

## The United Kingdom

### European inventory on NQF 2018

The UK education and training system performs relatively well according to most EU 2020 benchmarks. Participation of children aged four and above in early childhood education and care has reached 100% and student basic skills are at a high and stable level. The percentage of 15-year-olds with underachievement in reading, mathematics and science is below the EU average (17.9%, 21.9% and, respectively, 17.4% in 2015). The percentage of students who leave school early has been decreasing and has reached the EU average (10.6% in 2017); unlike in most EU countries, it is higher among native students than among those born outside the UK. The employment rates of recent graduates are above EU averages for all levels of qualification. One of the main challenges in the school system is the availability and retention of teachers; the government has increased support for training, recruiting and retaining teachers in all parts of the UK. The tertiary educational attainment rate is among the highest in the EU (48.3% in 2017), despite concerns around the high levels of student debt. Two-year 'accelerated' undergraduate degrees have been proposed as a solution to reduce the time required to obtain a degree and thus reduce university costs. Participation in study mobility programmes abroad is relatively low at 3.2% of total graduates in 2016 (compared to 9% the EU average); 50% of it has been as part of EU programmes. Initiatives to develop vocational education and training (VET) are being implemented in all parts of the UK. Efforts are focused on developing apprenticeship programmes, improving the quality of provision, the attractiveness of VET and engagement with STEM subjects. Participation in upper secondary VET has increased over recent years across the UK. Mismatches in terms of qualification level and field of study, on the one hand, and job profile on the other hand are higher compared to the EU average. Adult participation in lifelong learning is above the EU average, at 14.3% in 2017, but it has been declining. Various policy measures and initiatives in all parts of the UK aim to support retraining and upskilling of individuals across the lifespan (European Commission, 2018).

Starting in the 1980s, several qualifications frameworks were developed in the UK, partly reflecting the fact that education and qualifications policy has been devolved to the four UK nations, and partly reflecting the different needs and interests of subsectors of education and training. Between 2008 and 2015, five qualifications frameworks were operational in parallel: the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; the national qualifications framework (NQF); the qualifications and credit framework

(QCF); the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS), the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), of which the FQHEIS is a constituent part; and the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW), of which the FHEQ is a constituent part. The Scottish qualifications framework and the credit and qualifications framework of Wales 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 <sup>(1)</sup>. The RQF covers all general and vocational qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) <sup>(2)</sup> and by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA Regulation) <sup>(3)</sup>. The most significant change introduced by the RQF is the lifting of standardised requirements for the design of qualifications. RQF is a descriptive framework and 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 addressed this problem.

The Scottish and Welsh frameworks contrast developments in England and Northern Ireland, operating as comprehensive frameworks and setting themselves 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 abolition of the QCF has influenced the CQFW: starting from 2015, all regulated qualifications in Wales refer to the new RQF level descriptors, while non-regulated qualifications (the lifelong learning pillar) continue to refer to the original CQFW descriptors. The Scottish framework, in contrast, is considered a key tool for stakeholders and is increasingly emerging as the most visible and consistent of the UK frameworks.

---

<sup>(1)</sup> Relevant documents: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework>

<sup>(2)</sup> Ofqual: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about>

<sup>(3)</sup> CCEA: [http://ccea.org.uk/about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do](http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do)

## 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 general education qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) <sup>(4)</sup> in England and the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA) <sup>(5)</sup> in Northern Ireland. It also allows for the inclusion of qualifications developed for the third sector (community and voluntary sector). The framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) covers higher education qualifications awarded by organisations with degree awarding powers, at levels 4 to 8.

The RQF uses the same eight levels (plus three entry levels) as the former QCF. Levels 4 to 8 of the RQF are comparable to those in the 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. The QCF was intended to be a transformational framework, with a clear regulatory role in the design and accreditation of qualifications; however, it did not always contribute to the development of fit-for-purpose qualifications. The role of the RQF is to provide a transparent description of existing qualifications, not to regulate them.

