Referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework

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Regulation

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1. Introduction

In 2010, the UK presented to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Advisory Group its report on referencing three UK qualifications frameworks to the EQF. The three frameworks were: the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF for England and Northern Ireland), the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

In 2017, the Council of the European Union published a Recommendation on the EQF[1] which included:

> (*13) National qualifications frameworks and systems change over time, therefore referencing to the EQF should be reviewed and updated, whenever relevant.*

The UK's qualifications frameworks have changed since 2010 and the divergence between the education, training and qualifications arrangements in England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland has increased as a consequence of the devolution of responsibilities for certain civil functions from the UK government in London to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to the governments in Wales and Scotland.

In the light of these changes the UK National Co-ordination Points for the EQF (UK EQF NCPs) have prepared three updated referencing reports. These reports cover, separately, the frameworks used in England and Northern Ireland; Wales; and Scotland. This report covers the frameworks used in England and Northern Ireland.

The report is divided into three sections, plus annexes:

Section A

- the political and social context of the frameworks
- qualifications frameworks and regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland
- the education and training landscape in England and Northern Ireland

Section B

- responses to the EQF Referencing Criteria

Section C

- future directions

[1] Council of the European Union, 2017/C 189/03: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2017.189.01.0015.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2017:189:TOC

Aims of the report

This updated report explains the use of qualifications frameworks in the context of the education, training and skills systems in England and Northern Ireland. The report explains how the level descriptors of our frameworks relate to those of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The report should enable a greater understanding of the systems in England and Northern Ireland and how qualifications from other countries – and in other parts of the UK - relate to those qualifications in England and Northern Ireland. Our aim is to support understanding of qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland and, as a consequence, the mobility of learners and workers and the recognition and transferability of their qualifications.

In this updated report we summarise our experience of developing and managing qualifications frameworks over several decades. Our frameworks have evolved over time, changing in scope, structure and purpose, for example moving from the transformative purpose of the QCF, which promoted a particular approach to qualification development and design, to the communicative purpose[2] of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). We hope that readers will find our brief framework history useful.

We have taken the opportunity in this report to respond to the EQF Advisory Group's feedback on the UK's 2010 report. We have learnt from the approaches other countries have taken, since 2010, to referencing their qualifications frameworks to the EQF. We have also reflected on research, peer learning and the studies of Cedefop, as we have considered the referencing criteria.

We hope that the report will provide readers with a clear understanding of the qualifications systems in England and Northern Ireland, as a context for the referencing of the RQF, and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), to the EQF.

[2] UNESCO, ETF & CEDEFOP, 2015, p.7

Developments made since 2010 to the qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland and to the context in which they operate

There have been a number of key developments relating to the frameworks and to the context in which they are used since 2010, including the following, which are referenced in the report:

- the RQF replaced the QCF and NQF in 2014 (see pages 26-34)
- revised school-based general qualifications and vocational qualifications have been introduced in England and Northern Ireland, together with new apprenticeship arrangements (see Criterion 4)
- in 2016, CCEA Regulation took over the regulation of all qualifications (other than higher education qualifications) in Northern Ireland (see Criteria 1, 4, and 5)
- Ofqual was established in 2010 as the statutory regulator of qualifications (other than higher education qualifications) in England, and developed a new statutory regulatory framework (see Criteria 1, 4, and 5)
- the Office for Students (OfS) was established as the independent regulator of higher education in England in 2018 as a result of the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 (see pages 34 and 46)
- the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, introduced in 2013, was revised and republished in 2018 (see Criteria 1, 4, and 5)
- changes to government departments in England and Northern Ireland (see Criteria 1)
- the network of sector skills councils, which were responsible for the National Occupational Standards (NOS) that provided a foundation for many vocational qualifications, ceased to receive automatic public funding in 2016 (see page 40-42)

In addition, this report now formally references the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) to the EQF (see Criterion 2).

The self-certification of the FHEQ with the QF-EHEA was published in 2008. The framework mapping exercise was used as an opportunity to review the outcome of the self-certification exercise. The detailed mapping of the FHEQ to the EQF carried out for this report reaffirmed the outcome of the 2008 self-certification exercise.

Collaborative approach to producing the report

In 2010, we published a single report in three separate sections covering the frameworks used in the different parts of the UK. This updated report covers the frameworks used in England and Northern Ireland only. However, the UK EQF NCPs have worked closely together on the production of their respective reports. Scotland submitted its updated report to the EQF Advisory Group in December 2018. England and Northern Ireland, along with Wales, made initial presentations to the EQF Advisory Group in February 2019 and submitted their updated reports in June 2019.

We have worked together through the UK Coordination Group for European Vocational Education and Training Initiatives (UKCGVETI) to improve on our joint 2010 report. We have sought, in particular, to respond to the feedback from the EQF Advisory Group on the 2010 report, including on the presentation and completeness of the report, for example on the balance of information in the main body of the report and the annexes to the report.

More fundamentally, in this report we have also referenced the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) to the EQF. In 2010 we referred to the self-certification exercise that had been conducted to verify the compatibility of the FHEQ to the QF-EHEA. This report references the FHEQ to the EQF, covered in Criterion 2, and presented in detail in Annex 2.

Support from Steering Group and International Experts

We have been supported and guided in the writing of this report by members of a steering group, including two international experts. We have benefitted from their rich wealth of experience. They have advised us on how to present the report so that it is clear and accessible to readers from different backgrounds and with different degrees of understanding of the frameworks.

Consistency between the three UK reports

In 2018 and 2019 the UK presented three reports on referencing its frameworks to the EQF. These have been prepared in a complementary way and fully endorse the accepted inter-framework relationships within the UK administrations.

The mapping of the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF described in this report complements the report on the mapping of the CQFW described in the report from Wales. The draft reports were exchanged during production and issues and discrepancies were discussed and resolved as the reports were finalised. The mapping of the RQF level descriptors was also carried out in Wales (the RQF level descriptors are used for the regulated pillar of the CQFW), as a separate exercise by different experts. These two mapping exercises led to the same referencing

outcomes, which testifies to the robust nature of the relationships between the EQF and the RQF, and the EQF and the regulated pillar of the CQFW.

Scotland has its own education and qualifications system and despite considerable mobility of learners and workers between Scotland and other administrations of the UK, the Scottish system remains distinct from those south of its border. The Scottish referencing report is, as a consequence, different to the report from England and Northern Ireland, and to the report from Wales. However, the bodies responsible for frameworks across the UK shared the findings during their referencing processes and the production of their reports. Therefore there is a clear commonality in the referencing processes that are described and in the presentations of the reports.

The three new referencing reports are important within the UK administrations as they confirm a long established inter-framework referencing position. This is summarised in a document entitled 'Qualifications can cross boundaries', which covers the frameworks of the UK administrations and Ireland and has been updated regularly since its first publication in 2004.[3]

The referencing of frameworks in the UK and Ireland to the EQF

The table below illustrates the referencing position of the five frameworks in the UK and Ireland to the EQF.

Table 1: Correspondence of levels established between national qualifications frameworks and the EQF

<table>
<tr><th>Regulated qualifications framework (RQF)</th><th>Framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ)</th><th>European Qualifications Framework (EQF)</th><th>Credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW)</th><th>Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF)</th><th>National framework of qualifications for Ireland (NFQ IE)</th></tr>
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[3] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf

Key terms

We recognise some of the terms used in the report might be unfamiliar to readers from outside of the UK. We have therefore compiled a glossary of the key terms we have used.

Apprenticeship	A skills development programme that leads to competence in a recognised occupation. Delivered through a mixture of on and off the job training and therefore requiring the apprentice to be employed.
Award	A decision to give a candidate a result for a qualification, or for part of a qualification.
Awarding organisations (AO)	Organisations recognised by one or more of the qualifications regulators in England, Wales or Northern Ireland to develop, deliver and award qualifications. AOs offering academic qualifications can also be referred to as 'exam boards'.
Education and training providers	Organisations such as schools, colleges, independent training providers and universities that teach and train learners, delivering a wide range of academic and vocational and technical qualifications across a range of levels in both classroom and work-based settings.
Further Education (FE) Colleges	Colleges delivering qualifications in a wide range of vocational, technical and academic subjects at many levels (with some including higher education courses) across a range of ages. Some specialise in particular industry sectors such as art and design, catering, engineering or finance. They often have links with employers, so that students studying vocational and/or technical courses can combine classroom learning with work experience. Some colleges offer higher education courses but are not recognised to award degrees, while others are recognised as degree awarding bodies.
Higher Education (HE) Institutions	Education institutions, such as universities and colleges, offering higher education and degree level study.
Learning outcomes	Statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, often defined in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding.
General qualifications	There are a variety of general (academic) qualifications. The most widely studied general qualifications are GCSEs and GCEs (AS and A levels). These qualifications are referred to as general qualifications throughout the report.
Total qualification time	The number of notional hours which represents an estimate of the total amount of time that could reasonably be expected to be required in order for a Learner to achieve and demonstrate the achievement of the level of attainment necessary for the award of a qualification.

