

The United Kingdom

European inventory on NQF 2016

Until 2015, five different qualifications frameworks were operational in the UK. In England and Northern Ireland the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ), the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) and the national qualifications framework (NQF) operated in parallel, partly overlapping each other. The Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF) and the credit and qualifications framework of Wales (CQFW) are comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualification.

In October 2015 a new regulated qualifications framework (RQF) was introduced for England and Northern Ireland, replacing the QCF and the NQF ⁽¹⁾. The RQF covers all academic and vocational qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) ⁽²⁾ and by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA) ⁽³⁾. The most significant change introduced by the RQF is the lifting of standardised requirements for the design of qualifications. RQF uses the same eight levels (plus three entry levels) as the QCF but introduces some changes in the way qualification size is calculated.

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 they operate within. This is particularly visible in England and Northern Ireland where the existence of parallel frameworks may have partly contradicted their ability to support transparency and learning progression.

The introduction of the RQF addresses this problem. The new framework will, however, require time and stability to establish itself as a well-known and visible reference point for citizens, education providers and employers. The Scottish and Welsh frameworks contrast developments in England and Northern Ireland, operating as comprehensive frameworks and setting themselves

⁽¹⁾ Relevant documents: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofqual-to-introduce-new-regulated-qualifications-framework>

⁽²⁾ Register of regulated qualifications: <http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>

⁽³⁾ CCEA: http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do

ambitious targets for lifelong learning. Evaluation of the Welsh framework, published in 2014, pointed to the importance of better integrating it 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 stakeholders and is increasingly emerging as the most visible and consistent of the UK frameworks.

England and Northern Ireland

Introduction and context

In October 2015 a new regulated qualifications framework (RQF) was introduced for England and Northern Ireland, replacing the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) and the national qualifications framework (NQF). The RQF covers all vocational and academic qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) ⁽⁴⁾ in England and the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA) ⁽⁵⁾ in Northern Ireland.

The RQF uses the same eight levels (plus three entry levels) as the QCF. Levels 5 to 8 of the RQF are equivalent to those used by the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ). The RQF builds on the descriptors used by the QCF, partly adjusted by using EQF descriptors.

The main difference between the QCF and the RQF lies in their respective regulatory roles and functions. While the QCF took on a clear regulatory role as regards the design and accreditation of qualifications, the role of the RQF is to provide a transparent description of existing qualifications, not to regulate them.

The relationship between the RQF and the EQF (the 2010 referencing was linked to the QCF) will require clarification. The FHEQ was self-certified to the QF-EHEA in 2007. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) is responsible for the daily running of the framework.

Policy objectives

The aim of the 2015 reform is to introduce a simple, descriptive framework replacing the QCF (and the NQF). The RQF should provide an overview of qualifications and show how they relate to each other. Transparency will be achieved by setting consistent measures of size (how long, typically, a learner takes to study and be assessed for a qualification) and level of difficulty (see below for further detail).

⁽⁴⁾ Register of regulated qualifications: <http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>

⁽⁵⁾ CCEA: http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do

The new framework will include all qualifications regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation and will not (unlike the QCF) be used to set qualification design rules. The existing (Ofqual) General conditions of recognition ⁽⁶⁾ set a wide range of requirements for qualifications and will replace the regulatory functions previously forming part of the QCF. This change can be seen as part of a policy to devolve responsibility from national level to awarding organisations and learning providers. As stated by Ofqual, ‘lifting the rules means that high quality vocational qualifications can be designed around the needs of employers, rather than fitting to the prescriptive QCF rules’ ⁽⁷⁾.

The introduction of the RQF reflects experiences gained with the QCF following its formal adoption in 2008. Evaluation carried out in 2013-14 ⁽⁸⁾ concluded as follows:

- (a) the QCF provides a structure within which the relative size and value of qualifications can be expressed using consistent terminology;
- (b) the existing level structure seems to work well and the current eight levels and three entry levels are suggested to be kept;
- (c) the qualifications framework makes it possible to explain to learners how qualifications relate to each other and it also ensures that awarding institutions design and market their qualifications accurately. This function needs to be continued.