The QCF was referenced to the EQF in February 2010, as a part of the overall UK referencing process. The RQF levels have now been mapped to the EQF levels and the outcomes were the same as those in the 2010 referencing exercise. The FHEQ was self-certified to the QF-EHEA in 2008, and it will be formally referenced to the EQF in 2019. An updated referencing report covering both the RQF and the FHEQ is planned for 2019.

---

<sup>(4)</sup> Ofqual: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about>

<sup>(5)</sup> CCEA: [http://ccea.org.uk/about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do](http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do)

## Policy objectives

The (now abolished) QCF had been formally introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2008 as part of the UK vocational qualifications reform programme with four official aims (Ofqual, 2008):

- (a) ensure a wider range of achievements can be recognised within a more inclusive framework;
- (b) establish a framework that is more responsive to individual and employer needs;
- (c) establish a simpler qualifications framework that is easier for all users to understand;
- (d) reduce the burden of bureaucracy in the accreditation and assessment of qualifications.

An Ofqual review in 2013-14 of how the QCF rules were working found that they did not, in all cases, support the design of good qualifications. It concluded (Ofqual, 2014):

- (a) the QCF provided a structure within which the relative size and value of qualifications could be expressed using consistent terminology;
- (b) the level structure worked well and the eight levels and three entry levels were suggested to be kept;
- (c) the qualifications framework made it possible to explain to learners how qualifications related to each other.

While the transparency functions of the QCF were seen as positive, its regulatory role was criticised (Ofqual, 2014):

- (a) though the structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer, in practice there were very low levels of take-up for credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit system were not realised;
- (b) unit sharing<sup>(6)</sup> did not contribute to reducing the number of qualifications; after the introduction of the QCF, the number of qualifications increased;
- (c) there was a feeling that the requirements for awarding organisations to unit share damaged innovation and development;

---

<sup>(6)</sup> 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 intended to be available in a 'unit bank' to be used as building blocks by awarding organisations. Ofqual reported that organisations were reluctant to engage in the development of these shared units and that this lack of commitment had a negative impact on development and innovation.

- (d) the regulatory arrangements imposed an approach to assessment which required students to satisfy all assessment criteria; this led to over-assessment;
- (e) the overall validity of qualifications was not sufficiently addressed; the focus on unit assessment drew attention away from overall validity.

As a result, and as part of a policy to devolve responsibility to awarding organisations and learning providers, the new RQF was introduced (after public consultation) as a simple, descriptive framework aiming to help individuals understand better how qualifications relate to each other. It aims to achieve transparency of qualifications by setting consistent measures of size (how long, typically, a learner takes to study and be assessed for a qualification) and level of difficulty.

The new framework replaces the QCF and the NQF and includes all qualifications regulated by Ofqual in England and CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland. The existing Ofqual handbook *General conditions of recognition* <sup>(7)</sup> sets a range of requirements and principles for qualifications and replaces the regulatory functions previously forming part of the QCF. 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' <sup>(8)</sup>.

The introduction of the RQF reflects experiences gained with the QCF: it retains key transparency functions but plays a limited role in regulation of qualifications. The framework is now an integrated part of the regulated qualification system in England and Northern Ireland, aiming to ensure access, transfer and progression, validation of prior learning and quality assurance. Its design aims to allow learners of all abilities to access qualifications, from entry level to level 8. The general conditions of recognition require awarding organisations to offer qualifications that have progression routes and include a condition on the recognition of prior learning, providing a mechanism for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

---

<sup>(7)</sup> Ofqual (2017). *General conditions of recognition*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook>

<sup>(8)</sup> 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>

## Levels and use of learning outcomes

The RQF is based on the following principles (Ofqual, 2015):

- (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;
- (c) all qualifications registered in the framework are assigned a measure of size, expressed in total qualification time (TQT) and guided learning hours (GLH);
- (d) if recognition of prior learning (RPL) is allowed, awarding organisations are required to have and publish a policy on it;
- (e) allocation of credits to qualifications is no longer compulsory.

