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 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.

Wales

Introduction

The CQFW was adopted in 2002 and launched in 2003. Its purpose is to act as an overarching structure to provide clarity for existing education systems and includes all formal and regulated qualifications (including higher education) as well as quality assured lifelong learning (QALL). The CQFW thus brings together all recognised learning into a single unifying, inclusive structure incorporating all kinds of learning, whether formal, non-formal or informal. The CQFW can be seen as a second generation framework departing sector frameworks established from the 1990s and onwards. In certain areas, for example for general upper secondary qualifications (GCSEs), the Welsh framework overlaps with those of England and Northern Ireland. In recent years divergences between England and Wales in general qualifications have highlighted the need to review existing strategies, including the role of the CQFW ([1]). Evaluation of the CQFW was carried out in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014) focusing on strengths and weaknesses of the framework. The CQFW is seen as playing a generally positive and constructive role in the Welsh qualification landscape and there is support among all stakeholders to continue the work started a decade ago.

Main policy objectives

The CQFW is positioned as a key part of Wales' lifelong learning policy and strategy. It has five key goals:
(a) enable everyone to develop and maintain essential skills;
(b) encourage people to become lifelong learners;
(c) exploit the knowledge in business and educational institutions;
(d) encourage business and workers to gain new skills;
(e) help people within their communities to develop new skills.

The CQFW allows learners to explain to others the relative value of their award and enables them to transfer their knowledge and skills between career and learning paths. The CQFW is based on three principles:
(a) expression of achievement as learning outcomes;
(b) demands made by that learning on the learner (level);

([1]) See http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2013/gcsesalevels/ [accessed 13.11.2014].

(c)   the volume of learning achievements (credit).

The framework supports all recognised, credit-based formal education and training learning within:
(a)   higher education;
(b)   regulated general and vocational qualifications.

The links to these two pillars of education and training mean that the CQFW enables any learning post-14 to be formally recognised. However, the CQFW is not in itself a regulatory mechanism; any regulatory requirements are supplied through its relationship with regulating bodies. The framework is unit-based; it defines one credit as 10 hours of learning time and has nine levels (the lowest subdivided into three) with supporting levels descriptors.

The system for QALL forms a third and integrated pillar of the CQFW. It takes as its starting point that all learning, wherever and whenever it takes place, should be valued and recognised, making the Welsh framework one of the few European frameworks where validation and/or recognition of prior learning (RPL) is fully integrated. In recent years much effort has been invested in putting this system into practice. While enjoying some success, the number of individuals actually using this opportunity has been relatively limited and there is currently discussion on how to adjust the approach, for example by reducing the complexity of procedures.

The CQFW can be considered an 'open framework' in the sense that its unit-based approach at the outset is oriented towards many awarding bodies and education and training formats. This aids inclusion of units developed (for example) by the private sector and as part of continuing and enterprise-based education and training. Consequently, the procedures and quality criteria applied within the QALLL can exemplify how a NQF can establish links beyond traditional, formal education and training.

Stakeholder involvement

The 2014 evaluation points out that the CQFW is particularly well established in certain sectors, notably higher education and adult and community learning. For others, however, engagement was lower. The framework is currently governed by the Welsh Government, but stakeholders point out the need to broaden its basis by linking more directly to relevant employment and qualifications bodies (for example Career Wales and Qualification Wales). Increased involvement of employer representatives was also seen as relevant and the governing model of

the Scottish qualifications framework has been referred to as an option (a charitable educational trust involving a broad selection of stakeholders).

Stakeholders generally perceived engagement with the framework to be low among employers and most learners; they also saw the need to increase awareness of – and buy-in to – the framework across education and training sectors. This mixed assessment was balanced by the fact that stakeholders are generally aware of the CQFW and its roles and considered it a useful information tool, providing coherent understanding of Welsh qualifications. Several stakeholders point out that the framework is currently not a driver for policy in Wales and that there is a need to strengthen its overall role and visibility. However, both student and employer representatives state that CQFW is not 'on their radar' and has thus played a limited role in education and training policy developments.

