

THE UNITED KINGDOM

European inventory on NQF 2014

A total of five different qualifications frameworks currently operate in the UK. England and Northern Ireland have the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) established in 2001, the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) established during 2006-08, and the national qualifications framework (NQF) established in 2003. The Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF) has operated since 2001; in Wales, the credit and qualifications framework of Wales (CQFW) has been in place since 2003. 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 subsystems of education and training, explaining the existence of a separate FHEQ in England and Northern Ireland and the continued coexistence of the QCF and NQF. In contrast, Scotland and Wales have chosen to develop comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualifications. 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 in which they operate. This is particularly visible in England where the original ambitions on behalf of the QCF (as a comprehensive framework) seem to be under pressure. An evaluation of the QCF is expected to be finalised in the last quarter of 2014 and will, it is hoped, help to clarify the future role of this framework. From the perspective of the new and emerging frameworks introduced throughout Europe 'post-European qualifications framework (EQF)', the Scottish and Welsh frameworks are important learning cases. Both are comprehensive and have set themselves ambitious targets for lifelong learning. The evaluation of the Welsh framework, published in July 2014, points to the importance of integrating the NQF 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 Scottish framework, on the other hand, is considered a key tool for all stakeholders and is increasingly emerging as the most visible and consistent of the UK frameworks.

The relative complexity of the UK situation has led to the publishing of a brochure (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education et al., 2014) explaining to users how the frameworks interact, as well as how they link to the Irish framework.

England and Northern Ireland

Introduction

There is no single comprehensive NQF covering all levels and types of qualification in England and Northern Ireland. The QCF mainly addresses vocational and pre-vocational education and training (VET) areas; it does not include secondary general education (school leaving certificates) or higher education, qualifications which are covered by the framework for higher education (FHEQ). The QCF was referenced to the EQF in 2009 and the FHEQ to the European higher education area 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 a reforming framework (Ofqual, 2014) covering all levels and types of qualification, although with the important exception of secondary and (most) 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; it was formally adopted – after a two-year trial period – in autumn 2008. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) is responsible for the daily running of the framework (taking over from the now disbanded Qualifications and Curriculum authority (QCA). 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 of the QCF and the FHEQ

While the policy objectives of the QCF and the FHEQ may be seen to complement each other, they also differ in important respects.

QCF

The QCF can be traced back to the framework for national vocational qualifications (NVQ) established in 1987. This framework – operating with five levels – was set up to deal with a diverse national VET system. As stated by Lester (Lester, 2011), ‘the NVQ framework was developed to impose some order

in this apparent chaos and classify qualifications according to their level and occupational sector' (Lester, 2011, 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, it was replaced by the NQF 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 broader scope, addressing both work and school-based (vocational) awards. The QCF was designed, from 2003 and onwards, to replace the NQF and cover all publicly funded qualifications, including general and vocational education, but excluding degree-awarding institutions (higher education) ⁽¹⁾. The QCF (tested between 2006-08) has the same number of levels as the NQF (number of levels) but departs significantly by using (Lester, 2011, p. 207) '... 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'.

The QCF sets out a series of strategic benefits of the new framework:

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

The QCF is characterised by:

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

When introduced, the framework was embedded in a wider political and institutional context and seen as an instrument directly supporting national

⁽¹⁾ By the end of 2010 all vocational qualifications were to be accredited to the QCF. At this point the QCF should have replaced the NQF for vocational qualifications. This has not happened. General educational qualifications – principally the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and the general certificate of education at advanced level (A levels) – continue to be located in the NQF. The NQF uses the same system of levels (three entry levels and eight qualifications levels).

education and training policy reform. In this respect the framework can be described as 'tight' or 'strong', as it has been by some commentators (Tuck, 2007). The change of government policies since 2011 has directly influenced the role of the QCF. The 2014 evaluation of QCF raises questions on the regulating role of the framework and it is expected that a wide-ranging review will take place in the next year. The scope of the QCF also seems to be under review: while the framework was originally designed to include 'all publicly funded qualifications', Ofqual refers now (Ofqual, 2014) to adult vocational qualifications.