The RQF includes an entry level (subdivided into entry 1 to 3) and levels 1 to 8. A level can be assigned to a qualification and to a component of a qualification using level descriptors. It is also possible to assign more than one level to a qualification, provided that there is a clear rationale and ‘the range of achievement recognised by the qualification is sufficient to span more than one level’ (Ofqual, 2017) <sup>(9)</sup>. Levels 4 to 8 are consistent with the levels of the FHEQ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The level descriptors <sup>(10)</sup> are expressed in terms of learning outcomes and provide a general, shared understanding of learning and achievement at each of the eight levels and three entry levels. They are designed to be used across a wide range of learning contexts, and many have an ‘and/or’ construction indicating knowledge and skills associated with the study of a subject or in preparation for a job. The RQF level descriptors build on, but simplify, the descriptors used by the former QCF and the EQF. While the QCF operated with three categories – knowledge and understanding; application and action; autonomy and accountability – the RQF operates with only two: knowledge and understanding; and skills. The category for ‘autonomy and accountability’ was not included in the RQF due to the difficulty associated with aligning knowledge

---

<sup>(9)</sup> See Section E of Ofqual handbook: Design and development of qualifications:  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications>

<sup>(10)</sup> The level descriptors are available in the Ofqual handbook:  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications#level-descriptors>

and/or skills with autonomy and accountability in some job roles. This is illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1. **Descriptors for level 1 of the RQF**

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder....)	Skills descriptor (the holder can....)
Level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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</li> <li>• is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined routine tasks and procedures</li> <li>• Select and use relevant information</li> <li>• Identify whether actions have been effective</li> </ul>

Source: OFQAL, 2017.

‘Size’ in the RQF refers to the estimated total amount of time it could typically take to study and be assessed for a qualification. Awarding organisations must indicate the total qualification time (TQT) and guided learning hours (GLH) for all qualifications <sup>(1)</sup>. The concept of ‘guided learning hours’ (GLH) <sup>(2)</sup> refers to all 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.

The RQF downplays the role of 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.

England and Northern Ireland have had a long history of using the learning outcomes approach even before the introduction of the QCF and RQF. Under the QCF, awarding organisations for vocational qualifications were required to design qualifications based on units of learning outcomes, credits and assessment criteria, and to share qualification units by submitting them to a ‘unit bank’. A

<sup>(1)</sup> Currently, this condition does not apply to GCSEs, GCE AS and A levels; Ofqual-regulated apprenticeship end-point assessments; and certain qualifications undergoing withdrawal (Ofqual, 2017).

<sup>(2)</sup> In the RQF, total qualification time (TQT) replaced the notional learning time that was used in the QCF, while the concept of guided learning hours (GLH) from the QCF was maintained.

major staff development programme trained key stakeholders in the writing of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. While the regulatory design rules for qualifications were lifted with the introduction of the RQF, and the ‘unit bank’ was dissolved, awarding organisations continue to develop qualifications using units, learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and to build larger qualifications from smaller ones. This enables the accumulation of units of learning outcomes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

## Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The QCF had been jointly developed, tested and implemented by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England; the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland; and the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales. These regulatory bodies were responsible for regulating qualifications within the QCF and NQF. When the QCA was disbanded following the change of government in 2011, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) took over the main responsibility for qualifications and framework developments in England; since 2015 it has been responsible for the implementation of the RQF. Set up in April 2010 under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009<sup>(13)</sup> as a non-ministerial government department reporting directly to the Parliament, Ofqual is the regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England and, until 2016, it was also the regulator of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. In May 2016, CCEA Regulation took over the regulation of all qualifications awarded in Northern Ireland. Ofqual and CCEA Regulation host the EQF respective national coordination points (EQF NCPs) in England and Northern Ireland.