Abbreviations

Frameworks

CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
NCP	National Coordination Point
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
QF-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
RQF	Regulated Qualifications Framework
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

Organisations

CAFRE	College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, Northern Ireland
CCEA Regulation	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment Regulation
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DE(NI)	Department of Education, Northern Ireland
DfE	Department for Education
DfENI	Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland
EA	Education Authority, Northern Ireland
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
OfS	Office for Students
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
STA	Standards and Testing Agency
The Institute	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
UCAS	Universities and College Admissions Service
UKSCQA	UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

2. The political and social context of the frameworks

Education, training and skills policy in the United Kingdom

There are 4 administrations in the UK. Education, training and skills policy is a devolved matter. Responsibility for this area of policy is as follows:

- the UK government is responsible for education, training and skills policy in England
- the Northern Ireland Executive is responsible for education, training and skills policy in Northern Ireland
- the Scottish government is responsible for education, training and skills policy in Scotland
- the Welsh government is responsible for education, training and skills policy in Wales

Devolution allows for tailored decision-making. Locally developed policies can reflect the needs and priorities of the individual parts of the UK. People move freely within the UK, including as students and as workers. The UK's qualifications frameworks support such movement.

Despite devolution, the shared policy history of education, training and skills across England, Northern Ireland and Wales is reflected in current policies and practices, aspects of which remain common.[4] Students broadly follow the same key milestones through their education and learning. Many general school-level qualifications are the same or similar. For example, most 16 year olds in England, Northern Ireland and Wales take General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), although there are different versions of the qualifications reflecting the respective priorities of the different parts of the UK.

Vocational, technical and professional learning opportunities are also largely similar. Many of the same qualifications are available in each of England, Northern Ireland and Wales, although each has its own policy priorities and its own public funding rules.

[4] The education system in Scotland is quite distinct from the systems in the other parts of the UK.

The similarities between England, Northern Ireland and Wales are reflected in their qualifications frameworks. England and Northern Ireland use the same qualifications framework for regulated qualifications, the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), and England, Northern Ireland and Wales all use the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). In Northern Ireland, the FHEQ applies in full, whereas in England, the Office for Students (OfS) regulatory framework[5] sets out which elements of the FHEQ are mandatory, to ensure that qualifications awarded meet the academic standards as described in the FHEQ, and that they hold this value at the point of certification and over time, in line with sector-recognised standards.

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) is used in Wales. The CQFW includes, as one of its three pillars, the regulated qualifications pillar, which mirrors the RQF. This pillar is regulated by Qualifications Wales.[6] The two remaining pillars of the CQFW are the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and the Lifelong Learning pillar. The Lifelong Learning pillar acknowledges and accredits unregulated qualifications and non-formal learning.

Scotland has a different education system,[7] its own set of school qualifications and a separate and distinct credit and qualifications framework, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), managed by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP).[8] The SCQF incorporates the Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).

The Policy Context in England

The UK government is committed to using its education, training and skills policy to drive up productivity, support social mobility and to promote sustained and skilled employment for individuals, including those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England. This commitment is set out in the government's Post-16 Skills plan (2016).[9]

The main general qualifications taken by 16 and 18 years olds (GCSEs and A levels respectively) have been reformed, with the first new qualifications being taught from 2015 and the others rolled out over the following three years. GCSEs and A levels are clearly placed within the RQF. The Department for Education (DfE) is currently

[5] See paragraphs 342, 345 and 346 of the OfS Regulatory framework for higher education in England: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/
[6] https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/
[7] For further information on the Scottish system and the SCQF, please visit: https://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/about-the-framework/
[8] https://scqf.org.uk/about-us/the-scqf-partnership/
[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education

reviewing other post-16 qualifications to ensure they are high quality, have a clear purpose and lead to good progression. Ofqual will continue to work closely with the DfE and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute) to ensure robust quality assurance and regulation of technical qualifications.

The government also recognises the social and economic benefits of higher education through, for example, the Industrial Strategy, Building a Britain fit for the future.[10]

The Policy Context in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive acknowledges the importance of skills to developing a vibrant knowledge based economy. The Skills Strategy, 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures' (2011)[11] includes the aspiration to enable access and progression up the skills ladder, in order to raise the skills level of the workforce, raise productivity and secure Northern Ireland's future in a global marketplace. A top priority is to transform the professional and technical education and training system, to support economic growth, and to provide learning pathways enabling people to reach their full potential.

The Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships (June 2014)[12] provided the future direction of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, and set out the new policy commitments and an implementation plan. These new apprenticeships are available at level 3 up to level 8, with a major commitment to Higher Level Apprenticeships, and will be extended to a wider range of occupational areas, to facilitate progression to higher professional or technical training or on to a higher academic pathway.

As with England, in Northern Ireland the main general/academic qualifications studied by 16 and 18 years olds are GCSEs and A levels respectively. CCEA, the awarding organisation based in Northern Ireland, offers a range of GCSEs and A levels to schools. Revised assessments came into effect for first teaching in 2016 (A levels) and 2017 (GCSEs).

The Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland continues to deliver the key higher education strategies[13] published under the 2011–2016 Northern Ireland Assembly, which set out the higher education policy up to 2020 and aim to widen participation. These higher education strategies complement other strategies that

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10 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf

11 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/success-through-skills-transforming-futures-0

12 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/securing-our-success-northern-ireland-strategy-apprenticeships

13 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-strategies-northern-ireland

address the wider skills landscape and aim to enhance the Northern Irish economy, such as the skills strategy,[14] the apprenticeships strategy,[15] and economic and innovation strategies.

The qualifications markets in England and Northern Ireland

The market for regulated non-HE qualifications

In England and Northern Ireland regulated qualifications are developed and owned by awarding organisations (AOs) that are recognised by the appropriate regulator (Ofqual in England and CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland). AOs that award national academic qualifications are generally known as exam boards. Sometimes more than one AO can offer and award very similar qualifications that serve the same purpose.

These AOs compete for business in a market. Schools, colleges, employers, private training providers and sometimes students themselves decide which AO's qualifications they prefer. One of the key roles of the qualifications' regulators is to ensure that qualifications give a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding and indicate a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable qualifications.[16] This means that while AOs can compete on the quality of the service they provide, the quality of any supporting products, on specific features of their qualifications and on their fees, they cannot compete on the standard of their qualifications.

The origins of the market approach lie in the past, when universities or groups of universities offered qualifications which served as university entrance exams. This led to a position where schools could choose which university exam board-endorsed qualifications to provide to their students.

The market model allows for AOs to specialise and to innovate. An AO can tailor its qualifications to suit certain areas of the market, for example qualifications for certain employment sectors or in certain academic areas. An AO can also decide to focus on specific geographical areas, reflecting the industrial or economic priorities of a region.

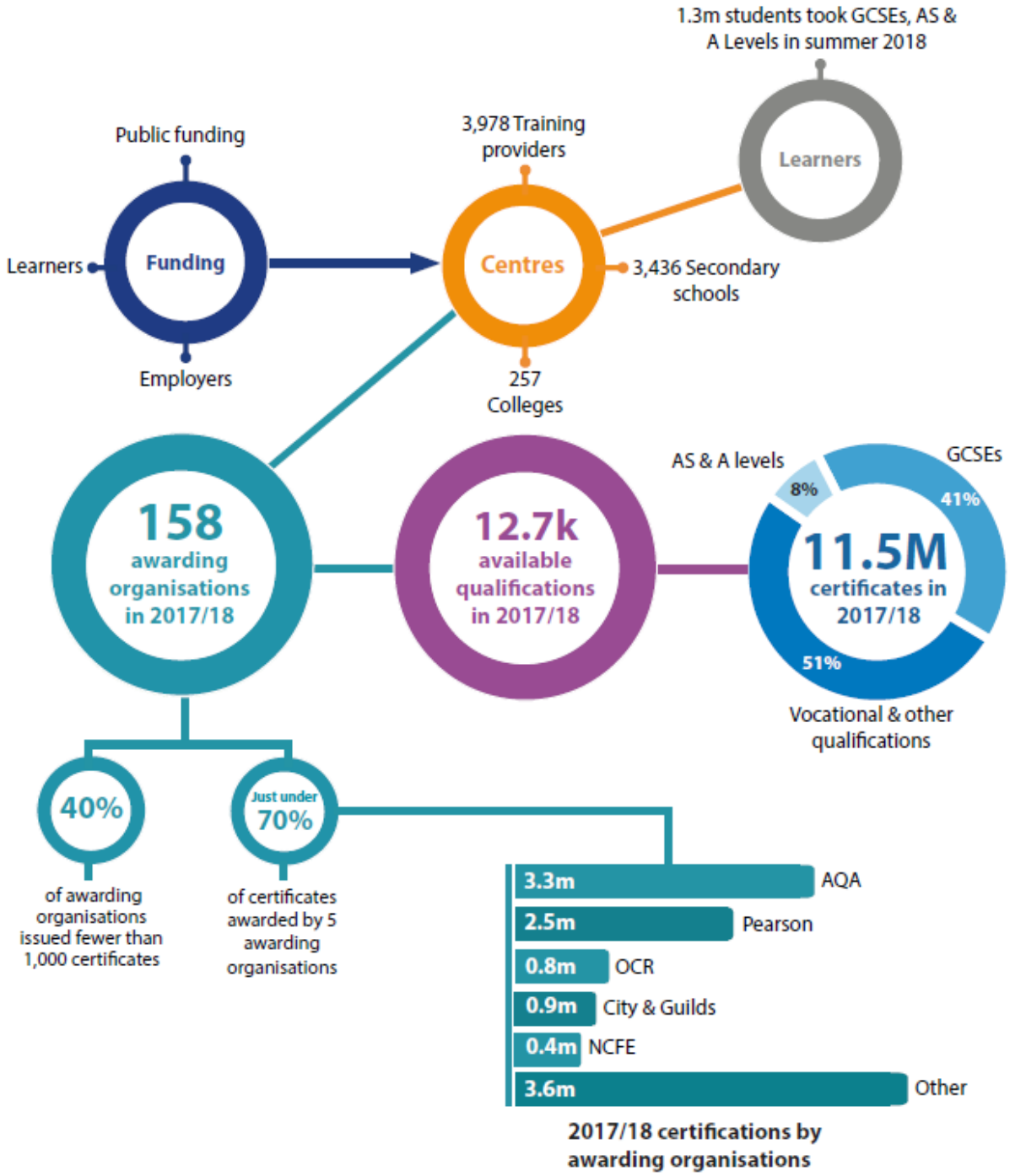
A qualification can only be regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation if there are, or may reasonably be expected to be, people taking the qualification in England and/or Northern Ireland. Once a qualification meets the regulatory requirements, the AO

