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National Qualifications Frameworks and Their Links to Quality Assurance

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Abstract

Higher education is a devolved responsibility across the four nations of the United Kingdom (UK). Higher education institutions are independent, autonomous organisations, with their own legal identities and powers, both academic and managerial. Each of the four nations of the UK has significant cross-border mobility in higher education and progression between the vocational education and training and higher education sectors.

Higher education institutions are responsible for the academic standards and quality of their own degrees and other awards through the process of internal quality assurance. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the independent UK body for safeguarding standards in higher education, undertakes external quality assurance reviews and judges how well higher education institutions fulfil their responsibilities and the effectiveness of their processes for doing so.

Qualifications frameworks form an essential component of both internal and external quality assurance processes operating within UK higher education. QAA has developed, reviewed and revised, promoted and negotiated the alignment and compatibility of national qualifications frameworks to ensure that 'qualifications can cross boundaries'.

The paper outlines the achievements and lessons learned over more than 10 years of development, use, and evaluation of the utility of national qualifications frameworks in quality assurance and enhancement.

Introduction

The higher education sector in the United Kingdom (UK) is complex and has a number of characteristics not generally encountered elsewhere. Higher education (HE) is a devolved responsibility across the four nations of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The similarities amongst the four nations are, however, greater than their differences, so it is possible to speak of a 'UK higher education sector'.

There are over 170 higher education institutions across the UK creating a large and diverse UK higher education sector. Student numbers at individual providers range from <500 to over 150,000 and there is diversity in mission as well as in delivery modes. UK higher education institutions are self-governing and are not owned or run by the Government. Their level of autonomy is high compared to similar institutions in many other countries. Most have an independent legal identity; some have a Royal Charter, some are higher education corporations, while others have been created through an Act of Parliament. All universities, colleges and other providers with legal UK degree awarding powers (DAPs) award their own degrees and qualifications, that is, higher education qualifications are not awarded by the state. This autonomy means that higher education providers are responsible for managing the academic standards and quality of their awards.

Each of the four nations of the UK has significant cross-border mobility in higher education within the UK and elsewhere. There is also progression between the vocational education and higher education sectors. Robust quality assurance and clear transparent information, advice and guidance about the qualifications awarded by UK higher education institutions is essential to the recognition of learning, supporting the national and international mobility of staff and students, assuring the comparability of awards and protecting the reputation of UK higher education.

Two, compatible, national higher education qualifications frameworks operate across the four nations; one for Scotland and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each country has a complementary vocational education and training qualifications framework. In the case of Scotland and Wales the higher education and vocational education and training frameworks are integrated into single national credit and qualifications frameworks but in England and Northern Ireland the frameworks are currently separate.

Individually, the higher education qualification frameworks operating in each country reflect the differing political, social and educational contexts. Together, the higher education and vocational education and training frameworks form a complex matrix of information and guidance about UK qualifications. All frameworks are essential elements of internal and external quality assurance arrangements operating within the UK.

Quality Assurance

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from UK HE institutions, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies in the UK. It was established to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education and is governed by a Board which has overall responsibility for its conduct and strategic direction.

HE institutions are independent, autonomous organisations, with their own legal identities and powers, both academic and managerial. They are not owned by the state, although most are dependent to a greater or lesser extent on state financing, and are

free to offer such programmes and awards as they wish, subject to the status of their awarding powers. Each higher education awarding body is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and a good quality education is being offered. QAA judges how well higher education institutions fulfil their responsibilities and the effectiveness of their processes for doing so.

Higher education awarding bodies are responsible for the academic standards and quality of their own degrees and other awards through the process of **internal** quality assurance. This involves, inter alia, each higher education provider continually assessing its systems and programmes to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This is done on an annual basis (by considering reports of external experts, course team monitoring reports and student feedback mechanisms) and via longer term periodic reviews (involving internal and external peers). The views of students and recent graduates are taken into account. QAA carries out **external** quality assurance by judging how reliably the universities and colleges fulfil their responsibilities. There is in consequence no national system of accreditation.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Internal and external quality assurance is facilitated by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)¹. The Quality Code is the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education and which leads to an award of a UK higher education institution.