While the transparency functions of the QCF were seen as positive, its regulatory role was criticised:

- (a) though the structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer, in practice there have been very low levels of take up for credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit system have not been realised;

⁽⁶⁾ Ofqual (2016). *General conditions of recognition* (Ofqual/16/6023):
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/529394/general-conditions-of-recognition-june-2016.pdf

⁽⁷⁾ UK Government web page of the consultation on *After the QCF: a new qualifications framework* (go to Consultation description):
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework>

⁽⁸⁾ Ofqual (2014). *Consultation on withdrawing the regulatory arrangements for the qualifications and credit framework* (Ofqual/14/5490):
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140813095715/http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/consultation-docs/withdrawing-the-regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qualifications-and-credit-framework-july-2014/

- (b) unit sharing ⁽⁹⁾ has not contributed to reducing the number of qualifications; after the introduction of the QCF, the number of qualifications has increased;
- (c) there is a feeling that the requirements for awarding organisations to unit share has damaged innovation and development;
- (d) the regulatory arrangements impose an approach to assessment which requires students to satisfy all assessment criteria. This leads to over-assessment;
- (e) the overall validity of qualifications is not sufficiently addressed; the focus on unit assessment draws attention away from overall validity.

The introduction of the RQF in October 2015 means that the main conclusions of the evaluation have been accepted. The new framework retains key transparency functions but will play a limited role in regulation and design of qualifications. The following principles, following a consultation carried out in spring 2015, apply to the RQF:

- (a) the levelling approach introduced by the QCF is continued: all qualifications should have a level; this level should be under review; and this revision should take place through a managed process;
- (b) the level descriptors of the QCF are simplified, not including a separate section on autonomy and accountability (see below);
- (c) all qualifications registered in the framework will be assigned a measure of size, expressed in total qualification time (TQT) and guided learning hours (GLH) ⁽¹⁰⁾;
- (d) if recognition of prior learning (RPL) is allowed, awarding organisations should be required to have and to publish a policy on it;

⁽⁹⁾ 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 in engaging in the development of 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 consultation responses.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Size in the RQF refers to the estimated total amount of time it could typically take to study and be assessed for a qualification. This can be anything from a matter of hours to several years of study; different students can take different amounts of time to study the same qualification. Size is expressed in terms of total qualification time (TQT). The part of this TQT that is spent being taught or supervised is known as guided learning hours (GLH).

(e) a new condition regarding credits is introduced ⁽¹¹⁾.

The concepts of ‘guided learning hours’ and ‘total qualification time’ are important for the RQF and will be applied to all qualifications. Guided learning ⁽¹²⁾ (GLH) is made up of activities completed by the learner under the direct instruction or supervision of a lecturer, supervisor or tutor, whether through physical presence or electronic means. Total qualification time (TQT) is made up of the GLH plus all other time taken in preparation, study or any other form of participation in education or training but not under the direct supervision of a lecturer, supervisor or tutor. TQT will be indicated for all RQF qualifications by the end of 2017.

The RQF downplays the role to be played by credits. Awarding organisations can attribute credits to qualifications, but are not obliged to do so. The credit value of a qualification is calculated by dividing TQT by 10. If credits are calculated these should be included in the qualification specification. Any qualification component to which credit is assigned should also be levelled. The unit-bank introduced by the QCF (allowing for unit sharing between different awarding organisations and qualifications) is closed, reflecting the 2014 evaluation findings.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The RQF includes an entry level (subdivided into entry 1 to 3) and levels 1 to 8. The level descriptors provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of the nine levels. The level descriptors are designed for across a wide range of learning contexts. Levels 5 to 8 are consistent with the levels of the FHEQ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The RQF level descriptors build on, but simplify, the descriptors used by the QCF. While the QCF operated with three categories – knowledge and understanding; application and action; autonomy and accountability – the RQF operates with two categories – knowledge and skills. This is illustrated in Table 1:

⁽¹¹⁾ Credit will be calculated by dividing TQT by 10.