[14] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/success-through-skills
[15] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/securing-our-success-northern-ireland-strategy-apprenticeships
[16] For a description of the statistical approach used to ensure standards are maintained in GCSEs and A levels, see: https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2018/01/19/gcse-and-a-level-awarding-in-2018/

must ensure that the standard of the award remains consistent wherever it is awarded, whether in England and/or Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Figure 1 below illustrates the scale and structure of the qualifications market in England.

Figure 1: Qualification market figures for England 2017/18[17]



[17] Data taken from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778824/AQMR_-_academic_year_2017_to_2018.pdf

Awarding organisations (AOs)

AOs vary in their origins and structures. Some are developed from historical craft organisations, such as The Worshipful Company of Farriers, which was set up in 1356, and offers a limited range of highly specialist technical and craft qualifications in horse management and welfare. Other AOs are large bodies that offer qualifications across a wide range of occupational sectors and/or academic fields, across a number of levels and in all regions of the UK and internationally, such as Pearson Edexcel and City & Guilds. Some AOs draw on close links to universities or professional bodies and some have their own assessment research centres and publishing divisions. Many other AOs sit in between these extremes, including those who have their origins in groupings of colleges.

In terms of their legal structure, there are three main types of regulated AO:

1. Shareholder-owned Companies (c.75 AOs)

   Ranging from micro-businesses to FTSE100 companies

2. Charitable Institutions (c.45 AOs)

   Including 'not-for-profit' companies such as professional bodies and Royal Charter bodies

3. Industry Bodies (c.35 AOs)

   Promoting skilled employment, providing consistency across employers and securing their ongoing role as the industry lead

Given the range of AO structures and their provenance, some often have a clear mandate from employers, and so engage readily with them in qualification development, as well as on other related industry matters.

AOs can be recognised to award a narrow or broad range of qualifications and to award qualifications at all or at just certain levels of the RQF. In order to be recognised, an AO must satisfy the relevant regulator that it:

- is appropriately constituted and governed
- is of suitable character and integrity
- is adequately resourced and funded; and
- will be able to develop, deliver and award qualifications in line with the regulatory requirements.

As illustrated in table 2, at the time of writing, there were over 15,000 qualifications on the Register of Regulated Qualifications,[18] awarded by 158 AOs recognised by Ofqual and 99 recognised by CCEA Regulation, with many recognised by both.

Table 2: Regulated qualifications market in England and Northern Ireland, 2017-18

	England	Northern Ireland
Recognised awarding organisations	158	99
Regulated qualifications available	15,094	11,562
Regulated qualifications active[19]	12,746	9,451
Regulated qualification certificates awarded	11.5 million	442,000
Percentage of available qualifications - academic	Around 50%	Around 59%
Percentage of available qualifications – technical, vocational and professional	Around 50%	Around 41%

The number of qualifications available in England and Northern Ireland is large: this is a factor of the open qualifications market structure, which leads to great flexibility and choice both in terms of qualifications available, and often in terms of more than one AO offering them. Ofqual and CCEA Regulation require AOs to provide evidence of a clear objective for the qualification and of support from users of the qualification (Condition E1), and of course it remains in the interest of AOs to develop qualifications for which there is clear demand. Some qualifications do have low take up, for example those in more niche sectors or covering very specific skills.

Statistics on the number of RQF qualifications awarded in England are published by Ofqual every quarter,[20] and tend to fluctuate more during periods of reform where changes are made to the categorisation and titling of qualifications for example, and where certain qualifications end and others are introduced. In Northern Ireland, the overall number of recognised AOs is decreasing, leading to a decrease in qualifications offered.

[18] All qualifications that are regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation can be found on the statutory Register of Regulated Qualifications: https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/

[19] Active qualifications are those accepting new learner registrations. Available qualifications includes those currently being studied by learners but which are no longer accepting new registrations, usually due to updated or reformed qualifications replacing them.

[20] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/vocational-and-other-qualifications-quarterly-january-to-march-2019

In England, there are policies to improve, simplify and streamline the post-16 offer. T Levels are a new suite of qualifications currently being developed to be a high quality technical choice for students after GCSE, alongside apprenticeships and A levels. The ongoing review of post 16 qualifications at level 3 and below (excluding GCSEs and A levels) is looking at the qualifications needed to sit alongside those major groups, aiming to ensure that all qualifications have a clear purpose, are necessary, of high quality and lead to good progression.

Non-regulated qualifications

The national regulators are concerned with regulated qualifications that sit in the national framework. However, in England and Northern Ireland there is also a wide range of qualifications outside of the RQF. Such qualifications are typically provided by employers, charities (including independent schools) and independent training agencies.

These qualifications can take many forms, for example certificates that attest to attending programmes of training where there is no formal assessment, or qualifications that are highly specific to a company or job role. Many highly recognised and portable professional qualifications also sit outside of the RQF, and are managed and quality assured through their own industry bodies, for example in the fields of finance, law and medicine. These qualifications are often well-established in their sectors and overseen by a professional body. On occasion, policy decisions made by government departments or key influential bodies may determine that certain groups of qualifications must be regulated, for example where public funding is available to support learning provision, or where particular qualifications are required.[21]

International and sectoral qualifications may also be regulated and listed in the Register of regulated qualifications, as long as the relevant AO is recognised by Ofqual and/or CCEA and complies with the regulatory procedures relating to those qualifications, in the same way as AOs must regarding qualifications offered in the UK.

The higher education market

Higher education institutions also compete with each other in a market. They compete to attract students to study at their institution, although in practice for the most selective universities, potential students are competing with each other for places on their courses. There are five higher education institutions in Northern

[21] Recent guidance published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) relating to Animal Welfare Inspectors (see paragraph 16(a)): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762430/animal-welfare-licensing-procedural-guidance.pdf

Ireland: two universities and the Open University, and two university teacher training colleges. There are over 350 higher education institutions registered with the Office for Students (OfS)[22] in England. The OfS sets the requirements for registration that providers must meet.

Higher education institutions (HEIs)

Higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland include publicly funded universities and other higher education providers. Some universities date back hundreds of years, such as the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, or the so-called "red brick" universities mostly dating from the late 19th century, situated in cities across England and in Northern Ireland.

Others are "newer" universities established in the last 30 or 40 years, or developed from long-standing colleges and polytechnics, when a 1992 government act[23] required all directly funded higher education institutions to be managed under the same funding and quality assurance arrangements.

Universities and other institutions that have the power to award UK degrees are legally recognised as 'degree-awarding bodies'. All UK degree courses are approved by the university or other recognised degree-awarding body that awards the final qualification.

Colleges that are approved to provide full higher education courses on behalf of recognised bodies are known as 'listed bodies'. They do not in themselves have the right to award degrees.

All institutions in England must be registered with the Office for Students in order to apply for degree awarding powers and to maintain the right to award degrees.[24]

[22] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/the-ofs-register/
[23] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents
[24] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/

Public funding of qualifications

Some, but not all, regulated qualifications are publicly funded. In both England and Northern Ireland, once a qualification is approved for funding, that funding is channelled through providers (academies, colleges, independent training organisations and so on) who have an agreement with the relevant funding body and will work within set policy and funding rules. Providers can decide which qualifications to deliver based on the relevant funding rules, which leads to a wide range of options available to learners, particularly those aged 16 or over.

England

In England, The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is accountable for £58bn of funding for education and training provided by schools, further education and sixth form colleges and independent training providers. The ESFA is also responsible for approving qualifications for funding. The ESFA approves qualifications for funding for learners aged 14 to 19 and post-19[25] learners. In order to be approved for funding (including Advanced Learner Loans) qualifications need to meet a set of approval criteria. Once a qualification is approved for funding (including Advanced Learner Loans), how it is funded, who it is funded for, and whether a learner can be fully funded, co-funded or can apply for a loan, will depend on the learner's age, their prior achievement and their personal circumstances.

In England, the main funded programmes through which a qualification may currently be approved are study programmes (for those aged under 19 years), the Adult Education Budget (post 19), Adult Learner Loans and the European Social Fund.