The introduction of the RQF took into account opinions from key stakeholders responding to two public consultations on the QCF and its withdrawal in 2014<sup>(14)</sup> and in 2015<sup>(15)</sup>. A total of 119 responses were registered

---

<sup>(13)</sup> The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009:  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/contents>

<sup>(14)</sup> Relevant documents at:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/withdrawing-qcf-regulatory-arrangements>

<sup>(15)</sup> Relevant documents, including an analysis of the responses, are available at:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework>.

in the latter: 104 from awarding organisations and 15 from individuals, with each response carrying equal weight. The transition from the QCF to the RQF has also involved a high degree of consultation, collaboration and communication between a range of stakeholders (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018):

- (a) the qualifications regulators and the recognised awarding organisations;
- (b) the recognised awarding organisations and approved centres/providers (schools, further education colleges, training organisations);
- (c) the awarding organisations and employer and sector organisations involved in the development of national occupational standards and qualifications;
- (d) awarding organisations and the third sector.

Awarding organisations who want to offer regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland must be recognised by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation (respectively) and meet the regulators' general criteria for recognition. Once recognised, awarding organisations can submit qualifications that comply with the general conditions for recognition to the Ofqual *Register of regulated qualifications* <sup>(16)</sup>.

Responsibility for the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) lies with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), a registered charity. QAA is included in the European quality assurance register for higher education (EQAR) and in a 2018 assessment by the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), it was found to be in full compliance with all European Standards and Guidelines (2015) criteria.

Prior to 2017, sector skills councils (SSCs) <sup>(17)</sup> were involved in the development of qualifications in the UK through their work on national occupational standards (NOS) underpinning national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQs). From 2016-17, skills policy in England has shifted away from national occupational standards <sup>(18)</sup>. Consequently, the SSCs and sector bodies no longer have a role in English

---

<sup>(16)</sup> Ofqual's *Register of regulated qualifications*: [www.register.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.register.ofqual.gov.uk)

<sup>(17)</sup> Sector skills councils (SSCs) are independent, employer-led organisations in specific economic sectors; currently there are 15 SSCs in the UK.

<sup>(18)</sup> Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, however, have retained NOS as the basis for work-based and vocational qualifications and apprenticeships. Skills Development Scotland has taken over the management of NOS and related activity on an interim basis, on behalf of the devolved administrations. The contents of the NOS database remain publicly available and employers throughout the UK can continue to use NOS if they so choose, although they are not a mandatory requirement in England for either qualifications or apprenticeships.

apprenticeship development and the capacity of these organisations has dramatically reduced. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which managed and maintained the UK NOS database and commissioned SSCs and sector bodies to develop and update UK NOS, closed in March 2017. The new Institute for Apprenticeships was established in England to ensure high-quality apprenticeship standards.

## Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways <sup>(19)</sup>

While there is no specific national strategy devoted to the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in England and Northern Ireland, and no system to coordinate validation activities taking place in the different sectors, there are a number of routes through which learners can have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated.

The *General conditions for recognition* of both Ofqual and CCEA regulation refer to recognition of prior learning (RPL) in relation to formal, regulated qualifications included in the RQF. RPL is mainly used for initial assessment of a learner to tailor the learning offer; this is a generally accepted practice leading to an amendment to the requirements that a learner must satisfy before assessment or before award, and to a reduction of funding so that only the activities that are delivered are paid for. Awarding organisations offering RPL in this context are required to set out and publish their RPL policy following the guidance to the *General conditions for recognition* (Ofqual, 2017). There is also a long tradition of recognising prior learning in higher education. RPL is referred to in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code for higher education <sup>(20)</sup>, and it can be used for access to university programmes, exemption and award. It is often linked to the award of credits and varies both across and within higher education institutions. The *Quality code* brought together RPL and assessment of formal learning in one chapter, aiming to demonstrate that both share common quality

---

<sup>(19)</sup> This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

<sup>(20)</sup> The QAA Quality Code for higher education was introduced in the academic year 2012/13 and applies to England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. After extensive revision, a new Quality Code was published in March 2018: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>.

