



Report on Series 1 round table discussion meetings: review and revision of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ (EWNI))

Introduction

1 Three 'round table' discussion meetings were held, on 26 June in Manchester, 17 July in Cardiff and 20 July 2007 in London. Delegates attending the meetings were invited to:

- identify main issues and challenges in using qualifications frameworks, in general
- discuss the challenges and issues facing the higher education (HE) sector when developing and refining approaches to the implementation of *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ (EWNI))
- where appropriate, identify and share good practice in meeting any challenges
- provide suggestions for the review and possible revision of the FHEQ (EWNI).

2 The following report provides a summary of the areas of discussion raised across the three meetings.

The purpose of the framework

3 The main purposes of the framework appeared, to the majority of delegates, to be entirely appropriate. No additions to the purposes were offered, although a number of delegates did suggest minor amendments to help clarify the intentions behind the purposes as described.

4 The FHEQ (EWNI) document is based on learning outcomes and therefore follows a particular methodology. Delegates supported this approach and felt that each qualification level should remain discreet rather than cumulative, as the content and breadth of programmes is as significant as the academic level achieved for progression to a higher level.

5 It was suggested that the FHEQ (EWNI) could be more discursive without being a lot longer. This was supported by delegates who reported that the brevity of the current FHEQ (EWNI) document encourages a range of audiences to read and use it. It was felt that a substantially longer document would not be read or used so extensively.

Awareness and use of the FHEQ (EWNI)

6 The majority of delegates considered the FHEQ (EWNI) to be a very positive and constructive document. It is considered to be a straightforward and helpful tool for institutional level management of academic standards. As such it has become a well embedded and integral part of institutional quality assurance procedures. It is referred to directly in the validation of new programmes and in periodic review, thereafter programme teams and external examiners consider the appropriateness of level in their annual reporting.

Relationship to other elements of the Academic Infrastructure

7 It was suggested that academic staff routinely make reference to qualification levels through subject benchmark statements and programme specifications rather than through a close and detailed knowledge of the FHEQ (EWNI) document itself. Using the FHEQ (EWNI) and other elements of the Academic Infrastructure to challenge and stretch staff when they are developing new provision was seen by many as a useful exercise, particularly when describing the standards of awards. It was recommended that any revision of the FHEQ (EWNI) develop the guidance and be more explicit about the links between programme specifications/subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ (EWNI).

Challenges in using the FHEQ (EWNI)

8 Several delegates reported that the challenges faced by programme designers when attempting to integrate the academic outcomes of a programme with the professional body requirements (ie fitness to practice/the capability to do the job in a practical sense) are not especially well served by the current FHEQ (EWNI). Many professional requirements span different levels of the FHEQ (EWNI) (and other frameworks, see below) and are not exclusively located in one level or another. Attempts to try to make professional requirements fit into one descriptor or another have not always been successful. Trying to locate an award into the 'correct' level can be a distraction from identifying what a practitioner needs to know/be able to do.

Modifications as a result of implementing FHEQ (EWNI)

9 Several higher education institutions (HEIs) reported making changes to either the names of some awards or the positioning of individual programmes following the publication of the FHEQ (EWNI) in 2001. The vast majority of HEIs, however, reported that the bulk of activity had been in formalising/documenting the alignment of programmes with the appropriate FHEQ (EWNI) qualification level descriptor, and in providing clear and accurate information to students.

10 Few delegates reported making changes to award structures as a consequence of implementing the FHEQ (EWNI). However, the placement of 'smaller' certificates and diplomas (ie University awards) remains a challenge for some.

Locating awards within the FHEQ (EWNI)

11 Several delegates noted that some levels within the FHEQ (EWNI), in particular M level, were crowded with diverse qualifications. The general conclusion was that the five levels were widely recognised by institutions and should be retained unless they unduly hindered reconciliation of the FHEQ (EWNI) with other relevant qualifications or credit frameworks.

12 Many delegates accepted the logic behind the proposal by the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Group to replace the current descriptions of levels using letters to numbers (C level = Level 4, etc). However, most HEIs reported that they had not adopted the terminology of C level, I level and H level etc to describe the levels of their programmes, following publication of the FHEQ (EWNI) in 2001, preferring Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 (associated with years of full-time undergraduate study).

13 Many delegates supported explicitly locating the levels of the FHEQ (EWNI) within the cycle nomenclature of the Dublin descriptors. This was seen as one way of 'future-proofing' the FHEQ (EWNI) against any new qualifications that might need to be positioned within it.

Ordinary (bachelor's) degrees

14 Several delegates reported that currently the ordinary (bachelor's) degree does offer the option to progress to master's level but in practice few candidates are accepted with an ordinary (bachelor's) degree onto these programmes. Delegates acknowledged that there was a case for aligning the ordinary degree with the level descriptors for honours level qualifications within the FHEQ (EWNI) and the end of the first cycle of the European Higher Education Area Qualification Framework (EHEAQF), if there was sufficient clarity about the size of qualifications as well as its level.

