extents, depending on the type of recognition taking place:

- (a) RPL for personal/career development (formative recognition);
- (b) RPL to gain entry to a learning programme (summative recognition);
- (c) RPL for the award of SCQF credit points to gain entry with credit or advanced standing in a programme/qualification (summative recognition).

Among the strengths of the Scottish approach to RPL are its compliance with agreed standards equivalent to those for qualifications obtained through formal education, and the transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks. The standard used involves comparison of the individual's learning against the aims and/or learning outcomes of the qualification or learning programme for which credit is being sought. The award of credit points can be carried out by SCQF credit rating bodies, within the context of clearly defined quality assurance mechanisms, and must involve a formal assessment or acceptance of evidence of learning which is quality assured. SCQF credit points can be awarded to recognise prior learning that has not already been assessed or credit rated, regardless of the context in which that learning was achieved, and they are of the same value as credit gained through other formal learning.

Most RPL activity so far has been related to higher education and VET. The national RPL framework for higher education attempts to locate RPL within broader developments in establishing more flexible and efficient learner journeys, a more flexible and accessible curriculum, and enabling greater participation and fair access to higher education by learners from a wide range of backgrounds. Graduate apprenticeships (GAs) ⁽²²⁾ are a new development set to begin from September 2018, expected to focus the attention of universities on RPL and to reinvigorate the agenda. In this context, RPL could be used for access to the programme or to award credit for competences developed in the workplace. In VET, RPL can be used to assess complete or partial units ⁽²³⁾ of qualifications

⁽²²⁾ Graduate apprenticeships (GAs) are work-based learning programmes at SCQF levels 9, 10 or 11 that lead to degree-level qualifications. These are nationally recognised, accredited and certificated by a national awarding body.
<https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/apprenticeships/graduate-apprenticeships/>

⁽²³⁾ RPL may be used to assess complete or partial SQA units. Where evidence of prior learning only partially meets the evidence requirements of a unit, other methods of

accredited by the SQA, including the Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQs). Over the past two years employers have become increasingly interested in using RPL; the SCQFP promotes it for recruitment, induction, supervision, performance interviewing and gaining qualifications for learning in the workplace. The SCQFP is also currently supporting two Government initiatives in relation to RPL: one aiming to provide better recognition of qualifications gained by those in the armed forces once they exit into civilian life; and the other looking at an RPL sustainable model for refugees and asylum seekers without credentials seeking to enter the labour market.

One of the challenges to implementation of RPL in Scotland is a perception among providers that RPL is expensive and time-consuming: it can seem easier and cheaper to include a person in a course rather than to carry out a one-to-one RPL process. Lack of explicit resourcing is another barrier, particularly in the college sector. For instance, if a learner uses RPL to reduce the learning he/she needs to undertake for a qualification, this can affect their status and the funding they are entitled to. Another issue is that there is no 'centre' for validation; instead validation is the responsibility of providers with support and guidance from SCQFP, QAA Scotland and SQA. This means that trust in RPL procedures and achievements will depend on the provider in question. The lack of a national policy or strategy on RPL means that providers have a wide variety of practices and procedures, which can be confusing to learners. A national strategy would be needed to improve the current arrangements, setting out the responsibilities of the different stakeholders involved. At the same time, SCQFP has limited capacity to promote RPL and to offer advice and guidance.

However, the speed and flexibility with which RPL procedures can be implemented is an advantage. Different sectors and employers are able to participate if they wish. Increased use of RPL can be further enabled by its links to other policy agendas:

- (a) developing the young workforce (Scotland's youth employment strategy);
- (b) outcome agreements (setting out what colleges and universities plan to deliver in return for their funding from the Scottish Funding Council);
- (c) the *Blueprint for fairness* ⁽²⁴⁾, concerned with widening access to universities to those from the most deprived communities.

assessment should be used to complete the outstanding requirements. The minimum level of awarding and certification will be a complete SQA unit. More information is available at: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/67029.html>

⁽²⁴⁾ Scottish Government (2016). *A blueprint for fairness: final report of the commission on widening access*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