assurance principles. However, data is not collected to show the extent to which RPL takes place. In England, progress and achievement in non-regulated learning (mainly adult and community learning) can be recognised through a five-stage process, complementary to RPL, known as RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning). Using RARPA standards is mandatory for non-regulated training provision funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), but the system is now also used by some providers offering accredited/regulated learning. Though this does not lead to any form of certification, it is a method of quality assurance of non-regulated learning provision and supports the transition from non-formal to formal learning. RPL and RARPA are referred to in the ESFA's funding rules which apply in England to providers from across the private and third sectors.

On the labour market, national vocational qualifications (NVQs) are work-related, outcomes-based, competence-oriented qualifications based on national occupational standards. They can offer people in work or in apprenticeship an opportunity to validate workplace learning. Assessment is through evidence of performance against work-related tasks, rather than formal examinations, and there are no time limits for completion of NVQs, no age limits and no special entry requirements. However, it has been noted that the NVQ system has promoted VNFIL only to a limited extent, partly because RPL is perceived as costly and NVQ learning outcomes are too narrowly defined. There are also separate validation initiatives in the third sector <sup>(21)</sup>.

One strength of the current RPL arrangements in England and Northern Ireland is the link to the RQF, allowing non-formal and informal learning to be converted into a recognised qualification with real currency. In addition, the qualifications regulator has oversight of (and provides quality assurance of) qualifications acquired via RPL. Qualifications awarded through RPL (and the standards used) 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'. Consequently, 'there is no question of whether the outcomes of validation are 'trusted' by stakeholders and in society, since they are the same outcomes' (European Commission et al, forthcoming).

---

<sup>(21)</sup> An example is the Soft outcomes universal learning (SOUL) record® (<https://soulrecord.org>), a toolkit using questionnaires and worksheets to collate data on soft outcome progression. It is used by organisations in the third sector for quality reviews and to support funding applications (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

However, there is no single centralised policy on RPL or VNFIL provision; responsibility for deciding on and implementing validation arrangements has been devolved to the awarding organisations <sup>(22)</sup> and learning providers. 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. Some argue that this way of validation can better respond to changes in the labour market. The potential disadvantage is that, without a greater drive at national level, and without a centralised system for identifying where RPL is available or if a particular qualification can be obtained via RPL, it is likely that the number of people actually benefiting from RPL opportunities will remain low. 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.

For the use 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

The RQF was introduced in October 2015 after extensive consultation with key stakeholders. It replaced the NQF and the QCF and it covers all regulated qualifications from general and vocational education in England and Northern Ireland <sup>(23)</sup>. The RQF has now reached an operational stage and forms an integrated part of the regulated qualifications system.

RQF implementation is supported by the *General conditions of recognition and statutory guidance* (Ofqual, 2017), which ensure the quality assurance of all qualifications entering the RQF from a development, delivery and awarding/certification perspective. Awarding organisations that want to offer regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland must meet the general

---

<sup>(22)</sup> Ofqual and CCEA Regulation recognise 155 and, respectively, 99 awarding organisations which can award credits and qualifications in England and Northern Ireland.

<sup>(23)</sup> There are 17 783 and 11 759 regulated qualifications available in England and Northern Ireland, respectively (January 2019).

criteria for recognition and be recognised by the qualifications regulators (Ofqual and CCEA Regulation). Once recognised, awarding organisations can submit qualifications compliant with the *General conditions of recognition* to the Ofqual *Register of regulated qualifications* <sup>(24)</sup>. All qualifications entered into the register become part of the RQF. The *General conditions of recognition* require awarding organisations to take a consistent approach to determining the level and describing the size of regulated qualifications. All qualifications registered in the framework were required to have total qualification time assigned by the end of 2017.

Several operational activities were closely associated with RQF implementation: 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 qualification; and policy development <sup>(25)</sup>.

