

Research and Library Services



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THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Research and Library Service

This research paper focuses on the background of the National Qualifications Framework and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

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The origins of the national qualifications framework

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) initiated a review of postgraduate education in 1995¹ in response to increasing concern and confusion about the nature of postgraduate provision, and the quality and nomenclature of UK postgraduate qualifications. After the review, a Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals was established and reported (Harris Report) in 1996². Among its recommendations was the establishment of a national qualifications framework.

The Report (the Dearing Report)³ of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) put forward a framework for both undergraduate and postgraduate provision in 1997. It recommended that:

“The Government, the representative bodies, the Quality Assurance Agency, other awarding bodies and organisations which oversee them, should endorse immediately the framework for higher education qualifications that we have proposed”. (Recommendation 22)⁴

At the Same time, the Scottish Committee of NCIHE (The Garrick Report)⁵ recommended:

“to providers of higher education programmes in Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access that they should together consider and adopt an integrated qualifications framework based around level of study and the SCOTCAT credit points” (Recommendation 1)

So the Ministers agreed that:

“The provision in Northern Ireland and Wales corresponds, in the main, to that in England, but bearing in mind the distinctive nature of the education structure and qualifications systems, the legal framework, and the administrative funding arrangements in Scotland, Ministers agreed that we should establish a Committee (known as the Scottish Committee) to consider issues particular to Scotland and to advise us accordingly...No such special arrangements were thought necessary for Wales and Northern Ireland...” (Chapter 23)⁶ ***“... Gave the Quality***

¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England “the Review”, under the chairmanship of Professor Martin Harris, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester in 1995.

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1996/m14_96.htm

² Higher Education Funding Council for England, Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, Standing Conference of Principals “Review of Postgraduate Education” May 1996.

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1996/m14_96.htm

³ The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education report was submitted to the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland by Chairman Sir Ron Dearing on 23rd July 1997. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

⁴ The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report, List of Recommendations (Recommendation 22) in Chapter 10. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

⁵ The Chairman of the Scottish Committee, Sir Ron Garrick produced “Report of the Scottish Committee” which attempted to avoid repetition and to concentrate on issues where action was required in Scotland. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

⁶ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report, Chapter 23 Higher Education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

*Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) a central role in the development and maintenance of the framework...*⁷

The Qualifications Frameworks Development Groups

Two Qualifications Framework Development groups were established by the QAA in 1998. These are:

- The English, Welsh and Northern Irish Qualifications Framework Development Group (EWNIG) chaired by Professor Ivor Crewe, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex
- The Scottish Qualifications Framework Development Group (SQFDG) chaired by Professor David Swinfen, Vice-Principal, University of Dundee

The following principles were set out as the basis for the development of the two HE Qualifications Frameworks which was built upon with the recommendations in the Harris and Dearing/Garrick reports⁸:

- The frameworks should be structured in terms of levels of intended outcome and qualifications positioned in relation to these.
- All qualifications should be defined in terms of minimum volumes of credit at these specified levels.
- The nomenclature of qualifications should be consistent and provide an accurate representation of their nature.
- All qualifications sharing the same title should require the same minimum credit requirements at specified levels.
- Each particular module should be defined in terms of intended outcomes with a specified credit volume at one - and only one - specified level.
- The level of a module (or similar) should be determined by relating its intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria to levels descriptors.
- Progression in time during a sequence of study does not necessarily entail progression to a higher level of learning.
- A qualification was awarded to mark the achievement of positively-defined outcomes - not as compensation for failure, or by default.
- All properly assessed and quality-assured learning Credit should be allocated on the basis of achievement, not 'time served'.

National Qualification Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

In 1998 a Joint Forum was established under the chairmanship of Professor Ivor Crewe to bring together officers of the QAA, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Northern Irish Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), with representatives of HE and FE institutions, professional bodies and employers.