The Quality Code comprises a set of interrelated documents that all UK higher education providers use to set and maintain the academic standards of the awards they offer and help them assure and enhance the quality of the learning opportunities and experience of their students. It has three parts; Part A: setting and maintaining threshold academic standards, Part B: assuring and enhancing academic quality and Part C: information about higher education provision. All HE providers, reviewed by QAA, commit to meeting the Expectations set out in the Quality Code. QAA also uses the Quality Code to underpin all of the external review methods it uses to assess HE institutions quality assurance arrangements and provide a judgement on whether HE providers meet the national expectations set out in the Quality Code.

National higher education qualifications frameworks are an essential component of Part A of the Quality Code.

National Qualifications Frameworks

There are two national qualifications frameworks for higher education in the UK; *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ)² and a parallel higher education qualifications framework document for Scotland, *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS)³ that reflects the features of its different education system, while making clear the many similarities and alignments with the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Both frameworks are developed and maintained by QAA. They were first established in 2001 with the assistance of Advisory groups made up of experts and HE sector representatives and incorporate

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx>

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQ08.pdf>

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQscotland.pdf>

feedback gained from extensive discussion and consultation with the HE sector and its stakeholders.

The two frameworks share many core purposes and features. Both frameworks provide generic guidance on the academic standards of higher education awards. They contain: guidance on the consistent naming of academic awards; a qualifications framework identifying different levels; threshold generic qualifications descriptors for awards at each level; and guidance on implementation arrangements

At the postgraduate levels, the two higher education frameworks have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Below the postgraduate levels, the honours degree level in Scotland and level 6 in the FHEQ are considered to be in broad alignment. Below level 6, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts.

The main features and purposes of the FHEQ are to:

- provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to higher education providers and their external examiners
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating
- a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector.

As a result, the FHEQ should enable higher education providers to communicate to employers; schools; parents; prospective students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); and other stakeholders the achievements and attributes represented by the typical higher education qualification titles.

Within the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland there are also frameworks of school and vocational qualifications managed by the OfQual, and integrated overarching credit and qualifications frameworks in Scotland, *The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*⁴ (of which *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* is a constituent part) and *The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*⁵ (of which the FHEQ is a constituent part). The frameworks for school and vocational education and training are not included in the Quality Code.

Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications

throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and thus align with *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*⁶. As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the FQ-EHEA (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) have also been incorporated into the FHEQ.

The higher education qualifications frameworks, and associated guidance for implementation, have been written to assist higher education providers to maintain

⁴ <http://www.scqf.org.uk/The%20Framework/>

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

⁶ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQSelfCert.pdf>

academic standards; to inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; to ensure international competitiveness; and to facilitate student and graduate mobility.

QAA reviewers use the HE qualifications frameworks as a reference point when reviewing the establishment and management of academic standards by higher education providers. In particular, reviewers look at how institutions align the academic standards of their awards with the levels referred to in the qualifications frameworks.

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the use of qualification frameworks which higher education institutions are required to meet:

Each qualification (including those awarded under collaborative arrangements) is allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ or FQHEIS, as applicable.

QAA reviewers also ascertain whether institutions have means of ensuring that awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with the standards referred to in the qualification frameworks.

Outcomes of external quality assurance

An analysis of 59 individual institutional reviews, undertaken and published by QAA between December 2004 and August 2006⁷, shortly after the introduction of the FHEQ, indicated that in general, institutions engaged in a positive manner with the qualification frameworks.

It is clear from the individual review reports that qualification frameworks generate considerable thought and debate, and that institutions had taken the opportunity to revise their award structures in order to bring them into line with national expectations. Good practice was identified where an institution had made extensive use of the frameworks qualification level descriptors in developing, and describing, the links between intended learning outcomes, assessment and the qualification frameworks. Good practice was identified where there was close alignment between intended learning outcomes and the relevant qualification descriptor of the qualifications framework, a number of recommendations were also made where intended learning outcomes or assessments were found not to be set at the correct level.