The transition from the QCF to the RQF was found to be less challenging than the implementation of the QCF. It did not require radical overhaul of all qualifications, as with the introduction of the QCF, and the QCF regulatory requirements were not replaced with another set of prescriptive rules. The *General conditions of recognition* were updated, and criteria and guidance, and a transition timetable, were developed by Ofqual and published widely for awarding organisations to ensure compliance with the new RQF conditions. There have been key challenges in implementing the RQF: managing changes smoothly in a planned and phased transition process with realistic timescales; coordinating and managing communications with awarding organisations; and managing the technical aspects of transition, particularly IT changes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The Ofqual *Register of regulated qualifications* <sup>(26)</sup> has been set up and now includes qualifications from general education up to RQF level 3 (EQF level 4) and VET qualifications (vocational and occupational) ranging from entry level to level 8. The EQF level is displayed along with the RQF level for each qualification in the register. The RQF level is indicated on qualification documents <sup>(27)</sup> and

---

<sup>(24)</sup> The Ofqual *Register of regulated qualifications*: [www.register.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.register.ofqual.gov.uk)

<sup>(25)</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

<sup>(26)</sup> Ofqual *Register of regulated qualifications*: [www.register.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.register.ofqual.gov.uk)

<sup>(27)</sup> In the *General conditions of recognition* there is a condition on 'Requirements on qualification titling' which specifies that RQF levels must be included in the

Europass certificate supplements for all qualifications included in the framework; the indication of the EQF level is optional, at the decision of awarding organisations. A number of surveys were conducted among awarding organisations and employers to gauge interest in the inclusion of EQF levels on learner qualification documents but this was found not to be necessary (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Ofqual and CCEA Regulation work on qualifications and on the RQF is promoted through their websites, publications, web-based leaflets<sup>(28)</sup>, consultations and presentations. The regulators also communicate regularly with awarding organisations through email circulars, the Federation of Awarding Bodies, the regulators' annual conference, and attendance at the awarding organisations' forums and conferences. The prioritised target groups are recognised awarding organisations, fellow regulators in Wales and Scotland, and relevant government departments and funding agencies. When the QCF was withdrawn in 2015, a significant communications campaign took place to ensure the general public had access to clear information as required<sup>(29)</sup>. With the RQF in operation, Ofqual ensures information availability to stakeholders. It is the responsibility of awarding organisations to communicate with their approved centres/providers and with employers, and it is the centres'/providers' responsibility to communicate with learners, employers and parents.

Evaluation of the RQF has not yet been undertaken. It is estimated that there is a good level of awareness and use of the framework among education

---

qualification title in the qualifications register, in all awarding organisation documentation and on learner qualification certificates.

<sup>(28)</sup> Such as:

Ofqual 'postcards' outlining Ofqual's work, 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>

Ofqual's publication describing the new RQF: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulated-qualifications-framework-a-postcard>

Ofqual handbook: *General conditions of recognition*: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook>

CCEA's website: <http://ccea.org.uk/qualifications>

<sup>(29)</sup> This took place mainly via the recognised awarding organisations. For example, Ofqual held a public consultation about the rules and guidance that should be in place following the removal of the QCF; there were 119 responses – 104 from awarding organisations, and 15 from individuals – with each response carrying equal weight.

and training institutions and providers, and recognition authorities and bodies. Knowledge and use of the RQF is more limited among labour market stakeholders and guidance and counselling practitioners. While the framework itself is little known by the general public, there are pockets of good awareness and understanding of RQF levels and what they refer to. For example, GCSEs and A levels are widely understood in their own right and they are not widely referred to as L1/2/3 qualifications, but their vocational and technical alternatives are generally referred to by learners and employers using the RQF level. Levels are widely used in school and college prospectuses, often in job advertisements and job descriptions, and qualification level requirements are sometimes included in licences to practise and professional requirements.