NQF implementation

One of the oldest comprehensive NQFs in Europe, the SCQF has reached an advanced operational stage. In its initial stages, between 2001 and 2006, SCQF implementation focused on levelling the main general, vocational and higher education qualifications. From 2007 onwards efforts were made to include non-formal and international qualifications. The SCQF database ⁽²⁵⁾ contains all qualifications and learning programmes that are levelled and credit rated; there are around 11 500 qualifications in total so far, of which around 1 000 belong to social partners, trade unions, employers and professional bodies. Both SCQF and EQF levels are included in the public view of the SCQF database, and SCQF levels can be included on certificates, diplomas, and Europass certificate and diploma supplements once the qualification/programme has been formally credit rated. Surveys of employers and awarding bodies have been carried out to gauge interest in the inclusion of the EQF level on certificates. However, this is not felt necessary, though awarding bodies can do so if they wish.

Further efforts to promote the visibility of the framework are made through the overall SCQF communication strategy, through presentations, social media, and leaflets, addressing various target groups. The SCQF is thought to be extensively known and used by education and training providers, partly due to the SCQF School ambassador programme developed by the SCQFP, which trains teachers and senior pupils to pass on information about the framework to other teachers, pupils and parents. It is also well known and regularly used by guidance and counselling practitioners and recognition authorities and bodies; labour market stakeholders have limited but growing awareness of it.

The SCQFP has systematically used evaluations to inform framework developments. Six studies investigating the impact of the SCQF across different sectors have been conducted by various consultants using a range of different methods. All suggested that the SCQF Partnership was moving in the right direction in terms of raising awareness of the framework, while it lacks resources to achieve this on a large scale.

A 2013 evaluation looking at the level of awareness, perception and understanding of the SCQF (Ashbrook Research & Consultancy, 2013) showed that the framework is widely recognised by learners, parents and education

<https://beta.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>

⁽²⁵⁾ The SCQF database is available at: <http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/search-database/>

professionals in Scotland. A 2015 evaluation of the use of the SCQF among higher education institutions and colleges (Kerson Associates Ltd, 2015), suggested that the framework is well embedded in curriculum decision-making processes, aiding the development of progression pathways and highlighting gaps in provision; it is also used in quality assurance processes.

An assessment was undertaken in 2016-17 (University of Glasgow, 2017) of the impact that the SCQF and the SCQF Partnership had made across key stakeholders and their policies and practices. It showed that the SCQF and SCQFP are both well-established features of Scotland's education and qualifications landscape, having cross-cutting impacts such as:

- (a) providing a common point of reference and vocabulary across different user groups;
- (b) emphasising the value and equality of all qualifications due to the comprehensive nature of the SCQF;
- (c) supporting the progress of all learners by providing a single, quality assured benchmark that all can refer to and which can help plan, articulate and transport their learning;
- (d) providing a model of international best practice and promoting the Scottish education and skills system internationally.

The SCQFP was found to be instrumental in a number of key developments expected to have a long-term impact on Scotland's education and skills landscape: embedding of SCQF levels in the school curriculum and in Scotland's national training programmes; replacement of SVQ levels with SCQF levels; inclusion of more than 850 non-mainstream qualifications and programmes; establishment of six new credit rating bodies (CRBs); and development of adult achievement awards (allowing for the recognition of non-formal skills).

The study also showed that reach and use of the SCQF increased across all target groups between 2010/11 and 2015/16, evidenced by:

- (a) an increase from 400 to 11 270 in the number of qualifications credit rated onto the SCQF database;
- (b) the increasing prominence of the SCQF in the college sector, including 4 008 college students who benefitted from articulation routes between Higher National Qualifications (HNQs) and degree level courses in 2015/16;
- (c) increased use of the SCQF by employers in job adverts (153 in 2015/16);
- (d) continued yearly growth in the SCQF's social media and website reach.

Referencing to the EQF

The SCQF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process ⁽²⁶⁾.

In the meantime, there have been major changes in the general education system in Scotland, including the renaming of qualifications to indicate their SCQF level (National 1 to National 5). The offer of apprenticeships from level 6 upwards has been expanded, with some plans to introduce apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5. As a result of these changes, an updated referencing report has been prepared by the SCQF Partnership and presented to the EQF advisory group in December 2018 ⁽²⁷⁾.