Some variability of engagement with the qualifications frameworks at subject level was identified. One-third of the audit reports identified one or more programme specifications that made no mention of the FHEQ. Nonetheless the majority of discipline audit trails concluded that intended learning outcomes were pitched at the appropriate level, or that the standard of achievement displayed by students was appropriate to the location of the award on the FHEQ.

Institutions were reported to have made active efforts to ensure that the guidance in the FHEQ had been taken into account in both internal award frameworks, and quality management processes and documentation, especially for programme approval and review. Where there were gaps in institutional documentation, or where consideration of the FHEQ was not evident, the review reports made recommendations. The overview report concluded that, for the most part, institutions had mechanisms to ensure that an oversight was taken at institutional level of the application of the FHEQ, and alignment with it, on a periodic and continuing basis.

⁷ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/QAA311FHEQ.pdf>

A follow-up report⁸ analysing the findings of 76 external quality assurance reviews carried out by QAA between February 2007 and June 2009 demonstrated that the qualifications frameworks had become firmly embedded in institutional internal quality assurance processes as an essential part of the management of academic standards

Individual institutional reports regularly noted alignment with national reference points as a key requirement for the approval of new programmes, with the FHEQ being specifically emphasised. The systematic use of the FHEQ is most clearly demonstrated in more recent reports, with the explicit expectations placed on their use by external examiners appearing to impact positively on the contribution they make to the assurance of standards.

Transparency

In addition to the use of national qualifications frameworks in higher education quality assurance arrangements, the process of developing, reviewing and revising, and verifying the compatibility of the national higher education qualifications with relevant European qualifications frameworks has led to improved coordination and transparency between the higher education and vocational education and training sectors.

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. As such, in order to promote transparency, the QAA has negotiated the alignment of the higher education qualifications frameworks with other qualifications frameworks operating across the UK and its close neighbour, Ireland. These negotiations resulted in a simple guide '*Qualifications can cross boundaries*'⁹; which provides information about the ways qualifications across all sectors are organised in the UK and Ireland; broad comparisons between qualifications and their levels for each country, and how the UK and Ireland qualifications frameworks relate to qualifications frameworks in Europe. There is regular liaison among the qualifications framework 'owners' and regulators about the relationships between the various qualifications frameworks and their alignment.

This work has resulted in:

- Improved clarity about higher education qualifications and how they relate to each other,
- A clearer understanding of the national qualifications frameworks operating across the four countries of the UK and Ireland.
- The similarities and differences between higher education and vocational education and training qualifications becoming more easily visible.
- Clear information and a simple guide about the way learners can potentially move within or between qualifications frameworks and education sectors

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<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Outcomes-from-audit-Managing-academic-standards.pdf>

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http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quals_cross_boundaries.pdf

- Confirmation of the compatibility, and hence recognition and acceptability, of higher education awards across national and international boundaries

Summary

A number of lessons have been learned over 10 years of development, use, and evaluation of the utility of national qualifications frameworks in quality assurance and enhancement and the processes of aligning 'system-to-system' frameworks. These include:

- The importance of involving the higher education sector in leading, developing and revising frameworks to secure academic ownership.
- Recognition that national qualification frameworks cannot drive educational reform in isolation but are useful tools in the process
- The shift to a learning outcomes approach takes time to embed
- The implementation of national qualifications frameworks needs to be realistic in order to secure confidence
- Staff, students and employers require support in understanding the implications of a learning outcomes based approach and the adoption of national qualifications frameworks
- Information and advice needs to be targeted at specific stakeholders

Conclusion

In conclusion, national qualifications frameworks are an important for the recognition and comparability of qualifications across national boundaries. They provide a useful transparency tool and form an essential component of quality assurance mechanisms. A variety of approaches are required to ensure effective collaboration and consultation among the partners of higher education involved in national qualifications frameworks.