Framework implementation

When the framework was adopted in 2002, a 10-year implementation plan (2003-14) was agreed. This reflected the view that framework implementation takes time and requires a long-term development perspective. The evaluation carried out in 2013/14 is also of considerable interest outside Wales as it offers a good insight into the challenges involved in setting up NQFs. The main strengths of the CQFW were summarised as follows:

(a) stakeholders from all sectors consider the CQFW to have played a main role in allowing greater validation of non-formal and informal learning (recognition of prior and informal learning). The QALL pillar of the framework is considered to have had an impact on disadvantaged learner groups and contributed to overall lifelong learning strategies. The framework was generally seen to have raised learner aspirations and contributed to promoting progression. The opportunity to add new units to the QALL pillar of the framework is seen as beneficial to its flexibility and as a condition for helping special-needs groups;

(b) stakeholders considered the CQFW to have supported recognition of non-mainstream provisions, enabling providers to extend their overall offers to the benefit of learners. They believed the framework made it possible to develop these non-mainstream provisions in consistently, referring to the levels and the descriptors of the framework;

(c) the CQFW is seen as supporting a 'common currency' of credit that has made it easier to articulate and communicate achievements across sectors, levels and geographic areas. The levels descriptors are considered to

support consistency and trust between stakeholders, allowing learners to understand better what their qualifications are worth and to map various progression pathways;

(d) a broad range of stakeholders appreciated the flexibility offered by the unit based approach. These stakeholders, including awarding bodies, sector skills councils, training providers and third sector organisations, pointed to this approach as allowing for rapid renewal of provisions and meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners. The framework, by providing an overview, also made it possible to avoid duplication of units and qualifications, thus providing economic benefit;

(e) several stakeholders point to the role played by the framework in supporting transfer and progression outside Wales, in particular in relation to the rest of the UK.

The main weaknesses of the CQFW were considered to be:

(a) most stakeholders believe that the potential of the CQFW has not been used in practice as much as originally hoped. Despite having been used in some sectors, the 'concept has not acquired great scale'. Despite some work carried out by the Welsh government, the framework has yet to reach the general public, employers and learners. The use of complicated language (written for awarding institutions) and lack of guidance on the benefits of the framework may have contributed to this lack of visibility. Stakeholders highlight the bureaucracy surrounding the framework as one factor preventing its wider use. Employers in particular ask for a framework which is easier to understand and simpler to approach. The arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning (see also below) are considered by some to be too complicated and run the risk of discouraging potential users;

(b) it is generally concluded that too few employers engage in or are aware of the framework. While this reflects a general lack of visibility of the CQFW, some stakeholders highlight that the English-Northern Irish QCF is the dominant framework in the UK and that some employers may prefer to relate to this and not limit themselves to Wales;

(c) some stakeholders point out that credit accumulation and transfer has not played the role it originally was expected to; learners and employers seem to be more focused on full qualifications than credits in the current situation;

(d) the most important criticism was directed towards the Welsh Government and the lack of 'strategic investment' in the framework. It is noted that recent policy documents and statements do not place much focus on the role of the framework in the wider Welsh education and training landscape. It was, for

example, not prominent in the 2013-14 review of qualifications (Welsh Government, 2014). It was pointed out that the recent disbanding of the credit common accord forum impacted on the role and profile of the CQFW, in particular as a wide range of key stakeholders were involved, lending credibility to the framework.

Stakeholders responding to the evaluation generally recognise the role played by the CQFW as a unifying framework; there is support for its development and implementation. Increasing divergences between the Welsh and the English education and training systems offers an opportunity for the CQFW to present the Welsh qualification landscape and to inspire its development and reform. To strengthen the role of the CQFW will, however, require that the Welsh Government contributes to raising its profile as an integrated part of the education and training policy landscape.

Levels descriptors and learning outcomes

There are nine levels in the CQFW: entry plus eight levels. There are common level descriptors which apply to all types of learning programmes and qualifications.

All qualifications and learning programmes within the CQFW are based on learning outcomes and must have quality-assured assessment of these outcomes. The CQFW uses two measures to describe qualifications:

(a) the level of the outcomes of learning;
(b) the volume of outcomes, described by the number of CQFW credit points.