Important lessons and future plans

The SCQF is one of the oldest comprehensive NQFs in Europe. It has gradually evolved from an instrument for transparency and communication of qualifications to a reference tool for revision of education and training and for human resource development. Given the government's focus on articulation of progression pathways, the interest in promoting, valuing and recognising all types of learning, and the full buy-in of stakeholders, the SCQF has a secure position as a permanent feature of the national qualifications system, underpinning all education and training policies. *The 15-24 learner journey review* ⁽²⁸⁾ undertaken by the Scottish Government in 2018 features both the SCQF and the SCQF Partnership as instrumental in achieving success in its recommendations aimed at achieving shorter and more coherent learner journeys. The SCQF is seen as central to policies on access, transfer and progression, validation of non-formal and informal learning, and quality assurance.

Success factors include regular evaluations helping to ensure its relevance, and its governance, based on a partnership model with collaboration and good links to the government and other networks. The SCQFP is seen as a completely neutral organisation, allowing engagement of a wide range of stakeholders.

⁽²⁶⁾ It was prepared by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Scottish credit and qualifications framework Partnership and the Welsh Assembly Government. See Qualifications and Curriculum Agency et al. (2010).

⁽²⁷⁾ See SCQF Partnership (forthcoming).

⁽²⁸⁾ Scottish Government (2018). *The 15-24 learner journey review*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00535273.pdf>

However, due to its small size and limited funding, keeping every sector and every institution in the loop and upscaling projects have been key challenges in implementing the framework. The evaluation of SCQF and SCQFP impact undertaken in 2016-17 (University of Glasgow, 2017) has revealed that, while mainstream institutions such as colleges and universities have been impacted extensively by the SCQF, employers and general education schools require more attention. Current and future efforts are focused on implementing the School ambassador programme and an employer engagement strategy to extend the use of the framework by these groups. The recommendations of the 2016-17 impact assessment include:

- (a) continued resourcing of the SCQF Partnership for the coordination, promotion and quality assurance of the framework in order to maintain its increasing scale, reach, use and impact;
- (b) taking a more targeted approach to promoting the SCQF to those involved in planning young people's learner journeys (teachers, parents and pupils) and employers (tying in with the *Developing the young workforce* agenda);
- (c) striking a balance between simplicity and quality assurance: simplicity encourages increased use and understanding of the SCQF, while quality assurance ensures its credibility.

The two last points have been taken forward by the SCQF Partnerships in their latest communications strategy.

Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF)

SCQF level	SQA qualifications		Qualifications of higher education institutions	Apprenticeships & SVQs	EQF level
12		Professional development award	Doctoral degree	Professional apprenticeship	8
11		Professional development award	Master degree, Integrated master degree, Postgraduate diploma, Postgraduate certificate	Graduate apprenticeship, Professional apprenticeship, SVQ	7
10		Professional development award	Honours degree, Graduate diploma, Graduate certificate	Graduate apprenticeship, Professional apprenticeship	6
9		Professional development award	Bachelor / Ordinary degree, Graduate diploma, Graduate certificate	Graduate apprenticeship, Technical apprenticeship, SVQ	

SCQF level	SQA qualifications			Qualifications of higher education institutions	Apprenticeships & SVQs	EQF level
8		Higher national diploma	Professional development award	Diploma of higher education	Higher apprenticeship, Technical apprenticeship, SVQ	5
7	Advanced higher awards, Scottish baccalaureate	Higher national certificate	Professional development award	Certificate of higher education	Modern apprenticeship, SVQ	
6	Higher awards, Skills for work higher	National certificate	Professional development award		Modern apprenticeship, Foundation apprenticeship, SVQ	4
			National progression award			
5	National 5 awards, Skills for work national 5	National certificate	National progression award		Modern apprenticeship, SVQ	3
4	National 4 awards, Skills for work national 4	National certificate	National progression award		SVQ	2
3	National 3 awards, Skills for work national 3	National certificate	National progression award			1
2	National 2 awards	National certificate	National progression award			
1	National 1 awards					

Source: adapted from the SCQF website, 2018; <https://scqf.org.uk/interactive-framework/>

Main sources of information

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Abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
EQF NCP	national coordination point for the EQF
GAs	graduate apprenticeships
NQF	national qualifications framework
QAA Scotland	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland
SCQF	Scottish credit and qualifications framework
SCQFP	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SFC	Scottish funding council
SQA	Scottish qualifications authority
SVQs	Scottish vocational qualifications
VET	vocational education and training

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