

# Wales

## Introduction and context

The credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) was adopted in 2002 and launched in 2003. Its purpose is to act as an overarching structure to provide clarity for the existing education systems; it includes all formal and regulated qualifications (including higher education) as well as quality-assured lifelong learning (QALL). The framework has no regulatory functions, but helps to bring together the main stakeholders involved in regulating Welsh qualifications.

The CQFW is operational and can be seen as a second generation framework, departing from sector frameworks established from the 1990s onwards. Following evaluation of the CQFW in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014) <sup>(1)</sup> a number of changes have been introduced, partly reflecting the setting up of Qualifications Wales <sup>(2)</sup>, a new government body responsible for regulated qualifications (outside higher education). Changes were also introduced to the quality-assured lifelong learning pillar of the framework, seeking to clarify the way non-formal and informal learning is recognised.

Abolition of the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) in England and Northern Ireland has also influenced the CQFW. From 2015 all regulated qualifications will refer to the new Ofqual level descriptors introduced for the regulated qualifications framework (RQF) in England and Northern Ireland <sup>(3)</sup>. Non-regulated qualifications will continue to refer to the original CQFW descriptors.

## Policy objectives

The CQFW is seen as an 'enabling tool' in relation to Welsh Government's economic and skills policies and goals. It should therefore:

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- <sup>(1)</sup> See the relevant web page of the Welsh Government: <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/evaluation-impact-credit-qualifications-framework-wales/?lang=en>
  - <sup>(2)</sup> Welsh Government web page on qualifications and their regulation, including the establishment of Qualifications Wales: <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/?lang=en>.
  - <sup>(3)</sup> See chapter on UK England and Northern Ireland.

- (a) offer a national qualifications framework for learners in Wales of all ages and abilities;
- (b) provide a common currency for learning achievement;
- (c) support the recognition of credit and qualifications across all levels, enabling learners to progress;
- (d) support providers in articulating pathways of progression that are easily understood and are transferable and consistent within Europe and the wider international community.

The CQFW embraces three common principles:

- (a) expression of achievement as learning outcomes;
- (b) the demands made by that learning on the learner (level);
- (c) the volume of learning achievements (credit).

Together, these principles underpin all styles/types of learning in all sections of education and training. The CQFW is positioned as a key part of Wales' lifelong learning policy and strategy. The framework operates according to five key goals, to:

- (a) enable everyone to develop and maintain essential skills;
- (b) encourage people to become lifelong learners;
- (c) exploit the knowledge in business and education institutions;
- (d) encourage business and workers to gain new skills;
- (e) help people within their communities to develop new skills.

For formal education and training, the framework supports all recognised, credit-based learning within:

- (a) higher education;
- (b) regulated general and vocational qualifications.

The system for quality-assured lifelong learning (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. In the last few years much effort has been invested in putting this system of validation into practice. While enjoying some success, the number of individuals actually using this opportunity has been limited and a discussion on its future development continues (see below).

The CQFW can be considered an 'open framework' in the sense that its unit-based approach at the outset is oriented towards a multitude of 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.

## Levels and use of 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 programme and qualification.

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.

With effect from 1 December 2015, Qualifications Wales (which has oversight of the regulated pillar) adopted the revised Ofqual level descriptors following the withdrawal of the QCF in England (see chapter on UK England and Northern Ireland). These set out knowledge and skills at each level and are broadly the same as the CQFW knowledge and understanding descriptors. The category of ‘autonomy and accountability’ has been removed from regulated qualifications.

The Ofqual level descriptors adopted by Qualifications Wales apply to vocational and general qualifications within the regulated pillar only. All other learning must comply with the CQFW level descriptors (2009) which set out application/action and autonomy/accountability, as these categories remain important within the higher education and quality-assured lifelong learning pillars.

Table 1 shows how the 2009 descriptors have been structured and designed (level 1).

