

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].

Scotland

Introduction

The Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF) promotes lifelong learning in Scotland. The framework was originally implemented in 2001 but has since been gradually revised and refined. SCQF governance is organised as a company (see below), which is a unique solution in Europe, and a charity was set up in 2006. The framework covers all levels and types of qualifications but is not a regulatory framework. The SCQF assists in making clear the relationships between Scottish qualifications and those in the rest of the UK, Europe and beyond, thereby clarifying opportunities for international progression routes and credit transfer. The SCQF sees itself as an integrating framework, supporting everyone in Scotland, including learning providers and employers, by:

- helping people of all ages and circumstances to get access to appropriate education and training so they can meet their full potential;
- helping employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how qualifications relate to each other and to other forms of learning, and how different types of qualification can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

Level descriptors and criteria for inclusion are common across all levels and types of qualification.

Main policy objectives

The objectives pursued by the SCQF are:

- to support lifelong learning;
- to clarify entry and exit points for qualifications and programmes of learning at whatever level;
- to show learners and others possible routes for progression and credit transfer;
- to show the general level and credit (size) of the different types of Scottish qualifications;
- to enable credit links to be made between qualifications or learning programmes to assist learners to build on previous successes.

It will do this by making the overall system of qualifications and relevant programmes of learning easier to understand and providing a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities. The SCQF has a clear ambition to promote integration and progression across levels and types of qualification. While the existence of a common set of descriptors and criteria is seen as an important precondition, the development of a fully integrated framework is seen as a long term task. As one of the oldest comprehensive NQFs in Europe, the SCQF illustrates the potential of frameworks as instruments for development and, to some extent, reform. The SCQF has been described (by Raffe, 2009a, 2011) as a 'communication framework' without strong regulatory or reform functions. Experiences may indicate that it is too simple to operate with the distinction 'communication' and 'reform' frameworks, the SCQF seems gradually and increasingly to operate from a middle position where it acts as a reference point for revision and renewal of curricula and education and training in general. This is closely related to the important role played by learning outcomes throughout the Scottish education and training landscape, supported and made possible by the NQF. As important is the role played by the SCQF as a platform for dialogue between stakeholders and its ability to initiate and sustain a 'common conversation'.

The SCQF is an 'open framework' in the sense that it explicitly addresses the private sector and employers, and encourages these to have their training provisions accredited and included under the framework. The benefits of such an inclusion are presented on the SCQF website ⁽²⁾ as follows:

- it gives your in house training national recognition and a comparison with nationally recognised qualifications;
- it helps employees to map their learning pathways and gain personal recognition for what they have achieved. It also allows them to progress into more advanced learning programmes whether in-house or via an external learning or training provider;
- it encourages employees to undertake learning, raises morale and increases company loyalty;
- it promotes skills development and helps support effective skills utilisation.

As in the case of Wales (see below) the unit-based approach used in Scotland aids inclusion of qualifications of differing character and size. Normal procedures applied for the framework as a whole can also be used for qualifications outside the traditional, public sector. It is interesting to note that a big proportion of the SCQF database contains what can be termed non-traditional qualifications (by the SCQF estimated to approximately 400 out of 1500), it is also interesting to note that a number of 'international qualifications', notably awarded by multinational ICT companies, are included in the SCQF.

Stakeholder involvement and framework implementation

The framework is maintained by the Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership which is a company limited by guarantee and also a Scottish charity. The partnership is

⁽²⁾ <http://www.scqf.org.uk/Employers/> [accessed 5.12.2012].

made up of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Universities Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency, Association of Scotland's Colleges, and Scottish Ministers.

A high degree of ownership can be observed with the SCQF. This reflects how the framework established in 2001 brought together three previously developed frameworks covering different types and levels of qualifications, ranging from the qualifications of higher education institutions, Scottish vocational qualifications, and the national and higher national qualifications.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The SCQF has 12 levels ranging from access at SCQF level 1, up to Doctorate at level 12. The different levels indicate the level of difficulty of a particular qualification and increases in levels relate to factors such as:

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

The Scottish level descriptors were revised in 2012. This does not represent a radical departure from the past approach but can be seen as part of continuous evolution of the framework based on experiences gained. The three access (entry) levels are seen as important in addressing the needs of individuals with particular learning needs and as an important part of an overall lifelong learning strategy. For some, the access level can function as a way back to formal education and training.

It is a requirement of the framework that all learning to be included in the framework is described in terms of learning outcomes. Closely linked to the learning outcomes approach is the use of recognition of prior learning. While involved in development of RPL since the 1990s, there is still debate on how to make further progress in this field. A main distinction is between RPL as exclusively about recognition of prior formal learning and RPL as recognition of non-formal and informal or experiential learning. A toolkit has been developed for the last and more challenging form of recognition and will be used as a basis for future developments.

Referencing to the EQF

The SCQF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process and resulted in the following referencing:

Table **Level correspondence established between the Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF) and the EQF**

SCQF	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
EQF			1	2	3	4	5		6		7	8

Main sources of information

Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership acts as NCP for Scotland.
<http://www.scqf.org.uk/> [accessed 12.3.2013].