The influence of the RQF (and its predecessor QCF) has been noted in several areas. The QCF played a major role in the redesign of vocational qualifications using units of learning outcomes and assessment criteria and being assigned a QCF level and credit value. Despite the withdrawal of the QCF rules, awarding organisations continue to design qualifications using units, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The RQF has also helped increase permeability of the education and training system, strengthening dialogue and cooperation between sectors and institutions. In Northern Ireland, regulated VET qualifications (referred to as professional and technical qualifications), which become part of the RQF, are required to have support from qualification users (providers, employers and sector bodies). These bodies and the awarding organisations must work cooperatively on the review and renewal of national occupational standards for work-based RQF qualifications and Northern Ireland apprenticeship programmes. Levels 4 to 8 of the RQF are comparable to levels 4 to 8 of the FHEQ, which reduces barriers between education and training sectors, allowing learners to move between pathways at these levels. The RQF and the *General conditions of recognition* play an important role in parity of esteem between VET and academic qualifications, as both types appear at all levels of the framework and they can only enter the RQF if they are regulated and subject to rigorous quality assurance measures. The RQF level descriptors can also be used to provide a broad comparison of foreign qualifications; UK-Naric takes account of the RQF levels in their recognition work. The UK and Irish EQF NCP, regulators and quality assurance bodies produce a broad comparison leaflet<sup>(30)</sup> which shows level-to-level comparisons in the UK and Ireland, and

---

<sup>(30)</sup> Ofqual et al. (2017). *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*. This leaflet is updated regularly and can be

indicates how UK and Irish qualifications frameworks relate to qualifications frameworks in Europe.

## Referencing to the EQF

The QCF had been referenced to the EQF in February 2010 as a part of the overall UK referencing process (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency et al., 2010). An update on developments in England and Northern Ireland was presented in the EQF advisory group in February 2019, and an updated referencing report to reference the RQF and FHEQ<sup>(31)</sup> to the EQF is planned to be presented in June 2019. It will cover the transition from the QCF to the RQF, changes in the design, content and assessment of apprenticeships, along with the introduction of degree apprenticeships in England and the introduction of higher apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

## Important lessons and future plans

The changes introduced in England and Northern Ireland in recent years aimed to increase the validity, flexibility and value of regulated qualifications. The review of the QCF identified a number of problems with the *Regulatory arrangements for the qualifications and credit framework*<sup>(32)</sup> and the way in which they affected qualification design, specifically (Ofqual, 2014):

- (a) the structure of the QCF had been designed to support credit transfer; in practice, there were very low levels of take-up of credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit-based system were not realised;
- (b) unit sharing did not have the desired effect of reducing the number of vocational qualifications; there were over 10,000 more qualifications than in 2008 when the QCF regulatory arrangements were launched;

---

accessed at:

[http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications\\_can\\_cross\\_Boundaries.pdf](http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications_can_cross_Boundaries.pdf)

<sup>(31)</sup> The FHEQ was self-certified to the QF-EHEA in 2008, but it was not referenced to the EQF.

<sup>(32)</sup> Ofqual (2008). *Regulatory arrangements for the qualifications and credit framework*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf)

- (c) there was a strong feeling that the requirement to unit share had significantly damaged qualification innovation and development;
- (d) the *Regulatory arrangements for the QCF* imposed a mastery approach to assessment, which required students to satisfy all of the assessment criteria as evidence that they met all of the learning outcomes; this worked against the use of compensation and could lead to over-assessment at the unit level;
- (e) the unit-level focus on assessment was not easily compatible with synoptic and end-point assessment which could be effective forms of assessment of some vocational qualifications;
- (f) there was confusion about vocational qualifications which were not developed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the QCF* and about what this meant for qualifications frameworks.

This, together with 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* (Ofqual 2017) focus on what the awarding bodies and their qualifications should achieve, and not on how they should achieve it. They are considered as a best practice quality assurance manual for qualification development, delivery and review. The key requirements of the RQF are that the size and the level of all regulated qualifications are described in a consistent way.