Table 1. **Structure and design of the 2009 descriptors (level 1)**

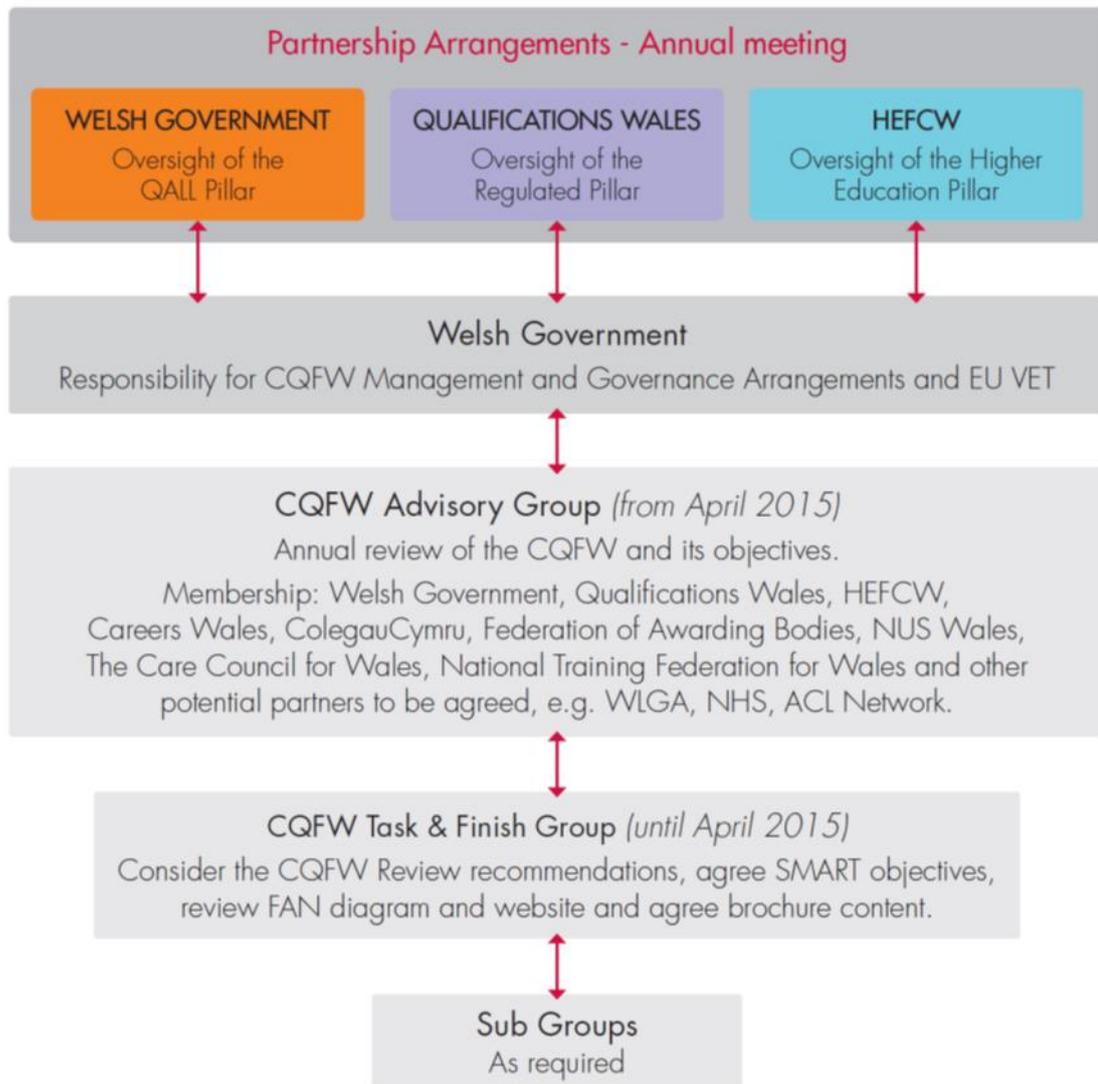
Level	Summary	Knowledge and understanding	Application and action	Autonomy and accountability
Level 1	Achievement at level 1 reflects the ability to use relevant knowledge, skills and procedures to complete routine tasks. It includes responsibility for completing tasks and procedures subject to direction or guidance.	Use knowledge of facts, procedures and ideas to complete well-defined routine tasks.  Be aware of information relevant to the area of study or work.	Complete well-defined routine tasks.  Use relevant skills and procedures.  Select and use relevant information.  Identify whether actions have been effective.	Take responsibility for completing tasks and procedures subject to direction or guidance as needed.

## Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) is managed by a strategic operational partnership comprising the Welsh Government, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Qualifications Wales.

The 2014 evaluation notes that the CQFW is particularly well established in certain sectors: higher education and adult and community learning. For other sectors, however, engagement was lower. Stakeholders generally perceived engagement with the framework to be low among employers and most learners, and that there is a 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 it is considered a useful information tool, providing coherent understanding of the Welsh qualifications system. Following the 2014 evaluation, the following governance structure has been applied for the CQFW:

Figure 1. CQFW governance structure



## Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways <sup>(4)</sup>

Non-formal learning can be recognised in a number of ways in Wales. First, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is possible for individuals using their previously acquired learning to obtain or access formal qualifications on the CQFW, including higher education (HE) and vocational qualifications. Access to higher education courses includes opportunities for recognition of prior learning. Second, the quality-assured lifelong learning (QALL) pillar of the CQFW is intended to recognise non-formal learning provision as a unit on the CQFW. Third, national vocational qualifications (NVQs) offer an opportunity to validate workplace learning.

Opportunities for RPL are developed from a sectoral perspective, with different approaches for VET, HE and adult learning. A bottom-up approach is taken, with awarding organisations and learning providers developing their own policies (and practices in the case of providers) for RPL. There are no systems to coordinate validation across the different sectors of learning in Wales and no sectors are given priority. The question of trust in the outcomes of RPL is not really an issue, since outcomes (access, award of credits/qualifications) are not usually different to those acquired by learners who have pursued a formal route; an exception is the case of Agored Cymru <sup>(5)</sup> qualifications, where certificates and/or credit transcripts awarded by Agored Cymru identify RPL credits specifically. However, the QALL pillar of the CQFW serves to increase trust in and recognition of non-formal learning provision, which is acknowledged through this pillar.

The CQFW is a potential enabler for validation in Wales. One of the main impacts identified by stakeholders is greater recognition of prior learning through the QALL pillar, with particular benefits for disadvantaged learner groups, helping to raise aspirations and promote progression opportunities. Stakeholders identified the flexibility created by the CQFW as a benefit and, through RPL, the

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<sup>(4)</sup> 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., forthcoming).

<sup>(5)</sup> Agored Cymru (<https://www.agored.cymru/>) is an awarding organisation approved to operate in the qualifications and credit framework. It creates nationally recognised, quality-assured qualifications and units across a diverse range of subjects.

framework is said to have helped employers and employees to avoid duplication of training.

Nevertheless, in Wales, as in the other countries of the UK, use of RPL remains at the discretion of individual providers. Data are not collected at national level, except in the HE sector, where they are only collected in relation to RPL provision (APEL <sup>(6)</sup> modules) and not in relation to access aided via RPL. Aside from this, evidence of the use of RPL can only be found in relation to individual examples of initiatives, such as those put forward in this report.

According to stakeholders interviewed in 2014 and 2016, potential obstacles to further development include the lack of strategic drive to promote RPL at national level, lack of awareness amongst learners of RPL opportunities, lack of expertise among providers, or lack of confidence to carry out RPL or trust in RPL processes (in the HE sector). It is also possible that the lack of dedicated funding for RPL (except in the HE sector) is a disincentive to what can be perceived as a process that is difficult to administer and time-consuming (for both individual applicants and providers). In relation to non-formal provision, Agored Cymru is in the early stages of working on ways to break down barriers to utilising/incorporating RPL; to date it has not found a successful mechanism to upskill tutors or reduce costs.

