

THE UNITED KINGDOM – Scotland

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 subsectors of education and training, explaining the existence of a separate FHEQ in England and Northern Ireland and the continued coexistence of the QCF and the 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.

Scotland

Introduction

The 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 'Stakeholder involvement'), 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, 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:

- (a) helping people of all ages and circumstances to get access to appropriate education and training so they can meet their full potential;
- (b) 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 (12) levels and types of qualification.

Main policy objectives

The objectives pursued by the SCQF are to:

- (a) support lifelong learning;
- (b) clarify entry and exit points for qualifications and programmes of learning at whatever level;
- (c) show learners and others possible routes for progression and credit transfer;
- (d) show the general level and credit (size) of the different types of Scottish qualifications;
- (e) 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 (Raffe, 2009, 2011) as a 'communication framework' without strong regulatory functions. Experiences suggest that the distinction between 'communication' and 'reform' is too simplistic; 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 Scottish education and training, 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 inclusion are presented on the SCQF website ⁽¹⁾:

- (a) it gives in-house training national recognition and a comparison with nationally recognised qualifications;
- (b) 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;
- (c) it encourages employees to undertake learning, raises morale and increases company loyalty;
- (d) it promotes skills development and helps support effective skills utilisation.

As is generally the case in the UK countries, the unit-based approach used in Scotland seeks to aid 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. Much of the SCQF database contains what can be termed non-traditional qualifications (by the SCQF, in 2013, estimated to approximately 400 out of 1500), and several 'international qualifications', notably awarded by multinational information and communications technology companies, are included in the SCQF.

⁽¹⁾ See <http://scqf.org.uk/employers/employer-guide/> [accessed 13.11.2014].

Stakeholder involvement

The framework is maintained by the SCQF partnership, a company limited by guarantee and also a Scottish charity. The partnership is made up of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, universities Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency, association of Scotland's colleges and Scottish ministers. Employers are also represented in the SCQF partnership board.

A high degree of ownership can be observed with the SCQF, in all sectors of education and training as well as by labour market stakeholders. This reflects how the framework established in 2001 brought together three previously developed frameworks covering different types and levels of qualifications, ranging from higher education institution qualifications and Scottish vocational qualifications, to the national and higher national qualifications.

Framework implementation

Independent evaluation carried out in 2013 looked at the level of awareness, perception and understanding of the SCQF among learners, parents, teaching staff and management (SCQF partnership, 2013). Based on a combination of focus groups (27), online questionnaires (1 444 responses), face-to-face interviews (250) and in-depth interviews (16), it gave valuable insight into the level of implementation of the framework. Overall results are encouraging and demonstrate that the SCQF is widely recognised by learners, parents and education professionals in Scotland. The evaluation is also important outside Scotland as it provides research-based documentation on the impact of the framework on end-users. The following main findings were reported for the learners:

- (a) 53% of all learners reported that they are aware of the SCQF. The level of knowledge varied between the different parts of education, with the highest levels found in schools (63%) and the lowest in community adult education. Some learners are aware of the qualifications levels, but do not associate them with the SCQF as such, indicating that the actual level of awareness is higher than 53%;
- (b) those learners aware of the framework (66%) have reasonable understanding of its principles and purposes. Learners are particularly aware of the levels, the credit points and the role of the framework in visualising progression and transition throughout education and training;
- (c) half of the learners aware of the framework have actively used it. Those in schools are most likely to use it, supporting them in planning future

education and training careers. The framework is only partly used in further education and in community adult education, reflecting low levels of awareness.

For teaching staff and school management, the following main findings were reported:

- (a) there is a universal awareness of the SCQF among management and teaching staff. The level of detailed understanding varies, however, being the highest among guidance staff and in schools where the framework has been actively presented and promoted;
- (b) the level of understanding of the SCQF is lowest among classroom teachers, as is appreciation of the added-value offered by the framework;
- (c) the overall perception of the framework is positive and teaching staff in particular point to the role of the framework in identifying levels and pointing to progression routes. Specific benefits mentioned are that the framework helps learners to understand better the qualifications they are working towards and to identify progression. The framework is also perceived as promoting a comprehensive picture, including academic, vocational and general qualifications.

Among parents, the following findings were reported:

- (a) around a third of the parents interviewed have heard of the SCQF. Most had developed their awareness through an education institution (53%), while 47% reported becoming aware of the framework through their children;
- (b) only 8% of parents interviewed have been actively using the framework;
- (c) virtually everybody participating in the interviews recognised the added-value of the SCQF and supported that parents should be more actively told about the framework and its potential role in supporting their children's education choices.