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 several years in England and Northern Ireland, and it is expected that the RQF will remain a permanent feature of the skills and education system. There is a diverse qualifications market with a range of qualifications for users to choose from, and the RQF provides a good basis for understanding the relationships between them <sup>(33)</sup>. While there is continued commitment to international portability of qualifications following the UK's exit from the EU <sup>(34)</sup>, the uncertainty around it is seen (October 2018) as the

---

<sup>(33)</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

<sup>(34)</sup> Ofqual and CCEA regulation (2019). *Referencing the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF*. Update to the EQF advisory group, January 2019.

most evident challenge for future RQF implementation (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

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

RQF levels	Qualification types	EQF levels (*)
8	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 8	8
7	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 7	7
6	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 6	6
5	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 5, Higher national diplomas (HND)	5
4	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 4, Higher national certificates (HNC)	5
3	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 3, GCE AS and A levels	4
2	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 2, GCSEs at grade A* – C and from 2017 grade 4-9 (England), Functional skills level 2 (England), Essential skills qualifications (NI)	3
1	Technical/Vocational qualifications level 1, GCSEs at grade D-G and from 2017 grade 3-1 (England), Functional skills level 1 (England), Essential skills qualifications (NI)	2
Entry level 3	Entry level certificates (sublevel 3), Functional skills entry level (England) (English, mathematics & ICT), Essential skills qualifications (NI)	1
Entry levels 1-2	Entry level certificates (sublevels 1 and 2)	-

(\*) The EQF levels are indicative, as the 2010 referencing report referred to the QCF, not the RQF. An updated referencing report will be available in 2019.

Source: Adapted from Ofqual; QAA; SCQF; CCEA Regulation; Welsh government & QQI (2017). *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*. [http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications\\_can\\_cross\\_Boundaries.pdf](http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications_can_cross_Boundaries.pdf)

### Main sources of information:

- The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) acts as EQF NCP for England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about>
- The Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Northern Ireland acts as EQF NCP for Northern Ireland: [http://ccea.org.uk/about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do](http://ccea.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do)
- *Register of regulated qualifications*: <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>
- QCA et al. (2010). *Referencing the qualifications frameworks of the United Kingdom to the European qualifications framework*  
<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/2011-05-16-uk-eqf-referencing-report.pdf>

## 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
FQHEIS	the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland
GCE A level	general certificate of education at advanced level
GCE AS level	general certificate of education at advanced subsidiary level
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
RQF	regulated qualifications framework
SCQF	Scottish credit and qualifications framework
SSCs	Sector skills councils
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics

SVQ	Scottish vocational qualifications
VET	vocational education and training

## References

[URLs accessed 1.3.2019]

- European Commission (2018). *Education and training monitor 2018: United Kingdom*. [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-united-kingdom\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-united-kingdom_en.pdf)
- European Commission and Cedefop (2018). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].
- European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming). *European inventory for validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: 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>
- Ofqual (2008). *Regulatory arrangements for the qualifications and credit framework*.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371294/2008-08-15-regulatory-arrangements-qcf-august08.pdf)
- 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/](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/)
- Ofqual (2015). *After the QCF: a new qualifications framework: decisions on conditions and guidance for the regulated qualifications framework (RQF)*.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/461401/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework-decisions-on-conditions-and-guidance-for-the-rqf.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461401/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework-decisions-on-conditions-and-guidance-for-the-rqf.pdf)
- Ofqual (2017). *General conditions of recognition*. Ofqual handbook.  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook>
- Ofqual et al. (2017). *Qualifications can cross boundaries: a guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*.  
[http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications\\_can\\_cross\\_Boundaries.pdf](http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/Qualifications_can_cross_Boundaries.pdf)
- Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency et al. (2010). *Report: referencing the qualifications frameworks of the United Kingdom to the European qualifications framework*.  
<https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/2011-05-16-uk-eqf-referencing-report.pdf>