⁽¹²⁾ Guided learning hours were also used by the QCF.

Table 1. **New descriptors for level 1 of the RQF**

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder....)	Skills descriptor (the holder can....)
Level 1	Has basic factual knowledge of a subject and/or knowledge of facts, procedures and ideas to complete well-defined routine tasks and address simple problems; and is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of work	Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined routine tasks and procedures. Select and use relevant information. Identify whether actions have been effective.

Source: OFQAL, 2015 ⁽¹³⁾.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The QCF was jointly developed, tested and implemented by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England; the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland; and the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales. These qualifications regulatory bodies were responsible for regulating qualifications within the QCF and NQF. When QCA was disbanded following the change of government in 2011, Ofqual took over main responsibility for framework developments and is now responsible for the implementation of the RQF. The introduction of the RQF took into account the opinions from key stakeholders responding to a consultation launched March 2015. A total of 119 responses were registered ⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽¹³⁾ Ofqual (2015). *Qualification and component levels: requirements and guidance for all awarding organisations and all qualifications* (Ofqual/15/5774).

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461637/qualification-and-component-levels.pdf

⁽¹⁴⁾ UK Government web page of the consultation on 'After the QCF: a new qualifications framework': <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework>. Specific information on the analysis of the consultation: Ofqual (2015). *Analysis of responses to our consultation 'After the QCF: a new qualifications framework'* (Ofqual/15/5770):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461400/analysis-of-responses-to-our-consultation-after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework.pdf

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹⁵⁾

There are a number of routes through which learners can have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated in England and Northern Ireland. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is used in relation to formal, regulated qualifications. In vocational education, RPL is mainly used to tailor the learning offer; in higher education (HE), it can be used for access, exemption and award. In England, progress and achievement in non-regulated learning (non-accredited learning) can be recognised through a five-stage process known as RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement), though this does not lead to any form of certification. National vocational qualifications (NVQs) offer an opportunity to validate workplace learning. They are aimed mainly at people in work and lead to a nationally recognised qualification, proving the ability to perform an occupation to a nationally recognised occupation standard. There are also separate validation initiatives in the third sector. However, there is no system in place to coordinate validation activities taking place in the different sectors.

There is no specific national strategy devoted to RPL but it is referenced in both the Skills Funding Agency and Ofqual policies for funding and qualifications, respectively. This means that the actual offer of RPL depends on the awarding organisations and providers themselves. The process is designed to be self-governing and allow for RPL validation where it is relevant, but not to impose an overly rigid model on those who deliver qualifications. The advantage is that each validation process, and even each individual procedure of validation, can be tailored to the learner(s) in question; the potential disadvantage is that, without a greater drive at national level, it is likely that the numbers of people actually benefiting from RPL opportunities will remain low.

Where qualifications are awarded through RPL, these are the same as those earned through formal learning opportunities, although it may not be possible to achieve the same graded outcomes; instead, the outcomes of RPL are either 'pass' or 'fail'. As such, there is no question of whether the outcomes of validation are 'trusted' by stakeholders and in society, since they are the same outcomes.

⁽¹⁵⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

There is no data to show the extent to which RPL takes place in England and Northern Ireland, but it is thought that, in practice, it is relatively small-scale. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that for vocational qualifications (referring here mainly to regulated qualifications), it is generally accepted practice to assess a learner to determine the training s/he requires to achieve a qualification. This process of initial assessment, leading to a tailored learning opportunity, is not generally referred to or understood as a specific process of RPL but, where it happens, it is a recognised practice and leads to the discounting of funding so that government only pays for the activity that is delivered. In the higher education (HE) sector, RPL is more commonly used for access into university programmes; data is not collected to show the extent to which this takes place. For the application of RPL to increase, further support and awareness-raising amongst providers and other practitioners involved in working with learners would be needed. This includes resources in terms of staff numbers and staff development, as well as a funding methodology which supports the process and makes it a viable option for providers to offer.