Under the joint regulatory arrangement in 1999, the 6 levels National Qualification Framework has been established (Table 1)

⁷ NICIHE, 1997a, p151 <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

⁸ QAA 'Quality assurance: the new approach', Higher Quality, no 4 , October 1998 <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news/higherquality/hq4/default.asp>

Framework for higher education qualifications	National Qualification Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland
D Doctoral	5 - Higher levels
M Masters	
H Honours	4 - Higher levels
I Intermediate	
C Certificate	
	3 - Advanced
	2 - Intermediate
	1- Foundation
	Entry

Table 1: NQF for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Revision of National Qualifications Framework

The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland 2004⁹, which was revised, following public consultation. It replaced Arrangement for the statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland 2000. It also reviewed the joint regulatory arrangements, the revised National Qualifications Framework, which comprise 9 levels and replaced the existing framework of 6 levels. (Shown in Table 2)

Table 2: A consultation on the development of a new framework for achievement on

Framework for higher education qualifications	National Qualifications Framework (as implemented from Spring 2004)
D (Doctoral) - Doctorates	8 - Vocational diplomas
M (Masters) - Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas	7 - Vocational certificates and diplomas (NVQ 5)
H (Honours) - Bachelors degrees, graduate certificates and diplomas	6 - Vocational certificates and diplomas
I (Intermediate) - Diplomas of Higher Education and Further Education, Foundation Degrees, Higher National Diplomas	5 - Key skills Vocational certificates and diplomas (NVQ 4)
C (Certificate) - Certificate of Higher Education	4 - Vocational certificates and diplomas
	3 - Key skills, Vocational certificates and diplomas, A-levels, (NVQ 3)
	2 - Key skills, Vocational certificates and diplomas, Basic Skills, GCSE (Grades A* to C), (NVQ 2)
	1 - Key skills, Vocational certificates and diplomas, Basic skills, GCSE (Grades D to G), (NVQ 1)
	Entry - Basic skills, Certificates of achievement

February 2005

In November 2005, Ministers agreed the establishment of a Programme Board to oversee vocational qualifications reform by bringing together key strands of work across the UK in the Vocational Qualification Reform Programme.

An agreement was reached across the three regulators **in England, Wales and Northern Ireland** to test and trial the mechanisms and processes needed to revise

⁹ The Statutory Regulation of External Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland 2004 http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/docs/regulation/Regulatory_criteria_letter.pdf
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the current National qualifications Framework. This was the first proposal to **use the Qualifications and Credit Framework to replace the current National Qualifications Framework.**

As the new Framework represents a big change to current arrangements for qualifications, ministers have asked the regulators of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to test and trial the framework.

A two-year testing and trialling period of the Qualifications and Credit Framework began in September 2006 (first phase) with a second phase starting in March 2007 and will run through to June 2008.

The regulators will write a final report with recommendations on the tests and trials in June 2008, then the Ministers in England, Northern Ireland and Wales will decide whether the new framework should be fully implemented.

Management and development of the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (Scqf)

The proposals for the Scottish framework had been developed as an integral part of the wider Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) which was developed by 'the Development Partners' which included QAA, the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP), the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department (SEELD), the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)¹⁰.

The Development Partners established a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC). The Chair of the JAC was Dr Andrew Cubie. All Scottish organizations were involved on the JAC to identify ways in which the SCQF can be used to assist in widening access, encouraging participation and ensuring the development of people's skills and knowledge to their full potential.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework brought all Scottish mainstream qualifications together into a single unified framework (shown in Table 3). It was identified as one of the 'Ten Points' proposed in the Government's Action Plan for the development of a lifelong learning strategy in Scotland, the qualifications of higher education institutions, SQA National Qualifications and Higher National Qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) implemented progressively from the end of 1999.

The aim of the SCQF was to:

- Assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential;
- Enable employers, learners and the public in general to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

¹⁰ As recommended by the Garrick report, recommendation 4 (NCIHE, 1997b, p46).
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SCQF level	SQA National Units, Courses and Group Awards	Higher Education	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
12		Doctorates	
11		Masters	SVQ 5
10		Honours Degree Graduate Diploma/Certificate*	
9		Ordinary Degree Graduate Diploma/Certificate*	
8		Higher National Diploma Diploma in Higher Education	SVQ 4
7	Advanced Higher	Higher National Certificate Certificate in Higher Education	
6	Higher		SVQ 3
5	Intermediate 2 Credit Standard Grade		SVQ 2
4	Intermediate 1 General Standard Grade		SVQ 1
3	Access 3 Foundation Standard Grade		
2	Access 2		
1	Access 1		
* These qualifications are differentiated by volume of outcomes and may be offered at either level			

Table 3: The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

Structure and key features of the SCQF (Levels and credit points)

Two measures were used to place qualifications and learning programmes in the SCQF¹¹. These were the levels of the outcomes of learning and the volume of these outcomes, described in terms of SCQF credit points. The SCQF has 12 levels. Each level is described in terms of its characteristic general outcomes under five broad areas:

- Knowledge and understanding
- Practice
- Generic cognitive skills
- Communication, numeracy and IT skills
- Autonomy, accountability and working with others

SCQF credit points are used to quantify the outcomes of learning and give them a value or currency. The allocation of credits is based on the amount of time that an 'average' learner at a specified level might expect to take to achieve the outcomes. Credits can be used to assist learners to transfer between programmes. It is the

¹¹ http://www.scqf.org.uk/the_framework.asp

responsibility of awarding bodies within the SCQF to determine how much credit can be transferred into different programmes.