The findings of the evaluation point to a number of areas for future development of the framework and some recommendations:

- (a) the role of the SCQF levels in providing a reference for all qualifications must be further promoted;
- (b) all members of the SCQF partnership (see above) should be involved in raising further awareness of it;
- (c) the positive effect of using social media to increase awareness should be developed;
- (d) the SCQF brand should be strengthened;
- (e) toolkits should be developed for different purposes; supporting practical use of the different elements of the framework.

The 2013 evaluation confirms that the SCQF has reached an advanced state of implementation and that overall awareness of the framework is relatively high.

Validating non-formal and informal learning ⁽²⁾

An overarching validation methodology known as ‘recognition of prior learning’ (RPL) has been linked to the implementation of the SCQF. RPL in the Scottish context goes beyond the validation of non-formal and informal learning, to also include prior formal learning.

Two national RPL networks ensure that there are links between relevant stakeholders; one run by the SCQF partnership and one by the Scottish higher education RPL network, supported by Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland and Universities Scotland. The SCQF RPL toolkit was initially published in March 2010 and then reprinted in December of that year, with over 1 000 copies issued. A review of use of the toolkit began with a testing phase (carried out by Learning Link Scotland) to see if it was fit for purpose for different types of individuals. The second phase involved full consultation (an online survey and focus group with stakeholders) in 2012-13. As a result of the review, there are plans to develop online RPL guides, both for learners and providers, to be finalised in second half of 2014 (SCQF, 2014).

RPL can be used to award credits towards qualifications or in admissions processes. It is also recognised as a method of supporting personal development planning, career development and to form bridges between non-formal/informal learning and formal education and training. The SCQF handbook describes the two types of RPL possible in Scotland: formative and summative recognition. Formative recognition provides the possibility for the learner to benchmark their learning against the SCQF level descriptors. This does not result in the award of SCQF credit points. Summative recognition results in the award of SCQF credit points and involves formal assessment of the learner’s prior informal or experiential learning. This may also be referred to as the accreditation of prior experiential learning.

RPL can be used for the assessment of units in the following types of qualification:

- (a) higher national certificate and diplomas (except graded units);
- (b) professional development awards;

⁽²⁾ This section draws mainly on the European Commission et al., 2014.

- (c) Scottish vocational qualifications;
- (d) national progression awards;
- (e) national certificates;
- (f) awards/professional development awards.

Some units and assessments cannot be achieved through RPL, such as where there are regulatory, professional or other statutory requirements.

The QAA has introduced a new quality code for higher education, which is 'the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers'. This new quality code replaces the set of national reference points known as the academic infrastructure and places major emphasis on RPL. QAA Scotland is working with the Scottish higher education sector to develop a national framework for RPL.

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; 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.

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 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 it is described in terms of learning outcomes.

Referencing to the EQF

The SCQF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as part of the overall UK referencing process as follows:

Table 1 **Levels correspondence established between the SCQF and the EQF**

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

Source: QCDA et al., 2010.

Main sources of information

Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership acts as national coordination point for Scotland. <http://www.scqf.org.uk/> [accessed 13.11.2014].

Table 2 **Qualifications in the SCQF**

SCQF	SQF qualifications		Higher education qualifications	SVQ, modern apprenticeships	EQF	
12	Some SQA qualifications are changing between 2013 and 2016. See www.squa.org.uk/readyreckoner		↑	Doctoral degrees	Professional apprenticeships	8
11			Master degrees	Professional apprenticeships/SVQ 5	7	
10			Honours degree	Professional apprenticeships	6	
9			Professional development award	Bachelor/ordinary degrees/graduate diploma, graduate certificate	Technical apprenticeship/SVQ 4	6
8		Higher national diploma	↓	Diploma of higher education	Technical apprenticeship/SVQ 4	5
7	Advanced higher Scottish baccalaureate	Higher national certificate	Certificate of higher education	Modern apprenticeship/SVQ 3		
6	Higher			Modern apprenticeship/SVQ 2	4	
5	National 5, intermediate 1			SVQ 1	3	
4	National certificate 4, access 3				2	
3	National 3, access 3				1	

SCQF	SQF qualifications			Higher education qualifications	SVQ, modern apprenticeships	EQF
2	National 5, access 2					
1	National 5, access 1					

Source: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education et al., 2014.

List of abbreviations

CQFW	credit and qualifications framework of Wales
EQF	European qualifications framework
FHEQ	framework for higher education qualifications
NQF	national qualifications framework
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QCF	qualifications and credit framework
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SCQF	Scottish qualifications framework
UK	United Kingdom

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