While RPL is possible 'on paper', it is not clear how much it is actually offered and taken up in practice; it appears that implementation is low. In the HE sector, for instance, the RPL Wales project found that, although there is good practice in some (departments of) universities, this is limited. A more uniform approach, which can be applied across all qualifications and situations, is called for in the progress report for the RPL Wales project, to help to ensure that the Welsh workforce is able to face the changes taking place in the country's labour market (Treadwell, 2014).

## NQF implementation

When adopted in 2002, a ten-year implementation plan (2003-14) was agreed. This reflected the view that framework implementation takes time and requires a long-term development perspective. The 2014 evaluation offers a good insight

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<sup>(6)</sup> APEL: accreditation of prior experiential learning.

into the challenges involved in setting up national qualifications frameworks. 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 for greater validation of non-formal and informal learning (recognition of prior and informal learning). The quality-assured lifelong learning (QALL) pillar of the framework is considered to have had an impact on disadvantaged learners 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 the flexibility of the framework and as a condition for addressing the needs of 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. It was stated that the framework made it possible to develop these non-mainstream provisions in a consistent way, referring to the levels and the descriptors of the framework;
- (c) the CQFW was 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; consistency, it is argued, allows 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, noted this approach as a major benefit, allowing for rapid renewal of provisions and for meeting the needs of a diverse groups of learners. The framework, by providing an overview, also made it possible to avoid duplication of units and qualifications, delivering economic benefit;
- (e) several stakeholders note the role played by the framework for 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 the following:

- (a) most stakeholders consider that 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 taken off in a great scale'. Despite some work carried out by the Welsh government, the framework has yet to reach the general public, employers and learners. Arrangements for recognition of

- prior learning (see also below) are considered by some to be too complicated and run the risk of discouraging potential users;
- (b) it was 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 point to the fact 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 pointed out that credit accumulation and transfer has not played the role originally expected; learners and employers seem to be more focused on full qualifications than credits in the current situation;
  - (d) the most important criticism of implementation of the framework was directed to the Welsh Government and the lack of 'strategic investment' in it. It is noted that recent policy documents and statements place little emphasis on the role of the framework in the wider Welsh education and training landscape.

## Referencing to the EQF

The CQFW was referenced to the EQF as a part of the overall UK referencing process in February 2010 (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency et al., 2010). As with England and Northern Ireland, no link was established between the FEHQ and EQF. This was based on the argument from the HE-sector that no additional benefit of such a link could be observed. This decision can be reviewed in the future, depending on the developments of the EQF and feedback from potential users of the frameworks.

## Important lessons and future plans

In the 2014 evaluation of the framework, commissioned by the Welsh Government, stakeholders pointed out that the 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 further development and reform.

Overall, stakeholders responding to the evaluation recognised the role played by the CQFW as a unifying framework; there was general support for its

further development and implementation. In 2015, based on the findings of the evaluation, the following recommendations were made <sup>(7)</sup>:

- (a) to support CQFW as a meta-framework that underpins future qualification strategies;
- (b) to revise the aims and objectives so that it evolves to become a 'functional' national qualifications framework which acts as a vehicle for describing the qualifications system in Wales;
- (c) to simplify and raise the levels of understanding and profile of the CQFW;
- (d) to maintain relationships with other UK nations to ensure alignment of frameworks across the UK and Europe;
- (e) to redesign the QALL pillar to allow separation of lifelong learning that is formal from the non-formal;
- (f) to move ownership of the QALL pillar from government back to the sector, with a view to making formal and non-formal learning less bureaucratic and more accessible;
- (g) to revise existing publicity materials and use them to promote and raise the profile of the CQFW. Existing electronic communication and marketing mechanisms will also be utilised;
- (h) to establish a CQFW advisory group, with membership drawn from wider key stakeholders;
- (i) for Qualifications Wales to provide oversight of the regulated qualifications pillar.

