

European Inventory on NQF 2012

THE UNITED KINGDOM

A total of five different qualifications frameworks currently operate in the UK. In England and Northern Ireland we find the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) established in 2001, the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) established during the period 2006-08 and the NQF established in 2003. The Scottish qualifications framework has operated since 2001; in Wales the credit and qualifications framework of Wales (CQFW) has also been in place since 2001. This multitude of frameworks is partly explained by the gradual devolution of powers to the UK nations, in particular giving more autonomy to Scotland and Wales. The many frameworks also reflect the needs and interests of subsectors of education and training, explaining the existence of a separate framework for higher education qualifications in England and Northern-Ireland and the continued co-existence of the QCF and NQF. In contrast, Scotland and Wales have chosen to develop comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualifications. These developments show that frameworks have come to stay and can play an important role in promoting and modernising education, training and lifelong learning. They also show that frameworks develop and change continuously. This has been the case for England, where policy directions have changed frequently and to some extent, seen from the outside, reduced rather than improved the transparency of qualifications. From the perspective of the new and emerging frameworks introduced throughout Europe 'post EQF', the Scottish and Welsh frameworks are important learning cases. Both are comprehensive and have set themselves ambitious targets for lifelong learning. The relative complexity of the UK situation has led to the publishing of a brochure (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland et al., 2011) (¹) explaining to users how the frameworks interact as well as how they link to the Irish framework.

(¹) See *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quals_cross_boundaries.pdf [accessed 5.12.2012].

England and Northern Ireland

Introduction

There is no single comprehensive national qualifications framework covering all levels and types of qualification in England and Northern Ireland. The QCF mainly addresses vocational and pre-vocational education and training areas but without including secondary education (school leaving certificates) and higher education. The latter qualifications are covered by the framework for higher education. The QCF was referenced to the EQF in 2009 and the FHEQ to the EHEA-framework in 2008. There is currently no formal link between these two frameworks but comparison is aided by use of parallel level approaches supporting transparency.

The QCF is a regulatory credit and qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is presented as covering all levels and types of qualification, although with the important exception of secondary and higher education qualifications. The QCF recognises skills and qualifications by awarding credit for qualifications and units. It is supposed to enable people to gain qualifications at their own pace along flexible routes. The QCF was formally adopted – after a two-year trial period – in autumn 2008. The OFQUAL is responsible for the daily running of the framework. In comparison the FHEQ is not a regulatory framework but introduces some common objectives (benchmarks) to be pursued voluntarily and provides a language of communication supporting transparency and the positioning of qualifications to each other.

Main policy objectives

The QCF is a 'mature' NQF which can be traced back to the framework for NVQs established in 1987. This framework – operating with five levels – was set up to deal with a diverse and intransparent national VET system. As stated by Lester (2011) ⁽²⁾, '... the NVQ-framework was developed to impose some order in this apparent chaos and classify qualifications according to their level and occupational sector' (Lester, 2001, p. 206). The NVQ framework was heavily criticised as being too rigid in its application and too narrow in its scope, mainly addressing work-based awards. In 2003 the NVQ-framework was replaced by the national qualifications framework for England, Northern-Ireland and Wales. This framework introduced an 'eight plus one' approach, combining eight ordinary qualifications levels with an entry level for basic skills. The main difference to the NVQ approach was a broadened scope, addressing both work and school based awards. The original idea was that the QCF would cover all publicly-funded qualifications, including general and vocational

⁽²⁾ The UK qualifications and credit framework; a critique. *Journal of vocational education and training*, Vol. 63, No 2, June 2011, pp. 205-216.

education but excluding degree-awarding institutions (higher education) ⁽³⁾. The QCF (tested between 2006-08) contains the same number of levels as the NQF (number of levels, coverage) but departs significantly by using (Lester, 2011, p. 207) ⁽⁴⁾ ‘... units rather than qualifications (...) as the primary currency, and all units would carry a credit rating based (as in higher education) on one credit equalling 10 notional hours of learning’.

Reflecting the above developments, the following four official aims have been identified for the QCF. It should:

- ensure a wider range of achievements can be recognised within a more inclusive framework;
- establish a framework that is more responsive to individual and employer needs;
- establish a simpler qualifications framework that is easier for all users to understand;
- reduce the burden of bureaucracy in the accreditation and assessment of qualifications.

The QCF also sets out a series of strategic benefits of implementing the new framework. These are:

- the framework is simple to understand, flexible to use, and easy to navigate;
- the framework is responsive so that employers and learning providers can customise programmes of learning/ training to meet particular needs;
- unit achievement is recognised and recorded;
- all learners have an individual learner achievement record;
- improved data quality in relation to qualifications and achievement for users, stakeholders and government;
- the introduction of the QCF reduces administrative bureaucracy and costs.

The QCF differs from most new NQFs now being developed throughout Europe in its:

- regulatory approach;
- integrating not only qualifications, but also units, placed on levels;
- integration of credits;
- the direct link to individual learners (the learner achievement record).

These features reflect that the framework is embedded in a wider political and institutional context and that it is recognised as a key instrument supporting national education and training policies. In this sense the framework can be described as ‘tight’ or ‘strong’, as it has been by some commentators (Tuck, 2007) ⁽⁵⁾. But the framework also differs from most the new ‘EQF inspired’ frameworks by only covering a part of the qualification system. A nationwide qualifications framework, showing the relationship between all types and levels of qualifications, is still lacking in England and Northern Ireland.