A comparison of qualifications between the UK and the Republic of Ireland

The development of the New Qualifications and Credit Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland should be seen in the wider international context. In many parts of the world efforts are being made to restructure HE programmes and qualifications, often with the aims of making them clearer and more understandable to students from other countries and of promoting lifelong learning.

The Republic of Ireland and UK use different National Qualifications Frameworks. However, for the main stage of education or employment they are very similar. This makes it possible to draw broad comparisons between qualifications and their levels, rather than direct equivalences.

A comparison of qualifications between the Republic of Ireland and UK¹² is shown in Table 4:

Main stages of education /employment	England, Northern Ireland National Qualifications Framework	Wales & Ireland National Qualifications Framework	The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework	National Framework of Qualifications for Republic of Ireland	England, Wales and Northern Ireland framework for higher education qualification: FHEQ
Qualifications can be taken at any age in order to continue or return to education or training	Entry Level Certificate ESOL skills for life		<u>Level 1</u> Access <u>Level 2</u> Access, NPA National Certificate <u>Level 3</u> Access Foundation Standard Grade, NPA, National Certificate	<u>Level 1</u> Level 1 Certificate <u>Level 2</u> Level 2 Certificate	
Secondary education Initial entry into employment or further education	<u>Level 1</u> NVQ. VRQ. GCSEs at grade. D-G ESOL skills for life		<u>Level 4</u> Intermediate 1, General Standard Grade, SVQ1, NPA, National Certificate	<u>Level 3</u> Level 3 Certificate Junior Certificate	
Continuation of secondary education (progression to skilled employment). Completion of secondary education	<u>Level 2</u> NVQ. VRQ. GCSEs at grade A*-C. ESOL skills for life		<u>Level 5</u> Intermediate 2, General Standard Grade, SVQ 2, NPA, National Certificate	<u>Level 4</u> Level 4 Certificate Leaving Certificate	
Entry to higher education Qualified/Skilled worker	<u>Level 3</u> NVQ.VRQ. A Level		<u>Level 6</u> Higher, SVQ 3, PDA, NPA, National Certificate	<u>Level 5</u> Level 5 Certificate Leaving Certificate	
Specialised education and training	<u>Level 4</u> NVQ Level 4 HND		<u>Level 7</u> Advanced Higher, PDA, Higher National Certificate, Certificate	<u>Level 6</u> Advanced Certificate Higher Certificate National Craft Certificate	<u>Level C</u> Certificates of Higher Education

¹² Qualifications Cross Boundaries “Qualifications can cross boundaries” August, 2006
http://www.qualifications-across-boundaries.org/compare/uk_ireland

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		of Higher Education		
Entry to professional graduate employment	<u>Level 5</u> NVQ Level 4	<u>Level 8</u> Higher National Diploma, SVQ 4, PDA, Diploma of Higher Education <u>Level 9</u> Ordinary Degree, PDA, Graduate Diploma/Certificate	<u>Level 7</u> Ordinary Bachelor Degree National Craft Certificate	<u>Level I</u> Ordinary Bachelors Degree, Foundation Degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education and other Higher Diplomas
Intermediate/ higher education Advanced skills training	<u>Level 6</u> NVQ Level 4	<u>Level 10</u> Honours Degrees, PDA, Graduate Diploma/Certificate	<u>Level 8</u> Honours Bachelor Degree Higher Diploma	<u>Level H</u> Bachelors Degree with Honours, Graduate Certificates and Diplomas
Professional or postgraduate education or employment	<u>Level 7</u> Fellowships, NVQ Level 5 <u>Level 8</u> Highly specialists Diploma from a professional body	<u>Level 11</u> SVQ 5, PDA, Masters <u>Level 12</u> PDA Doctoral Degree	<u>Level 9</u> Masters Degree Post-graduate Diploma <u>Level 10</u> Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate	<u>Level M</u> Masters Degree, Postgraduate Diplomas, Postgraduate Certificates <u>Level D</u> Doctoral Degree

Table 4: A comparison of qualifications between UK and the Republic of Ireland