#### Further sources of information

Wales - Welsh Assembly Government acts as national coordination point:

<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

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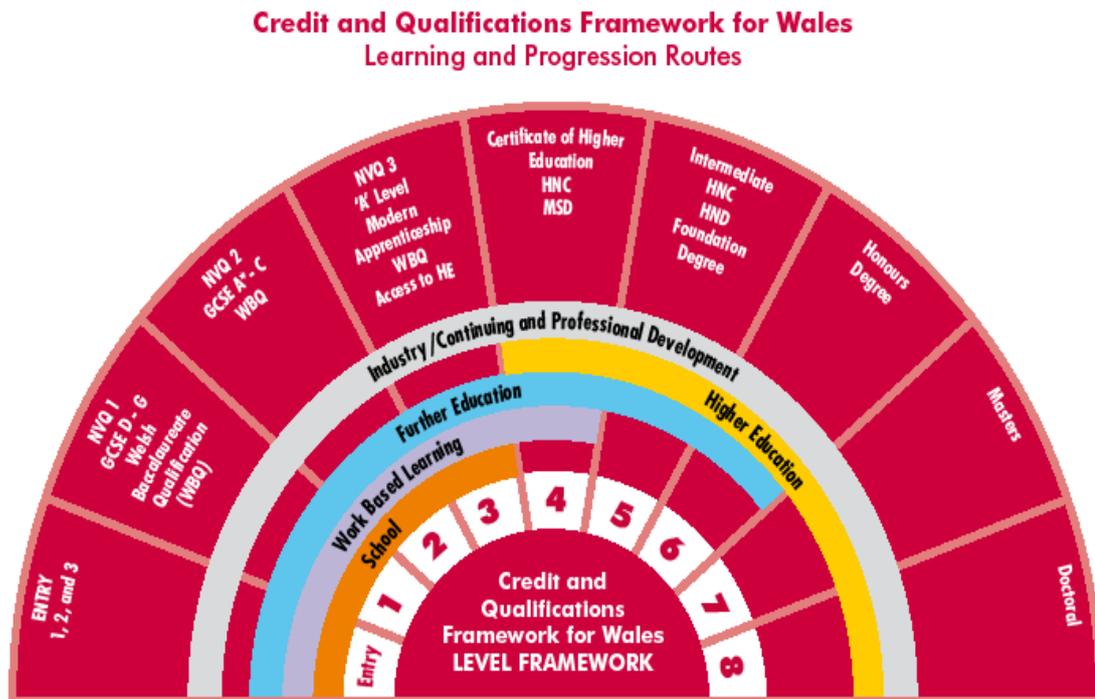
<sup>(7)</sup> Welsh Government (2016):  
<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

## Credit and qualifications framework for Wales

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 (HND) Foundation degree	5
4	Foundation degree Higher national certificates (HNC), Certificates of higher education	
3	Vocational qualifications level 3, GGCSE and 'A' level, Welsh baccalaureate qualification (WBQ) advanced	4
2	Vocational qualification level 2, Welsh baccalaureate qualification (WBQ) intermediate, General certificate of secondary education (GCSE) (grades A-C)	3
1	Vocational qualification level 1, General certificate of secondary education (GCSE) (grades D-G) Welsh baccalaureate qualification (WBQ) foundation	2
Entry level	Entry qualification, ESW	1

Source: QAA Scotland et al., (2014.) *Qualifications can cross borders: a guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland* : <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf>

Figure 2. Credit and qualifications framework for Wales



The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales was introduced in 2003 as a fully inclusive learning framework. The Levels capture all learning from the very initial stages (Entry) to the most advanced (Level 8). The Fan diagram illustrates the levels and examples of qualifications and learning provision that are included in it.

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**CREDIT & QUALIFICATIONS  
FRAMEWORK FOR WALES**  
**FFRAMWORTH CREDIDDAU  
& CWMYNDIAU CYWAW**



## List of abbreviations

CQFW	credit and qualifications framework for Wales
EQF	European qualifications framework
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVQs	national vocational qualifications
QALL	quality-assured lifelong 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 Wales*. [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf?search=&year\[value\]\[year\]=2016&country=&items\\_per\\_page=20](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf?search=&year[value][year]=2016&country=&items_per_page=20)
- 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](http://scqf.org.uk/content/files/europe/QFUK_Joint_Report_-_Updated_March_2010.pdf)
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