NQF implementation

Three different qualifications frameworks were operational in England and Northern Ireland until October 2015: the qualifications and credit framework (QCF), the national qualifications framework (NQF), and the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ). After extensive consultation throughout 2014 and 2015, and following a review of the QCF ⁽¹⁶⁾, Ofqual – the qualifications regulator – withdrew the regulatory arrangements for the QCF and introduced the regulated qualifications framework (RQF). The RQF is a simple, descriptive framework which requires all regulated qualifications to have a level and size. It is

⁽¹⁶⁾ Ofqual (2014). *A consultation on withdrawing the regulatory arrangements for the qualifications and credit framework* (Ofqual/14/5490):
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381547/2014-07-24-a-consultation-on-withdrawing-the-regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qualifications-and-credit-framework.pdf

supported by Ofqual's General conditions of recognition ⁽¹⁷⁾ and statutory guidance ⁽¹⁸⁾.

A total of two years is foreseen for the full implementation of the RQF. The operational activities closely associated with framework implementation include: accreditation of certain types of qualifications; auditing of awarding organisations against regulatory requirements, including their use of framework level descriptors and the way they describe the size of their qualifications; recognition of awarding organisations to offer certain types of qualifications; and policy development ⁽¹⁹⁾. All qualifications registered in the framework are required to have total qualification time assigned by the end of 2017.

Ofqual's work on qualifications is promoted through its website and publications ⁽²⁰⁾, and the framework level is displayed on all certificates for qualifications referenced to the framework ⁽²¹⁾. Except for a few cases, EQF levels are generally not displayed on certificates and there are currently no plans to introduce this requirement. There is no requirement for issuing certificate and diploma supplements for qualifications regulated by Ofqual. The EQF level is, however, displayed along with the RQF level for each qualification in the register of regulated qualifications ⁽²²⁾. The register includes GCSE, A level, AS level and vocational qualifications from England and Northern Ireland. According to Ofqual ⁽²³⁾, knowledge of the framework among its users is not an end goal in itself. The aim is for users of qualifications to be aware of the nature of qualifications and the relationships between them, a goal that the framework supports. Most

⁽¹⁷⁾ Ofqual (2016). *General conditions of recognition* (Ofqual/16/6023):
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/529394/general-conditions-of-recognition-june-2016.pdf

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ofqual (2016). *Guidance to the general conditions of recognition* (Ofqual/16/6068):
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538339/guidance-to-the-general-conditions-of-recognition-July_2016.pdf

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

⁽²⁰⁾ Ofqual 'postcards' outlining the work Ofqual is doing, with an emphasis on current reforms to qualifications in England:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/your-qualification-our-regulation-gcse-as-and-a-level-reforms>

⁽²¹⁾ Across England, Wales and Northern Ireland approximately 15.5 million certificates are issued annually. All of these have a national framework level displayed.

⁽²²⁾ Register of regulated qualifications: <http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Qualification>

⁽²³⁾ Cedefop (2015) *Survey on the Sustainability and Visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

students become aware of the qualifications framework through their school, course provider or self-directed research.

Referencing to the EQF

The QCF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency et al., 2010).

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 were consistent with the FHEQ, an implicit and indirect link was established.

The replacement of the QCF and NQF with the RQF means that the UK referencing report, for England and Northern Ireland, is outdated. An update is being planned but it is not clear when (and if) this will go ahead.

Important lessons and future plans

The changes introduced in England and Northern Ireland in the past couple of years aimed to increase the validity, flexibility and value of regulated qualifications. The review of the QCF, and the related public consultations in 2014 and 2015, brought agreement that the rules governing the design of qualifications should be abandoned, devolving responsibility for qualification design to awarding organisations and learning providers. At the same time, the transparency function of the framework was maintained in the newly introduced RQF. The updated General conditions of recognition, that all awarding organisations have to comply with, are outcome-focused: they focus on what the awarding bodies and their qualifications should achieve, and not how they should achieve it. The key requirements of the RQF are that the size and the level of all regulated qualifications are described in a consistent way ⁽²⁴⁾.