⁽³⁾ By the end of 2010 all vocational qualifications were to be accredited to the QCF. At this point the QCF replaced the NQF for vocational qualifications. General educational qualifications – principally the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and the general certificate of education at advanced level (A levels) – will continue to be located in the NQF until a decision is made whether or not to move them into the QCF. The NQF uses the same system of levels (Entry 1-3).

⁽⁴⁾ The UK qualifications and credit framework: a critique. *Journal of vocational education and training*, Vol. 63, No 2, June 2011.

⁽⁵⁾ *An introductory guide to national qualifications frameworks: conceptual and practical issues for policy-makers.*

Stakeholder involvement and implementation

Responsibilities for regulating the QCF in England, Wales and Northern Ireland lie with the following qualifications regulators:

- in England, the qualifications regulator for all external qualifications is the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator;
- in Northern Ireland, the qualifications regulator is the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, which regulates external qualifications other than NVQs.

A separate FHEQ has been established for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. This framework has five levels and is based on the concept that qualification is awarded for demonstrated achievement. These levels are comparable to levels 4 to 8 of the QCF, although a different approach (descriptors) is used to describe them ⁽⁶⁾. The five levels of the FHEQ are differentiated by a series of generic qualifications descriptors that summarise the knowledge, understanding and the types of abilities that holders are expected to have. The FHEQ is certified against the QF-EHEA (Bologna), but not against the EQF. The attitude of FEHQ in relation to the EQF is significantly different from that signalled by the QCF. A 'scoping group' was set up in 2008 to explore the relationship between FHEQ and the EQF, concluding that, while they support the lifelong learning goals of the EQF, the group was not aware of any additional benefits which might accrue to the higher education sector at present by referencing the FHEQ to it. The group recommends that the position can be reviewed again, taking into account development of the EQF and the Bologna process and a monitoring of levels of interest expressed by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The QCF comprises nine levels from entry level (subdivided into entry level 1 to 3) to achievement at level 8.

The level descriptors ⁽⁷⁾ provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of the nine levels. The level descriptors are designed to enable their use across a wide range of learning contexts and build on those developed through the Northern Ireland credit accumulation and transfer system (NICATS), the existing level descriptors of the NQF, and a range of level descriptors from frameworks in the UK and internationally. The five upper levels are intended to be consistent with the levels of the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Level is an indication of the relative demand made on the learner, the complexity and/or depth of achievement, and the learner's autonomy in demonstrating that achievement. The level descriptors are concerned with the outcomes of learning and not the process of learning or the method of assessment. The indicators for each level are grouped into three categories:

⁽⁶⁾ See Annex 3.

⁽⁷⁾ See Annex 3 for detailed descriptors.

- knowledge and understanding,
- application and action,
- autonomy and accountability.

Apart from the levels, the QCF consists of a system of units and credits. One credit is based on 10 hours of learning, regardless of where and when the learning took place. The QCF also includes principles for assembling qualifications from units, specifying which units must be achieved for each qualification. A set of principles for recognising prior certified and non-certified learning is also included.

The learning outcomes approach underpins the English and Northern Irish qualifications systems. Actively promoted since the 1980s, this perspective is broadly accepted and implemented.

Referencing to the EQF

The QCF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process. The following relationship was established.

The higher education framework (FHEQ) is not referenced to the EQF. While this option was discussed during the referencing process, agreement was not reached on this point. As the five upper levels of the QCF are consistent with the FHEQ, an implicit and indirect link is established. Preparations are under way for presenting an updated referencing report to the EQF AG (possibly) in 2013. Such a report would make it possible to revisit the linking of the FHEQ to the EQF.

Table **Level correspondence established between the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) and the EQF**

QCF	Entry level 1	Entry level 2	Entry level 3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
EQF			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	

Important lessons and the way forward

The adoption and implementation of the QCF demonstrates the need to continue to develop national qualifications frameworks. Building on the experiences from two previous framework approaches (the NVQ and the NQF), the integration of credits clearly moves the framework to a new stage of development.

QCF experiences are important as they demonstrate the challenges involved in pursuing a learning outcomes (and credit) based approach to qualifications. The QCF demonstrates that it is possible to develop and also sustain a qualifications framework over time, gradually refine its objectives and increase its impact. However, the QCF also demonstrates that national frameworks have to be fit for purpose and designed in

accordance with the national context. The QCF is a reflection of the particular strengths and weaknesses of English and Northern Irish education and training; it can hardly be used as a blue-print at European level.

The limited coverage of the QCF – and the lack of formal linkages between the QCF and FHEQ – also demonstrates the difficulties involved in building a comprehensive framework with nationwide coverage. The fact that many European countries are now moving towards comprehensive frameworks indicates that the new generation of framework development in response to the EQF actually goes beyond the scope of pioneering frameworks like the English and Northern-Irish one.

Main sources of information

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) acts as EQF NCP for England.

<http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/office-of-qualifications-and-examinations-regulation-ofqual.html> [accessed 12.3.2013].

Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Northern Ireland acts as the NCP for Northern Ireland, website to be added.