In England, there are two approaches to funding apprenticeships.[26] Employers with a wage bill of over £3m per year pay a levy which creates a resource to fund apprenticeships for contributing employers. Smaller employers who do not pay the levy share the cost of training and assessing their apprentices with government.[27] In England, apprentices do not necessarily study a qualification, but all apprenticeships require an independent End Point Assessment to confirm that the apprentice has demonstrated the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for professional

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[25] Information on how the ESFA approve qualifications for funding for 14 to 19 learners can be found at:
https://section96.education.gov.uk/
Information on how the ESFA approved qualifications for post 19 learners through the Adult Education Budget can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualifications-getting-approval-for-funding
Information on how the ESFA designates qualifications for Advanced Learner Loans can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designating-qualifications-for-advanced-learner-loans

[26] This is a UK government employment tax, so applies to companies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

[27] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work/apprenticeship-levy-how-it-will-work#pay-apprenticeship-levy

competence in the occupation and as specified within the End Point Assessment Plan.

The Office for Students distributes government higher education funding to eligible providers in England. These grants do not meet the entire costs of a course. Providers receive most of this cost through student tuition fees. The grants make a contribution towards providers' teaching, research, knowledge exchange and related activities.

The funding, distributed by the Office for Students, supports:

- areas where teaching costs are particularly high (such as medicine)
- particular policy areas and government priorities (such as promoting equal opportunities).

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education (DE(NI)) provides funding channelled through the Education Authority for education in schools covering learners up to the age of 19. It also approves regulated qualifications for use in schools and provides funding to a number of organisations to provide enterprise, employability and innovation programmes and events, for primary and post-primary pupils, both inside and outside school.

The Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (DfENI) is responsible for the financing of post-16 Education and Training (other than post-16 education in schools), which is channelled through providers (FE colleges, independent training organisations and Universities) who have a funding agreement with DfENI to deliver approved provision. DfENI leads the apprenticeships programme, including developing the Apprenticeship Frameworks and funding their delivery. There are currently over 170 different apprenticeship frameworks which are supported by DfENI.

For apprenticeships,[28] funding[29] for the tuition element of level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships, and for level 4 and level 5 Higher Level Apprenticeships, is partly provided through the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2014-2020 and the Department for the Economy (DfENI).

An Employer Incentive Payment is also available to employers whose employees successfully complete their level 2 and/or level 3 Apprenticeship framework. Employers must contract apprentices to work at least 21 hours per week (to include day release for directed training) and are responsible for paying their apprentices at least the National Minimum Wage rate.

[28] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/apprenticeships
[29] https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/finances-and-funding-apprenticeships

For apprentices aged 16-24, the costs of the directed ('off-the-job') training element of the apprenticeship are funded by the ESF and DfENI. For apprentices aged 25 and over, 50 per cent of the costs of directed training are funded by the ESF and DfENI. Adults aged 25 and over may only undertake apprenticeships in occupational areas that are economically important in Northern Ireland.

As in England and elsewhere in the UK, there are two approaches to funding apprenticeships in Northern Ireland: employers with a wage bill of over £3m per year, pay a levy which creates a resource to fund apprenticeships for contributing employers, while smaller employers who do not pay the levy share the cost of training and assessing their apprentices with government.

The DfENI Higher Education Division administers funding to the Northern Ireland higher education sector, supporting education, research and related activities.

3. Qualifications frameworks and regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland

A wide range of qualifications is available in England and Northern Ireland. Regulated qualifications fall within the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Higher education qualifications are within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Other non-regulated qualifications exist; these sit outside of the two regulatory frameworks.

Table 3: Responsibility for establishing and maintaining the qualifications frameworks

Framework	Responsible organisation
RQF (England)	Ofqual is the statutory qualifications and assessments regulator in England. Ofqual developed and used its statutory powers to establish the RQF in England, following public consultation. It uses these powers to maintain the integrity of the framework.
RQF (Northern Ireland)	CCEA Regulation regulates qualifications in Northern Ireland. It adopted the RQF into its requirements and maintains the integrity of the framework as it is used for qualifications taken in Northern Ireland.
FHEQ (England and Northern Ireland)	The shared FHEQ is managed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA).

This chapter presents a brief overview of the introduction, evolution and present status of qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland.

Introduction and evolution of national qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland

Qualifications frameworks are well established and valued in England and Northern Ireland. The origins of the first national qualifications framework in England and Northern Ireland go back to 1995. At that time Lord Dearing was invited by the UK government to consider and advise on ways to strengthen, consolidate and improve the range of 16-19 qualifications, to help employers compare the many hundreds of qualifications then available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In 1996 Lord Dearing recommended the introduction of national qualification levels. The levels, which would be included in qualification titles and printed on qualification certificates, would enhance understanding of qualifications, and the transferability of learning and progression. His recommendations underpinned the creation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The first National Qualifications Framework ranged from level 1 to level 5. In 2004 level 4 was replaced with levels 4, 5 and 6 and level 5 was replaced with levels 7 and 8. This allowed the NQF to better align with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications[30] (FHEQ) (see Table 4). The National Qualifications Framework also had an entry level, divided into three sub-levels (entry level 1, entry level 2 and entry level 3).

[30] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

Table 4: Evolution of NQF levels from 1996 to present with FHEQ levels

NQF levels 1996 – 2004 **Example qualifications**	**NQF levels 2004 – 2015** **QCF levels 2008 - 2015** **RQF levels 2015+** **Example qualifications**[31]	**FHEQ levels** **Qualification types**
LEVEL 5 Level 5 NVQ in Construction Management Level 5 Diploma in Translation	**LEVEL 8** Specialist awards	**LEVEL 8** Doctorates
	LEVEL 7 Level 7 Diploma in Translation	**LEVEL 7** Master's degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas
LEVEL 4 Level 4 NVQ in Advice and Guidance Level 4 National Diploma in Professional Production Skills Level 4 BTEC Higher National Diploma in 3D Design Level 4 Certificate in Early Years	**LEVEL 6** Level 6 National Diploma in Professional Production Skills	**LEVEL 6** Bachelor's degrees Graduate certificates and diplomas
	LEVEL 5 Level 5 BTEC Higher National Diploma in 3D Design	**LEVEL 5** Diplomas of higher education and further education Foundation degrees Higher national diplomas
	LEVEL 4 Level 4 Certificate in Early Years	**LEVEL 4** Certificates of higher education Higher national certificates
LEVEL 3 A levels Level 3 Certificate in Small Animal Care Level 3 NVQ in Aeronautical Engineering		
LEVEL 2 GCSE Grades 9 to 4 (England), A* to C (NI) Level 2 Diploma for Beauty Specialists Level 2 NVQ in Agricultural Crop Production		
LEVEL 1 GCSE Grades 3 to 1 (England), D to G (NI) Level 1 Certificate in Motor Vehicle Studies Level 1 NVQ in Bakery		
ENTRY LEVELS 1-3 Entry level Certificate in Personal and Social Development		

[31] For further information on qualifications at all levels that are regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation, see: https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was introduced in 2008 as part of the UK government's major reform of vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. At that time, the QCF did not replace the National Qualifications Framework, but sat alongside it. The QCF was an ambitious, transformative framework that incorporated qualification design rules to develop the reformed structure of vocational qualifications. It was designed to allow units of learning to be recognised and a unit based national credit transfer system for, initially, vocational qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales to be introduced.

The QCF was at that time seen as the future framework for all regulated qualifications and, as such, was referenced to the EQF in the 2010 report.[32] Following the introduction of the QCF, AOs had to change many of their qualifications to meet the regulations (rules) around qualification design and structure. Qualifications were required to be developed based on units and credits that could potentially be shared across more than one qualification offered by different AOs, in order to promote credit accumulation and transfer (CAT). Qualification titles also changed. The QCF required every qualification to have 'award', 'certificate' or 'diploma' in its title, according to the number of credits associated with the qualification.

Following a change of government in 2010,[33] and an evaluation by Ofqual of the effectiveness of the QCF,[34] Ofqual decided to replace the NQF and the QCF with a single, simpler, inclusive Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). The QCF imposed a specific approach to qualification design that, Ofqual concluded, was not in all cases consistent with high quality qualifications that met students' and employers' needs. While the regulatory design rules supported credit transfer, in practice credit transfer was not widely taken up. Further, the design rules did not by themselves always lead to good assessments, as evidenced where units that did not fully satisfy the design requirements were not necessarily found to result in a poorly delivered or assessed unit. Instead, deficiencies in the unit design were often counterbalanced by either the supplementary materials produced by AOs, or the assessment delivery by learning providers. This then raised questions about the value of the QCF regulations.

[32] http://ccea.org.uk/ga/regulation/european/european_qualifications_framework/referencing_process
[33] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-school-and-college-qualifications-and-curriculum/2010-to-2015-government-policy-school-and-college-qualifications-and-curriculum
[34] See page 5: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3767/1/2011-06-03-qcf-evaluation-report.pdf

In contrast, the RQF allows AOs greater freedom to design high quality qualifications and assessments and to be responsive to employers' needs and innovative in their approach. All regulated qualifications can sit comfortably within the RQF.