⁽²⁴⁾ Ofqual (2015). *Withdrawing the qualifications and credit framework and introducing the regulated qualifications framework: regulatory impact assessment: summary of analysis* (Ofqual/15/5776):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470056/withdrawing-the-qcf-and-introducing-the-rqf-impact-assessment-summary.pdf

Awarding organisations are expected to review their existing qualifications to ensure that they have a correct total qualification time by the end of 2017. For many qualifications this process can be addressed as part of their existing review cycle as more than 75% have their review date between 2015 and 2017 ⁽²⁵⁾.

The introduction of the RQF could be interpreted as a change in approach in line with the trends in NQF development in other European countries: a move towards comprehensive frameworks, less prescriptive in nature, and with a strong role of communication, as opposed to regulation.

Qualifications frameworks have existed for a number of years in England and Northern Ireland, and it is expected that the RQF will remain a permanent feature of the skills and education system in England. The country has a qualifications market with a diverse range of qualifications for users to choose from, and the RQF provides a good basis for understanding the relationship between them ⁽²⁶⁾.

Regulated qualifications framework (RQF) for England and Northern Ireland and FHEQ

Qualifications levels	Qualification types	EQF Levels (*)
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • doctorate, for example doctor of philosophy (PhD or DPhil) • level 8 award • level 8 certificate • level 8 diploma 	8

⁽²⁵⁾ Ibid.

⁽²⁶⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

Qualifications levels	Qualification types	EQF Levels (*)
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> integrated master degree, for example master of engineering (MEng) level 7 award level 7 certificate level 7 diploma level 7 NVQ master degree, for example master of arts (MA), master of science (MSc) postgraduate certificate postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) postgraduate diploma 	7
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> degree apprenticeship degree with honours - for example bachelor of the arts (BA) honours, bachelor of science (BSc) honours graduate certificate graduate diploma 	6
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diploma of higher education (DipHE) foundation degree higher national diploma (HND) level 5 award level 5 certificate level 5 diploma level 5 NVQ 	5
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> certificate of higher education (CertHE) higher apprenticeship higher national certificate (HNC) level 4 award level 4 certificate level 4 diploma level 4 NVQ 	5
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A level - grade A, B, C, D or E access to higher education diploma advanced apprenticeship applied general AS level international Baccalaureate diploma level 3 award level 3 certificate level 3 diploma level 3 ESOL level 3 national certificate level 3 national diploma level 3 NVQ music grades 6, 7 and 8 tech level 	4

Qualifications levels	Qualification types	EQF Levels (*)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSE - grade 1 • GCSE - grade A*, A, B or C • intermediate apprenticeship • level 2 award • level 2 certificate • level 2 diploma • level 2 ESOL • level 2 essential skills • level 2 functional skills • level 2 national certificate • level 2 national diploma • level 2 NVQ • music grades 4 and 5 • level - grade A, B or C 	3
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first certificate • GCSE - grade D, E, F or G • level 1 award • level 1 certificate • level 1 diploma • level 1 ESOL • level 1 essential skills • level 1 functional skills • level 1 national vocational qualification (NVQ) • music grades 1, 2 and 3 	2
Entry level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entry level award • entry level certificate (ELC) • entry level diploma • entry level English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) • entry level essential skills • entry level functional skills • skills for life 	1

(*) These levels are indicative as the 2010 referencing report referred to the QCF, not the RQF. The FHEQ is not referenced to the EQF.

Source: UK Government, education and learning web page: What qualification levels mean: <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

Further sources of information

Ofqual acts as EQF national coordination point:
<http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/office-of-qualifications-and-examinations-regulation-ofqual.html>

The Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Northern Ireland acts as national coordination point for Northern Ireland:
<http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/>

List of abbreviations

CQFW	credit and qualifications framework of Wales
EQF	European qualifications framework
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
FHEQ	framework for higher education qualifications
GCSE	general certificate of secondary education
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

References

- European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory for validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: UK England and Northern Ireland*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory#country>
- Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency et al. (2010). *Report: referencing the qualifications frameworks of the United Kingdom to the European qualifications framework*. http://scqf.org.uk/content/files/europe/QFUK_Joint_Report_-_Updated_March_2010.pdf