FHEQ

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. 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 qualifications framework in the European higher education area (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, taking into account development of the EQF and the Bologna process and monitoring of levels of interest expressed by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Stakeholder involvement

Responsibilities for regulating the QCF and NQF are distributed between the Office of Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual) in England and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland. The QCF was originally developed, tested and implemented by the QCA. When this body was disbanded following the change of government in 2011, Ofqual took over main responsibility for implementing the framework.

The responsibility for the FHEQ lies with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Framework implementation

The future role of the QCF is currently being discussed; the background document for the evaluation refers to practical experiences in implementing the QCF between 2008 and 2014. The following is stated regarding strengths of the QCF, (Ofqual, 2014, p. 24):

- (a) the QCF provides a structure within which the relative size and value of qualifications can be expressed using consistent terminology, providing the essential characteristics of a descriptive qualifications framework. Frameworks help learners to make informed decisions and assist in decisions on funding and recruitment;
- (b) the existing level structure seems to work well. The current eight levels and three entry levels are suggested to be kept also in the future;
- (c) the qualifications framework makes it possible to explain to learners how qualifications relate to each other and also ensures that awarding institutions design and market their qualifications accurately. This function needs to continue.

However, while these descriptive functions are seen as important, the consultation document raises fundamental questions over the reforming and regulatory role played by the QCF: (Ofqual, 2014, p. 24) 'Our review of the QCF did not identify any issues with the use of descriptive frameworks, just with the prescriptive design features required by the regulatory arrangements for the QCF'. The main issues raised (Ofqual, 2014, pp. 24-25) are:

- (a) while the structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer, in practice there have been very low levels of take up for this and the projected benefits of a credit system have not been realised;
- (b) unit sharing ⁽²⁾ has not contributed to reducing the number of qualifications; after the introduction of the QCF the number of qualifications/units has increased by 10 000;
- (c) there is a feeling that the requirement to unit share has damaged innovation and development;

⁽²⁾ To reduce the overall number of qualifications, the QCF introduced the principle of 'unit sharing' requiring awarding organisations to share units adding up to qualifications. Shared units were supposed to be available in a 'unit bank' to be used as building blocks by awarding organisations. Ofqual reports that organisations are reluctant to engage in developing these shared units and that this lack of commitment has a negative impact on development and innovation. Whether this point of view is shared by stakeholders remains to be seen in responses to the current consultation.

- (d) regulatory arrangements impose an approach to assessment which requires students to satisfy all assessment criteria. This leads to over-assessment. The unit level focus is not easily compatible with synoptic and end-point assessment;
- (e) the overall validity of qualifications is not sufficiently addressed; the focus on unit assessment draws attention away from overall validity.

While these are the main points made by Ofqual, responses to the consultation will show whether other stakeholders share these views. Ofqual, in line with what is said above, suggests removing existing regulatory arrangements for the QCF and replacing them with 'general conditions' for qualifications currently administered by Ofqual.

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

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

The descriptors provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of the nine levels. They 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, 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 FHEQ 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:

- (a) knowledge and understanding;
- (b) application and action;
- (c) 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.

Validating non-formal and informal learning ⁽³⁾

There is no comprehensive validation strategy or policy covering all sectors of education in England or Northern Ireland. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is understood to refer to recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. In relation to the QCF, RPL can lead to the award of units or full qualifications. In higher education, it is used for both admissions and exemptions, but most university regulatory frameworks limit RPL credit to between half and two thirds of an award.

RPL is available through the QCF that awards formal qualifications. Individuals can apply for exemption from credits based on their work-based learning. Non-formal certificated learning (employer in-house training, adult and community learning or other types of certified training) can also serve to provide credit exemption. Unlike the QCF, the NQF does not include any reference to RPL. Further, the QCF enables a much wider application of RPL than the NQF, because its units of assessment allow for wider recognition of a set of achievements, as individuals do not have to demonstrate completion of a full qualification to be awarded credit.