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) replaced the NQF and the QCF in October 2015.[35]

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)

The statutory basis of the RQF

The RQF is a framework for regulated qualifications which may only be awarded by AOs that are recognised (and therefore, regulated) by Ofqual in England, and by CCEA Regulation, in Northern Ireland. Ofqual and CCEA Regulation set criteria which an organisation that wishes to award regulated qualifications must meet for its regulated qualifications to be included in the statutory Register of Regulated Qualifications.[36] Once recognised, an AO is required, by legislation, to comply with the rules set by the regulators. The requirements of the RQF are embedded within these rules. Regulatory activities (for example the accreditation of qualifications and monitoring of AOs) ensure that these requirements are met by the AOs. The regulators can take enforcement action against an AO that does not comply with the rules.

Ofqual[37] and CCEA Regulation[38] publish the following rules and guidance, which apply to all AOs and all qualifications they regulate:

- Criteria for Recognition;
- the General Conditions of Recognition;
- guidance to the General Conditions of Recognition, (designed to help AOs understand how to comply with the rules). Awarding organisations must, by statute, have regard to this guidance;
- specific supplementary Conditions for certain groups of qualifications in each jurisdiction, such as GCSEs,[39] A levels,[40] Functional Skills Qualifications and apprenticeship End Point Assessments[41];
- other general rules and guidance relating to certificate requirements, logo requirements, requirements and guidance for assigning levels to regulated

[35] https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/10/01/explaining-the-rqf/
[36] https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/
[37] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook
[38] http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/compliance
[39] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-9-to-1-qualification-level-conditions
[40] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements
[41] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/epa-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements

qualifications and, where appropriate, their components, requirements for specifying total qualification time, and criteria for determining whether a qualification is relevant for the purposes of the Education and Skills Act 2008.

The regulators can take enforcement action against an AO that has breached, or that it considers is likely to breach, any of its Conditions. For example, Ofqual can direct an AO to comply with Ofqual's rules. Ofqual can impose a financial penalty on an AO that breaches its rules and has the power to withdraw the organisation's recognition to award one or more regulated qualifications.[42] CCEA Regulation does not have the same enforcement powers as Ofqual but it can withdraw the recognition status of an AO in Northern Ireland if the AO does not comply with the rules.

The RQF provides a single, simple system for cataloguing all qualifications regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation. Central to this system, are the regulatory requirements around the level and size of a qualification.

Level

The regulations require an AO to assign an RQF level to each of its regulated qualifications. It must have regard to the relevant regulator's requirements and guidance when assigning a level and, in particular, match the learning outcomes for the qualification to the level descriptors of the framework.

Qualification level indicates the difficulty and complexity of the knowledge and skills associated with any qualification. There are eight levels supported by three 'entry' levels. While most qualifications will be assigned a single level some, such as GCSEs, can span more than one (GCSEs span levels 1 and 2).[43]

Qualification levels are widely recognised and understood in England and Northern Ireland. Job descriptions, school and college prospectuses and statutory licences to practise requirements typically describe the level of demand of a qualification and explain progression opportunities with reference to the appropriate level in the qualifications framework.

If the regulator decides an AO has assigned the wrong level to a qualification, the AO must revise the level in accordance with the regulator's instruction.

[42] For further information on regulatory actions and interventions, including details of current and closed actions, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/regulatory-actions-and-interventions-by-ofqual

[43] GCSEs are graded qualifications taken by most 16-year olds following two years of study in each subject. They have been designed to target a wide range of student ability: allowing them to span two levels ensures they are accessible to the full range of students and provide challenge to the most able.

Level descriptors

The level descriptors for the RQF were based on those for the QCF and the NQF; Ofqual took care to make sure that introducing the RQF would not require any recalibration of the levels of existing qualifications.

The RQF requires qualifications to be designed using learning outcomes. The level descriptors are simple to interpret and present a clear hierarchy of demand.

The RQF level descriptors are expressed in terms of knowledge and skills categories only. The descriptors do not address a learner's autonomy and accountability, which was previously included in the QCF and is covered in the EQF in the responsibility and autonomy component. This change simplifies the RQF. There is no evidence that the exclusion of a responsibility and autonomy category detracts from the functioning of the RQF as a device for levelling qualifications. Therefore, whilst having a responsibility and autonomy domain may add value to the general concept of a qualification level, as it does in the EQF, in a simplified version of a framework such as the RQF, it was decided that its absence would not detract from the process of levelling of qualifications.

The RQF is a regulatory instrument and the level descriptors for the RQF must be used by all recognised AOs for all of their regulated qualifications. The knowledge and skills descriptors define specific requirements, using command verbs that can be monitored by the regulators through reviews of qualification documents, such as specifications and specimen assessment materials.

The structure and language of the level descriptors in the responsibility and autonomy domain were considered to be less defined and definitive than those in the knowledge and skills descriptors, making them less suited for use in the regulatory process. Descriptors for responsibility and autonomy would not apply in the same way across the spectrum of qualifications, as not all qualifications at a given level require a learner to demonstrate the same extent of responsibility and autonomy outcomes. For example, an A level in history is a level 3 academic qualification, which does not easily provide opportunities for a learner to demonstrate autonomy, compared to qualifications with an element of work-based learning. In this way, a level 2 qualification in horticulture is likely to offer more opportunities for a learner to demonstrate responsibility and autonomy.

A qualification can still be designed to recognise levels of responsibility and autonomy demonstrated by a learner: the framework describes requirements for knowledge and skills but does not constrain what any qualification can be designed to achieve. Where a qualification objective is to recognise a particular level of responsibility and autonomy in the workplace, this should be assessed as part of the

qualification and the qualification level should be determined by reference to the knowledge and skills descriptors.

Examples of this can be found in a number of qualifications. For example, a qualification at RQF level 5, the Award in Independent Auditing of External Quality Assurance,[44] naturally includes numerous references to working as an independent auditor, including outcomes to plan and conduct independent audits, as well as "evaluate external quality assurance activities, including the performance of external quality assurance verifiers", and "identify risks to their organisation". These kinds of activities are covered well by the knowledge and skills descriptors, but also include areas within the EQF responsibility and autonomy descriptor, such as reviewing the performance of others, evaluating work activities, and managing complex technical or professional activities or projects.

Similarly, a qualification at RQF level 2 called Working in Business Teams[45] includes as an assessment criterion "Know how to deal with any conflict or difficult situations as a team leader". The EQF responsibility and autonomy descriptor includes supervision of others under the EQF level 5 descriptor (RQF levels 4 and 5 are referenced to EQF level 5). This illustrates the rationale behind the regulatory approach to simplify the descriptor requirements, whilst allowing AOs the flexibility to adapt the descriptors to suit the requirements of their qualifications at any given level.

Qualification design is strongly informed by regulatory criteria (backed by enforcement powers), National Occupational Standards (particularly in Northern Ireland), and input from sector experts. The system is designed not to be overly prescriptive and to allow AOs to be innovative in how they design qualifications to meet the changing demands of learners and employers.

The exclusion of a domain for responsibility and autonomy from the RQF level descriptors was a significant change. However, an intensive mapping analysis, carried out in England and Northern Ireland as well as Wales (where the regulated pillar of the CQFW also uses the RQF level descriptors) found no evidence of a change in the level to level relationships between the RQF and the EQF. The removal of the responsibility and autonomy domain has had no effect on the referencing outcome first established in 2010 and confirmed in this report.

Size and credit

Qualification size refers to the estimated total amount of time it will typically take a learner to study and be assessed for a qualification. For some qualifications this will

[44] https://www.proqualab.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ProQual-L5-Award-in-Independent-Auditing-of-External-Quality-Assurance.pdf
[45] https://www.eta-awards.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Lean-Management-Guide.pdf

be a matter of hours (minimum of ten hours), for others it will be several years of study.

Qualification size is expressed in terms of Total Qualification Time (TQT), which includes supervised or taught learning and assessment (known as guided learning hours) as well as non-supervised learning.

An AO can assign a credit value to a component of a qualification, (as well as to a qualification as a whole), although this is not a requirement of the RQF. Where credit is assigned, the AO must also assign a level to that component. The credit value of a component or whole qualification is simply obtained, by dividing the TQT for the component or qualification by ten.

Qualifications in England and Northern Ireland

In England and Northern Ireland qualifications are awarded to individuals who have demonstrated, through one or more assessments, that they have achieved the learning outcomes to the required standard for that qualification.