Validating non-formal and informal learning ([2])

The CQFW, adopted in 2002, has sought to integrate fully validation of non-formal and informal learning from the start. The QALL pillar of the framework offers a mechanism to recognise (certificate) knowledge and/or skills gained through non-formal and informal learning. This includes adult and community learning, training undertaken in the workplace, informal, specialist, interest or hobby-based learning. The learning must be identified in recognised units, which can only be awarded by a 'recognised body'. There is a clear process for developing and drafting units, and training is available from recognised awarding bodies on how to write them. Draft units submitted to a recognised body are

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

subject to a process of scrutiny including experienced expert review, after which there may be revisions before the unit is submitted for approval and recognition. Once approved, it is available for use by any recognised awarding body. There are over 1000 units registered.

Alongside this, learners in Wales can also make use of the other validation routes available in the UK: RPL in VET, continuing VET and higher education, and recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning, as well as procedures to access higher education courses (see the UK-England, Northern Ireland country fiche for further information on these).

None of these initiatives can be considered a formal strategy/policy as they are methods/guidelines within specific education and training sectors: adult and continuing education, higher education, non-accredited adult learning. Validation is generally devolved to the learning provider, or at times to departments within the learning provider. Sectoral initiatives in the private sector or third sector are focused on providing guidance and frameworks for validation, through the use of QALL. RPL is conducted using same curricula/standards as those of formal education.

According to stakeholders interviewed for the 2014 validation inventory, some potential obstacles to further development of RPL include lack of awareness among learners of RPL opportunities, lack of expertise among providers, or lack of confidence to carry out RPL. It is also possible that the lack of dedicated funding for RPL (except in the higher education sector) is a disincentive to what can be perceived as a process that is difficult to administer and time-consuming (for both the individual applicants and the providers).

Referencing to the EQF

The CQFW was referenced to the EQF as a part of the overall UK referencing process in February 2010.

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

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

Source: QCDA et al., 2010.

As with England and Northern Ireland, no link was established between the FEHQ and the EQF, based on the argument from the higher education sector that no additional benefit of such a link could be observed. This decision can be reviewed, depending on the developments of the EQF and feedback from potential users of the frameworks.

Important lessons and future plans

The role to be played by the CQFW depends on a number of factors. The follow-up to the 2014 evaluation by the Welsh Government will indicate whether the framework will be given higher priority and visibility. Stakeholders seem to be in favour of a model closer to the Scottish qualification framework, where they are more directly involved in its running. The future of the CQFW also depends on the development of the qualifications framework in England and whether evaluation of the QCF will result in clarification of the future role of these frameworks. The presentation of the CQFW on its dedicated website is – from an external user point of view – very complicated. While containing much

information, the website is organised in a way which makes it hard for learners, parents or employers to grasp the essence and added value of the CQFW.

Main sources of information

Wales-Welsh Assembly Government acts as national coordination point.
Welsh Government, 2012.

Table 2   **UK-Wales qualifications framework**

CQFW levels	Qualifications types	EQF levels
8	Doctoral degree	8
7	Master degree Integrated master degree Postgraduate diploma Postgraduate certificate in education	7
6	Bachelor and honours degrees Professional graduate certificate in education Graduate diploma	6
5	Diplomas of higher education Higher national diploma Foundation degree	5
4	Foundation degree Higher national certificates Certificates of higher education	5
3	Vocational qualifications level 3 GGCSE and A level Welsh baccalaureate qualification (WBQ) advanced	4
2	Vocational qualification level 2 WBQ intermediate General certificate of secondary education (GCSE) (grades A to C)	3
1	Vocational qualification level 1 General certificate of secondary education (GCSE) (grades D to G) WBQ foundation	2
Entry level	Entry qualification, Essential Skills Wales	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
GCSEs	general upper secondary qualifications
NQF	national qualifications framework
QALL	quality assured lifelong learning
QCDA	Qualifications and Curriculum development Agency
QCF	qualifications and credit framework
RPL	recognition of prior learning
UK	United Kingdom
VET	vocational education and training
WBQ	Welsh baccalaureate qualification

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