Postgraduate qualifications

15 The distinction between qualifications that were postgraduate in time and those that were postgraduate in level was discussed, specifically in relation to the PGCE. Many HEIs reported that retaining the acronyms PGCE to represent both Professional Graduate Certificate in Education and Postgraduate Certificate in Education was confusing and unhelpful. Several delegates recommended including the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK, QAA joint statement on the PGCE qualification title into the revised FHEQ (EWNI) document to help with improving clarity and understanding about the differences between the two qualifications.

16 Similarly, several delegates requested more clarity on differences between postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma and master's and an explanation of the differences in the emerging qualifications at doctoral level (taught/professional/research doctorates).

17 Integrated master's qualifications continue to cause some difficulties for HEIs. Several delegates reported confusion about what is expected of integrated master's (especially in terms of international portability of qualifications or requirements by professional bodies) and how these will be represented through transcripts.

Qualification level descriptors and credit level descriptors

18 The method of describing qualifications first, in terms of intended learning outcomes (aimed at institutions) and second, in terms of expected abilities of qualification holders (aimed at employers), was considered to be an effective approach. All delegates confirmed that the use of outcomes-based terminology was well embedded across the sector and that the qualification descriptors of the FHEQ (EWNI) were useful in curriculum design. The fact that these were generic, non-prescriptive reference points was regarded as particularly important.

19 All delegates recognised the distinction between credit level descriptors and qualification descriptors. Delegates understood the different purposes for the two sets of descriptors and confirmed that it was appropriate to maintain this distinction.

20 The majority of delegates were aware of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Group proposals for national credit arrangements for HE in England and welcomed the report. Delegates reported that it would be helpful to bring together, in one revised FHEQ (EWNI) document, level descriptors with qualifications descriptions and the notion of cycles. However, there was plea to keep this as simple and clear as possible. Different audiences have different needs for different levels of detail. A nested approach, ie the Dublin descriptors nested within FHEQ (EWNI), linked to the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme level descriptors was favoured. It was thought to be particularly important to clarify what marks the end of the first cycle.

Relationships between frameworks

21 Many delegates commented upon the proliferation of credit and qualification frameworks that were emerging within the different education systems, sectors and countries. It was acknowledged that there was potential for much confusion between the frameworks, particularly the FHEQ (EWNI) and the emerging Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), especially if the revised FHEQ (EWNI) uses the same numbers for levels (of qualifications) as the QCF does for credit levels. This was thought to be particularly acute as the credit level descriptors used in the two frameworks were different. It was suggested that the disparity between the FHEQ (EWNI) and QCF use of credit level descriptors may cause difficulty in identifying progression routes from further education to HE and from vocational to academic programmes.

22 Delegates did not envisage any concerns with harmonising the current or revised FHEQ (EWNI) with the higher education frameworks in Scotland or the Republic of Ireland. Several delegates reported that alignment of the FHEQ (EWNI) with the EHEAQF was an essential step to promoting the acceptability of United Kingdom qualifications and mobility of UK graduates. Delegates envisaged few problems with aligning the FHEQ (EWNI) qualification level descriptors with the Dublin descriptors of the EHEAQF.

Summary

- While the FHEQ (EWNI) remains 'fit for purpose' and has been accepted well and embedded within institutional processes, it does require updating.
- Links to other frameworks - guidance/mapping/clarity of relationship between FHEQ (EWNI) and other frameworks would be welcomed.
- Revisions should add clarity not add further confusion.

- The revisions should consider the impact on different types of institutions with different needs.
- More guidance is needed on placing short qualifications within the framework, particularly on the number of credits and level/quantity of outcomes achieved.
- The annexes are the substance of the framework and should be incorporated into the main part of the document.
- It would be helpful to integrate credit, levels and qualifications but there need to be clear statements so that this does not become a regulatory tool.
- The alignment of the FHEQ (EWNI) with European developments is crucial to promote the acceptability of UK qualifications and portability of UK graduates.

Next steps

A second series of round table meetings are currently being planned. These will provide an opportunity for delegates to consider an initial draft of a second edition of the FHEQ (EWNI). The meetings will be held on the following dates and venues.

Date	Approx. time	Venue
13 November 2007	10.30 - 15.30	City Inn Manchester, 1 Piccadilly Place, Manchester M1 3DG
26 November 2007	10.30 – 15.30	Park Plaza, Greyfriars Road, Cardiff CF10 3AL
28 November 2007	10.30 – 15.30	Hilton London Euston, 17-18 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H

Further details about these events can be obtained from www.qaa.ac.uk/events

September 2007