This is in line with the Council of the European Union's 2017 definition which aims to improve the transparency and understanding of qualifications and qualifications systems in member states:

Qualifications are the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process by a competent authority and typically take the form of documents such as certificates or diplomas. They determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.[46]

The range of regulated qualifications

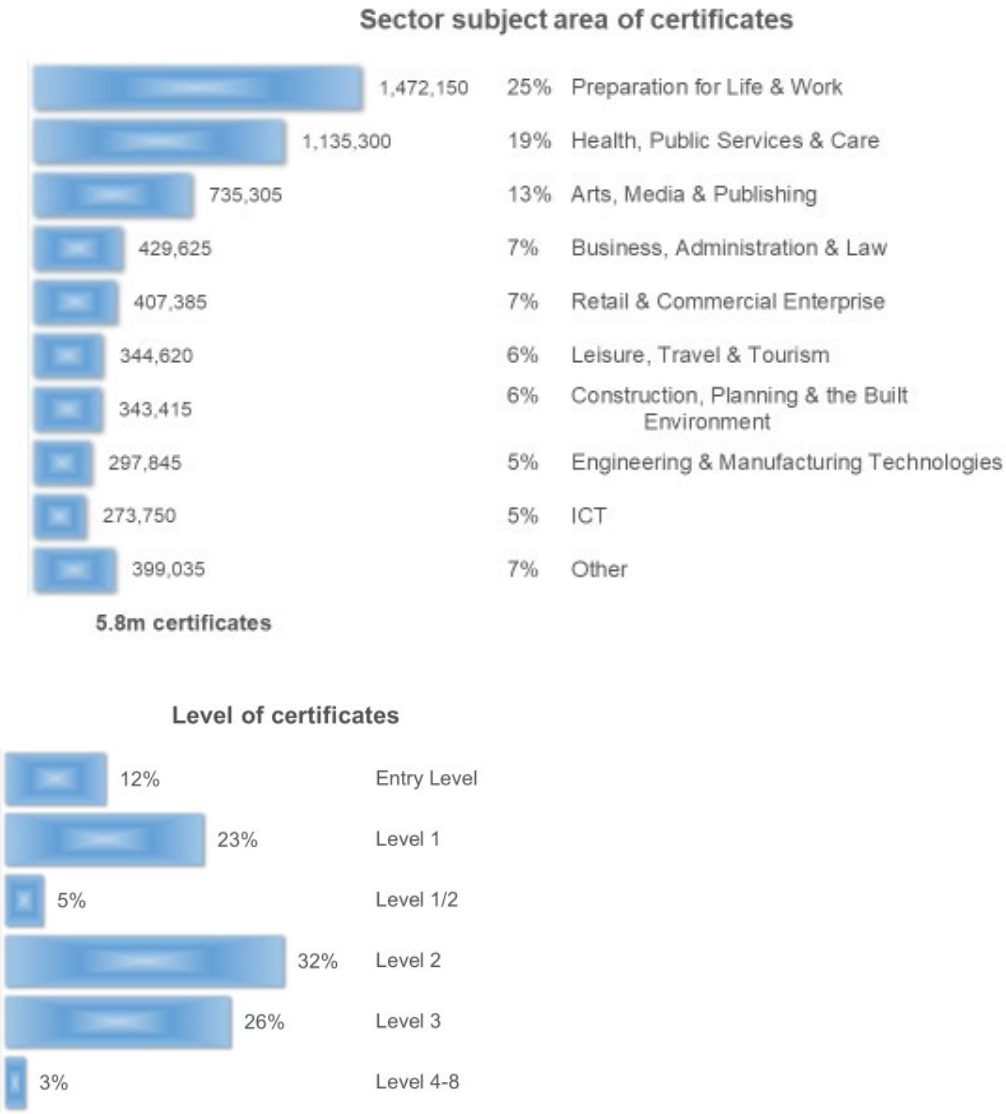
In 2017/18, there were approximately 15,000 regulated qualifications available across England and over 9,000 in Northern Ireland.

Many regulated qualifications are designed to meet the needs of particular occupations, for example in the construction industry, business and administration, retail, engineering, hair and beauty and agriculture. Some of these qualifications serve as a licence to practise, meaning a person is not allowed to perform in a particular function or occupation unless they hold a specific qualification. These qualifications are mainly taken after the age of 16. Employers and professional and/or representative bodies in the relevant sector will typically play a part in designing such qualifications.

There are also qualifications that provide broader preparation for work, either generally or in a specific occupational sector, but without preparing students for any particular role or occupation, as shown in Figure 2.

[46] http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9620-2017-INIT/en/pdf

Figure 2: Vocational and other qualification certificates awarded in England in 2017/18 by sector subject area and level[47]



A number of UK government reviews to inform English policy have been undertaken since 2010. While England-focused, they affected the other devolved administrations to varying extents. Following the Wolf Review of Vocational Education,[48] the UK government reduced the range of vocational qualifications available to school pupils to address concerns that some qualifications that had previously been taken in schools offered little value to young people or employers. A further review conducted

[47] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2017-to-2018

[48] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf

by the Independent Panel on Technical Education,[49] led by Lord Sainsbury, proposed an ambitious new framework for change.

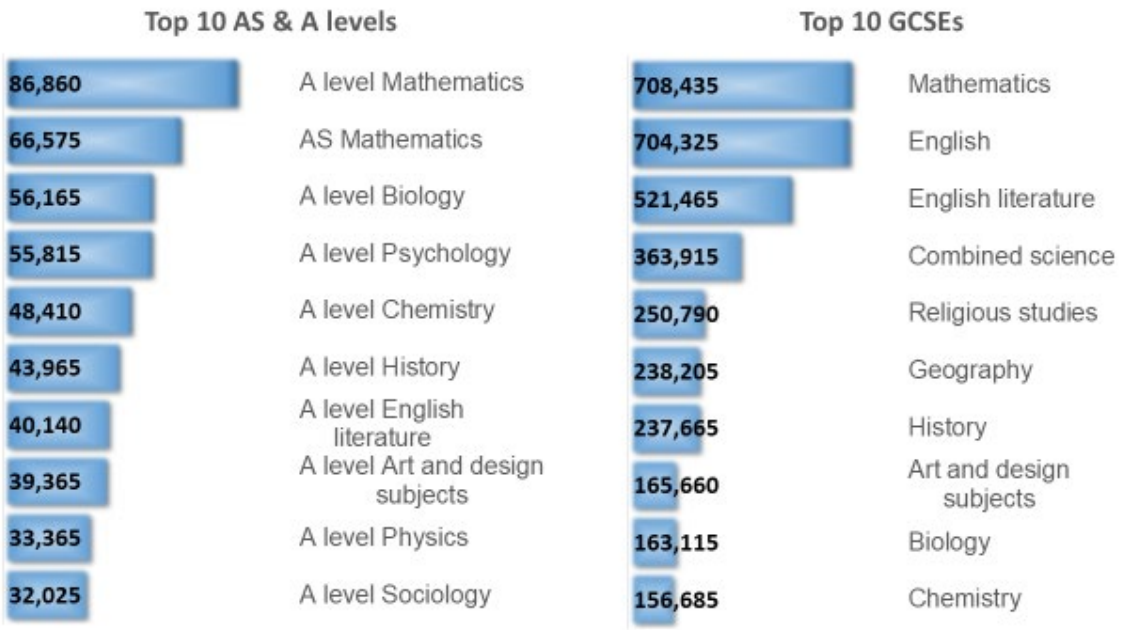
A new suite of two-year technical courses, known as T Levels, is now being developed for students in the 16-19 age range, the first of which will be taught from 2020. The content for T Levels is being designed by employers and will cover 25 employment areas. T Levels will offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least 45 days. Students will take a Technical Qualification during the course, which will be a regulated qualification within the Regulated Qualifications Framework at level 3.

Other regulated qualifications are general or academic in nature, for example in subjects such as English, mathematics, the sciences, history and modern foreign languages. These qualifications are widely taken by students in the 16-18 age range in schools and colleges to prepare for further or higher education and for employment generally.

Most students in England and Northern Ireland take a number (typically eight to ten) of General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) at age 16 and many take General Certificates of Education (GCEs or A levels) at age 18 (in, typically, two or three subjects), as shown in Figure 3. These national regulated qualifications are not school leaving certificates as such, although they are well known and widely taken to determine progression pathways and certificate achievement, and are also taken by adults. GCSEs and A levels are also used as a measure of school performance to hold schools to account, along with other technical/applied qualifications which can be taken alongside or in place of GCSEs and A levels.

49 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

Figure 3: Qualification certificates awarded in England in 2017/18 in the top ten most widely studied GCSEs and A levels[50]



Finally, there are regulated qualifications that certificate popular skills, such as in music, dance or sport and there are qualifications that might have a particular value for individuals working in a range of community settings as volunteers.

[50] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2017-to-2018

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

UK degree-awarding bodies,[51] typically universities, university colleges and some further education colleges with foundation degree awarding powers, award their own qualifications. Consequently, degree-awarding bodies are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of their qualifications. The FHEQ was first published in 2001 and was revised in 2008.

The OfS is the independent regulator of higher education in England. The OfS regulatory framework sets out how the OfS meets its statutory duties, and which elements of the FHEQ are mandatory to OfS registered providers.[52] In England, OfS registered providers must:[53]

- ensure that qualifications hold their value at the point of qualification and over time in line with sector-recognised standards
- deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the specific sections of the FHEQ.

In Northern Ireland, all higher education qualifications are expected to be designed, delivered and awarded in accordance with all elements of the FHEQ. All degree-awarding bodies are required to:

- use the framework in setting and maintaining academic standards
- ensure that the requirements of the framework are met
- demonstrate that their qualifications are awarded in accordance with the FHEQ.

The framework is also used by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in defining and using qualifications in the context of their professional recognition and accreditation processes as well as to inform international comparability of academic standards.

The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications are awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes, expressed in terms of knowledge, understanding and abilities, and attainment: it is an outcomes-based approach to qualifications.

The FHEQ levels are based on qualification descriptors, which set out, at each level, the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a particular type of qualification e.g. bachelor's degree with honours. They set out the threshold

[51] The power to award degrees is regulated by law in the UK. Those organisations granted the power to award higher education degrees are referred to as Recognised Bodies and as Degree Awarding Bodies. It is an offence for an organisation to purport to award, or to offer, a UK degree unless it is authorised to do so.