In higher education, the fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded based on achievement of outcomes and attainment, rather than years of study. The responsibility for RPL (formerly referred to as accreditation of prior (experiential) learning) lies with the awarding organisation (as that is where ultimate responsibility for academic standards lies). Although there is no legislation that regulates RPL for higher education, there is a long tradition of RPL and encouraging mature students to participate. Since 2010, the QAA has introduced the quality code for higher education. This sets out the 'expectations' that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet (the code applies to England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Each expectation is accompanied by a series of indicators that reflect 'sound practice', and through which providers can demonstrate they are complying. RPL is given significantly more emphasis in the new quality code and is specifically included in a chapter entitled 'assessment of students and the RPL' (Chapter B6, which

⁽³⁾ This section draws mainly on the European Commission et al., 2014.

refers only to experiential learning, not credit transfer) as well as in the chapter on admissions (Chapter B2).

Recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) is another route by which individuals can have their prior learning validated. It relates mainly to adult and community learning and is compulsory in some specific projects, mainly related to second-chance education. Guidance on the application of RARPA has been prepared by the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education which also provides events and training for practitioners in the application of RARPA.

There are also many qualifications not included in the QCF, NQF or FHEQ which can be achieved through validation, as it is up to the learning provider to decide what processes individuals are required to undertake to obtain the qualification in question.

Referencing to the EQF

The QCF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process. The relationship was established as shown in Table 1.

The FHEQ is not referenced to the EQF. While this option was discussed during the referencing process, agreement was not reached. 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 advisory group. Such a report would make it possible to revisit the linking of the FHEQ to the EQF.

Table 1 **Level correspondence established between the QCF and the EQF**

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

Source: QCDA et al., 2010.

Important lessons and the way forward

The English and Northern Irish story demonstrates how qualifications frameworks continuously evolve and develop. It will be important to clarify the scope and the role to be played by the QCF. Experiences of the credit transfer element of the QCF will also be important outside the UK, as will those with a unit-based approach and the way these are linked to assessment. Existing issues regarding the overlap between the QCF and the original NQF also need to be clarified, for the benefit of learners and employers.

The issue of a comprehensive qualifications framework has yet to be raised systematically in England. 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 that of England and Northern Ireland.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 17.11.2014]

Ofqual acts as EQF national coordination point:

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

Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Northern Ireland acts as the national coordination point for Northern Ireland:

<http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/>

Table 2 **QCF/NQF for England, Wales and Northern Ireland**

CQF levels	Qualification types	EQF levels
8	Vocational qualifications level 8	8
7	NVQ level 5 Vocational qualifications ⁽⁴⁾ level 7	7
6	Vocational qualifications level (6)	6
5	NVQ level 4 Higher national diplomas Vocational qualifications level 5	5
4	Vocational qualifications level 4 Higher national certificates	5
3	NVQ level 3 Vocational qualifications level 3 GCSE and A-level Advanced diplomas	4
2	NVQ level 2 Vocational qualifications level 2 GCSE at grade A-C ESOL skills for life Higher diplomas Functional/essential skills level 2 (English, mathematics and information and communications technology)	3
1	NVQ level 1 Vocational qualifications level 1 GCSEs at grade D-G ESOL skills for life Foundation diplomas Functional skills level 1 (English, mathematics and information and communications technology)	2
Entry level 3	Entry level certificates (sublevel 1-3) ESOL skills for life Functional skills entry level (English, mathematics and information and communications technology)	1

Source: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment ⁽⁵⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ The difference between vocational qualifications and national vocational qualifications is the following: vocational qualifications do not have to be 100% based on national occupational standards (NOS) and are often knowledge-based. NVQs are 100% based on NOS as they are qualifications that are evidence of occupational competence and so must have a direct relationship with the NOS. The QCF qualifications which are 100% based on NOS have NVQ (in brackets) within their title to communicate to end users that this 'new' QCF qualification is for occupational competence and replaces the original NVQ.

⁽⁵⁾ See <http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/> [accessed 17.11.2014].

List of abbreviations

CQFW	credit and qualifications framework of Wales
EQF	European qualifications framework
FHEQ	framework for higher education qualifications
GCSE	general certificate of secondary education
NOS	national occupational standards
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVQ	national vocational qualifications
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
QCF	qualifications and credit framework
RARPA	recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning
RPL	recognition of prior learning
VET	vocational education and training

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http://scqf.org.uk/content/files/europe/QFUK_Joint_Report_-_Updated_March_2010.pdf

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education et al. (2014). *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf>

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