[52] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/

[53] See paragraph 342 of the OfS Regulatory framework for higher education in England: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1406/ofs2018_01.pdf

academic standard for each qualification type. Courses of study in higher education that lead to an award are described in terms of learning outcomes; the learning outcomes are required to align to the relevant qualification descriptor for the award being made.

The FHEQ is also based on the principle of consistent nomenclature for the main qualification types e.g. degree and postgraduate diploma, to convey trustworthy information about the level, nature and subject of study.

Higher education providers that do not have degree-awarding powers can work in formal partnership with degree-awarding bodies to deliver higher education courses leading to higher education qualifications. Those that offer higher education courses on behalf of degree-awarding bodies are responsible for maintaining the quality of the courses while ultimate responsibility for the maintenance of the required academic standards rests with the degree awarding body.

The FHEQ is a significant component of the quality assurance for UK higher education. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education[54] is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers. It covers all providers of UK higher education within the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and where UK higher education is delivered internationally. Degree awarding bodies, as autonomous institutions, are responsible for assuring their provision against the expectations set out in the Quality Code and the specific sections of the FHEQ that are relevant for each nation.

The Quality Code protects the interests of all students wherever and however they study i.e. whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate, postgraduate, apprentices, or distance/blended/online learners.

The QAA manages the Quality Code and the FHEQ on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, which is made up of sector representatives, funders/regulators, and students.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education was significantly revised by the sector in 2018 to make the expectations more outcomes focused. The revised UK Quality Code sets out a sector-agreed series of expectations: two for standards and two for quality. These are underpinned by Core Practices, which are mandatory across the UK, and Common Practices, which are mandatory across the UK, except for England where they are not part of the regulatory requirements. In England, all registered higher education providers are instead required to meet registration conditions on quality and standards which map across from the expectations set out in the UK Quality Code.

[54] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

The UK Quality Code Expectations were designed, primarily, for 'academic' qualifications. The expectations are:

- Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students, and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed;
- From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education;
- The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework; and
- The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualifications and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.[55]

The 'relevant national qualifications framework' comprises the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies;[56] the two key frameworks included are:

- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), and
- The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).

The FHEQ applies in its entirety in Wales and Northern Ireland; in England the mandatory elements are set out in the OfS regulatory framework. The FHEQ in Wales forms part of the CQFW and the FQHEIS in Scotland part of the SCQF. Neither framework functions as a register of qualifications.

Table 5 presents the main types of higher education qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies within each level. It shows the FHEQ and FQHEIS. Within each level, the various qualifications involve different volumes of learning and hence differences in the range of intended learning outcomes.

The list of qualification titles and acronyms indicated in brackets is not exhaustive but gives typical examples. Degree-awarding bodies have the autonomy to determine their own qualification titles.

[55] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code
[56] http://www.qaa.ac.uk//en/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

Table 5 also presents the FHEQ level to which each qualification type is assigned, and indicates the alignment between the frameworks; framework levels placed alongside each other are deemed to be broadly comparable. Column 4 gives the corresponding cycle of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). The shaded cells in this column indicates where FHEQ qualifications such as postgraduate diplomas and postgraduate certificates do not meet the expectations for QF-EHEA end of cycle qualifications. The table presents, in a European context, points of integration and overlap between different qualification types awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies, and indicates routes (and barriers) for progression.

Table 5: Example qualifications in the UK Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications and the QF-EHEA cycles

Typical higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies	FHEQ level	Corresponding QF-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degree (e.g. PhD, DPhil, EdD, DBA, DClinPsy)	8	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (e.g. MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees (e.g. Meng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)		
Primary qualifications (or first degrees) in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (e.g. MB, ChB, MB BS, BM BS, BDS, BVSc, BVMS)		
Postgraduate diplomas		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)		
Postgraduate certificates		
Bachelor's degrees with honours (e.g. BA Hons, BSc Hons)	6	First cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland		
Graduate diplomas		
Graduate certificates		
Foundation degrees (e.g. FdA, FdSc)	5	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		
Higher National Diplomas (HND) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson		
Higher National Certificates (HNC) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson	4	
Certificates of Higher Education		

The range of FHEQ Qualifications

The FHEQ shows the levels at which qualifications can be awarded by degree awarding bodies, and common titling conventions for those awards e.g. Diploma of Higher Education, bachelor's degree, Doctorate (see Table 5). The subject areas for these awards are varied, many are covered by Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS)[57] which are managed by the QAA.[58] There are over 80 such statements, covering a wide range of subject areas ranging from Accountancy to Youth and Community Work; most are at bachelor's degree level, some are at master's level. The SBS are developed by the QAA working in collaboration with key stakeholders, for instance academics, professional bodies, employers and students. They describe the nature of study, the academic standards expected of graduates in each subject area and what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies.

The QAA's Characteristics Statements[59] describe the distinctive features of qualifications at particular levels within the FHEQ. They describe the qualifications in terms of their purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but do not include subject level detail.

The title of qualifications awarded will normally include the dominant subject or subjects studied e.g. BA (Hons) English, BSc (Hons) Mathematics. Where more than one subject is studied the title of the award will reflect this e.g. BA (Hons) English and History (where each subject is 50%) or BA (Hons) English with History (where English is the majority of study, typically up to 75%). Titling conventions allow up to three subjects to be named, although two is more common. Where a wider range of subjects is studied the award is suffixed with e.g. General Studies.

The use of credits to describe notional learning times is not compulsory in higher education. Where it is used (which is more common than not), a credit is aligned to ten hours of notional study time; this includes time in taught sessions, workshops, presentations, practical, research, assessments etc. The number of credits for each type of award in higher education is set out in the Higher Education Credit Framework for England.[60]

The use of the FHEQ, SBS, Characteristics Statements and Credit Frameworks, whether mandatory or advisory, allow degree awarding bodies to maintain their autonomy whilst ensuring equity and comparability of awards from different organisations and in different subject areas.

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[57] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements
[58] Subject Benchmark Statements and Characteristics Statements are mandatory in Northern Ireland and advisory in England.
[59] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/supporting-resources
[60] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

Qualification development

Qualifications are reformed and updated from time to time. New qualifications are introduced to prepare students for new occupations and to provide wider choice to providers. The qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland provide consistent reference points that enable students, providers and employers to understand at a high level how qualifications relate to each other.

General/academic qualifications

In England, the development of subject content for regulated general / academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels is managed by the DfE in consultation with subject experts and stakeholders (higher education representatives for example). Ofqual sets the rules for how these qualifications must be assessed, in order for the qualifications to sit within the RQF. Public consultations on the subject content and the assessment rules are then held, with the resulting final versions published on DfE's and Ofqual's websites. The four exam boards that are recognised to award such qualifications then use the subject content and the assessment rules to design a qualification. They develop a specification for the qualification together with samples of the assessment materials they plan to use. When the regulator, Ofqual, is satisfied that the specification meets its rules it accredits the qualification, allowing the exam boards to market it to schools and colleges.

In Northern Ireland CCEA Regulation, acting on behalf of the DE(NI), develops GCSE and GCE Design Principles.[61] All GCSEs and A levels developed by the AO part of CCEA must meet these criteria[62] and CCEA Regulation, in consultation with subject experts, accredits these qualifications, which can then be placed within the RQF. Northern Ireland has an open market policy so that (with some limited exceptions) GCSEs and A levels developed for the market in England (or Wales) can be taken by students in Northern Ireland too, subject to the AO complying with DE(NI) policy and assessment requirements.

Vocational, Technical and Professional Qualifications

In England and Northern Ireland there is significant engagement with employers, employees and public authorities in the design and development of vocational, technical and professional qualifications. When designing and developing qualifications, AOs will consult with, for example, individual employers, trade bodies, professional associations, individual employees, learners and other stakeholders in the economy and society.

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[61] http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/compliance/general_conditions_recognition

[62] http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/compliance/n_ireland_gce_and_gcse_qualifications_criteria.pdf

Regulators require that an AO can only make a regulated qualification available when it has consulted with users[63] of the proposed qualifications and has evidence of sufficient support for it. Trade unions representing teachers are among the unions most likely to engage in qualification design and development, especially of national qualifications.

As an example, Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT), a medium-sized vocational AO in the UK personal services sector, engages heavily with the following organisations, in the design of vocational and technical qualifications in the personal service sectors:

- The Institute of Hospitality
- WorldSkills, a global organisation promoting skills development
- UK Active, which aims to get more people, more active, more often
- The Register of Exercise Professionals (REPS)
- The British Association of Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology (BABTAC)
- The Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT)
- The National Hairdressers' Federation (NHF)
- The Hair Council
- The British Barbers Association
- The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

One specific area where trade unions have been particularly involved in qualification development in England relates to a range of Trade Union Congress (TUC) qualifications. These were developed by the TUC with an Ofqual regulated AO (NOCN) to support the work and progression of trade union representatives. Where these meet the appropriate criteria, they are approved for government funding in England and are available to eligible adult learners within funding rules.[64]

National Occupational Standards (NOS) describe the standards of performance expected of individuals in the workplace. NOS were originally used as a basis for the development of work-based qualifications for the UK as a whole and were developed by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) accordingly across all of the UK.

[63] Users of qualifications typically include: students and their representatives, schools and colleges, teachers, employers and their representatives, further and higher education institutions, government departments and professional bodies.

[64] For more information: https://www.tuceducation.org.uk/mod/page/view.php?id=49462 https://www.nocn.org.uk/

However, since 2016-17 Skills policy in England has shifted away from NOS and apprenticeships in England have moved from being defined as a collection of qualifications, to a holistic training programme with an associated assessment of competence. This means the existing apprenticeship frameworks are being replaced by apprenticeship standards (which reflect the knowledge, skills and behaviours employers require in an occupational role). Apprenticeship standards show what an apprentice will be doing and the skills required of them for that occupational role. Standards are developed by employer groups known as 'trailblazers'.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales 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. This covers three broad areas:

- Hosting the NOS database and ensuring its on-going maintenance and management
- Managing contracts with delivery partners for the revision and development of NOS, vocational qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks across the Devolved Administrations
- Supporting the three devolved administrations in developing a future policy approach to NOS.

The contents of the NOS database remain publicly available and employers throughout the UK can continue to use NOS if they so choose.

In practice, NOS continue to be used in some sectors in England. For example, some professional bodies use them to signify what they require of a qualification for licence to practise purposes. As an example, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has recently refreshed the NOS in this sector. As a professional body, CITB collated the views of employers to develop a new NOS, and AOs revised their relevant qualifications to meet these new requirements. However, CITB was concerned that AOs were interpreting the NOS in different ways, which had the potential to undermine the consistency and reliability of these important qualifications. As the qualifications' regulator, Ofqual is currently working closely with CITB and AOs to ensure that the interpretation of the NOS is consistent.

The UK government also has a direct interest in NOS, which provide a useful vehicle for qualification reform. This is typified by a programme in England to introduce a new suite of Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQ) that are principally aimed at adult learners. The DfE in England used NOS as a framework for developing and capturing new requirements against which AOs will develop new qualifications. Ofqual has been involved throughout the process and has introduced qualification specific rules to ensure the validity and reliability of the new qualifications.

Learner progression

People take qualifications at different stages of their lives and for a wide variety of reasons. With very few exceptions, school pupils take a range of qualifications during their compulsory education. Since 2013, individuals in England must continue to engage in education or training until they are 18. They can choose between staying in full time school or college, taking an apprenticeship, or going into employment during which they must engage in part-time study or training.

In Northern Ireland, individuals can chose to complete their education and training at 16, although most will continue to engage in learning beyond the compulsory age. The Entitlement Framework is the Post-14 curriculum which puts the needs of pupils first. It aims to provide access for pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum to enable them to reach their full potential no matter which school they attend or where they live.

In Northern Ireland, the Entitlement Framework guarantees that all pupils in schools have access to a minimum number of courses from age 14 to 16 and between 16 and 19, of which at least one third must be general and one third applied. These courses should be economically relevant and individually engaging with clear progression pathways.

After their compulsory education and training, individuals in England and Northern Ireland can then take qualifications for a wide range of reasons, often linked to their jobs and career aspirations or for personal interest and growth.

Funding routes exist to support disengaged learners to get back into employment, with training available for learners yet to achieve a level 2 qualification.

There is also a wide choice of the ways an individual can prepare for a qualification, eg through traditional teaching, work-based or on-the job training, distance learning including on-line learning and self-directed study.

Awarding organisations are also able to recognise prior learning should they wish.

Higher Education

A range of stakeholders are involved in the development of curricula for higher education. Subject Benchmark Statements are developed by subject specialists from the academic communities, employers, professional bodies, community groups, as relevant, to set out graduate outcomes for a subject area. These are mandatory in Northern Ireland, but not in England, although some providers may choose to use them as reference points. Requirements may also be set by regulatory bodies, for example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the General Medical Council, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

Individual courses within a higher education provider are developed by the subject academics in conjunction with other specialists, for example, learning and teaching experts, technology enhanced learning developers, as well as external input from other academics, professional bodies or past/current students among others. Awards within Apprenticeships must also meet the requirements set out in the Apprenticeship Standard or Apprenticeship Framework.

Modes of study will vary and include: full-time, part-time (including day release, block study, evening study), distance learning, on-line studies and work-based learning.

Where an award is developed and 'approved for delivery' by a degree awarding body it will be regularly or continuously monitored and reviewed with the aim of ensuring that the award continues to meet required outcomes for its graduates.

Transferability of qualifications across the UK and Ireland

Qualifications in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales are usually transferable, being recognised by employers[65] and higher education institutions[66] across the UK.

This also applies, albeit to a lesser extent, between the qualifications taken in the UK and Ireland,[67] which is important given the significant movement of people between the countries. With this in mind, the qualifications regulators and quality assurance bodies in the UK and Ireland work together as a 5-country group to identify and seek to address issues arising from cross border recognition of qualifications. This group has developed a reference leaflet, *Qualifications can cross boundaries,*[68] which is updated on a regular basis. This leaflet presents the relevant national frameworks mapped against the EQF and the QF-EHEA, as illustrated in Table 1.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency[69] (HESA) shows the numbers of students graduating from each level in England and in Northern Ireland. The most recent published data, for 2017/18, is shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Higher Education Qualifications awarded by level of qualification[70]

[65] For example, teaching qualifications from England are recognised in Scotland: https://www.tes.com/articles/moving-teaching-england-teaching-scotland
[66] UCAS provides advice and guidance for applications to all UK HEIs and universities: https://www.ucas.com/about-us/who-we-are
[67] Universities generally widely recognise international qualifications, in particular A levels and GCSEs: https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/international/europe/ireland/applying-to-an-irish-university/. The Common Travel Area allows citizens of the UK and Ireland to move, live and work in either country without needing any permission from the authorities, and regardless of the UK's relationship with the EU: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-travel-area-guidance/common-travel-area-guidance#working-in-the-cta
[68] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf
[69] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/
[70] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/outcomes see Figure 3

		England	Northern Ireland
Level of Qualification	**Level**	**2017/18**	**2017/18**
Postgraduate			
Doctorate research	8	20,630	495
Other postgraduate research	7/8	3,980	50
Total postgraduate research	7/8	24,615	550
Masters taught	7	154,955	2,110
Postgraduate Certificate in Education	7	17,635	260
Other postgraduate taught	7	40,230	1,775
Total postgraduate taught	7	212,820	4,150
Total postgraduate	7	237,435	4,695
Undergraduate			
First degree	6	349,190	9,185
Foundation degree	5	10,790	170
HNC/HND	4/5	28,270[71]	*
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education	6	1,750	*
Other undergraduate	4/5/6	42,710	1,445
Total other undergraduate		**57,650**	**1,615**
Total undergraduate		**406,840**	**10,805**
Total all		**644,275**	**15,500**

**These qualifications are awarded in Northern Ireland but data is not collected on certifications*

[71] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs/numbers

4. Education and training landscape in England and Northern Ireland

Within the UK, education and skills policy, funding, regulation and student support are devolved matters and thus the responsibility of the relevant administration. The context for the delivery of education therefore varies. Some organisations operate across the devolved administrations. While they might have different responsibilities within each administration there are often common elements.

This section sets out the roles and responsibilities of the relevant bodies, with specific reference to those operating in England and/or Northern Ireland. It then explains the landscape for Education and Training from pre-school through compulsory education and on to further, higher and vocational education and training.

Key public bodies in the education and training sector

Key organisations with a role in qualification policy, funding, education inspection and regulation in England and/or Northern Ireland are described below.

Government Departments

The UK government is responsible for education and skills policy in England. The Department for Education takes overall responsibility. Some specific responsibilities, including statutory responsibilities, reside with 'arm's length' organisations.

The devolved government for Northern Ireland (NI) is responsible for education and skills in NI. Two Departments have responsibility for Education and Training policy - the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy.

The Department for Education[72] (DfE) (England)

The DfE is a ministerial department supported by 18 agencies and public bodies and non-ministerial departments. DfE's main areas of responsibility cover early years, primary and secondary education, apprenticeships, further education and higher education.

Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DE(NI))

DE(NI) is responsible for Northern Ireland's education policy, with the exception of the higher and further education sectors. DE(NI)'s main areas of responsibility cover pre-school, primary, secondary and special education; the youth service; the promotion of community relations within and between schools; and teacher education and salaries.

[72] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education

The Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

DfENI is responsible for further and higher education in Northern Ireland. Unlike other parts of the UK, DfENI fulfils the roles of both a government department and a funding body. In further education, DfENI is responsible for policy and strategic development and financing, including the community and voluntary sector. In higher education, DfENI formulates policy and administers funding to support education, research and related activities in the NI higher education sector.

Education Inspection Bodies

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)[73] (England)

Ofsted is independent of the DfE and reports directly to Parliament. Ofsted inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, covering schools and further education and skills provision. Ofsted inspects the quality of apprenticeship training provision from level 2 to level 5. Ofsted works collaboratively with the Office for Students (OfS) to regulate OfS-registered providers delivering apprenticeship training at levels 4 and 5, and the OfS provides relevant information to Ofsted to inform its inspection judgements.[74]

The Education and Training Inspectorate[75] (Northern Ireland)

The ETI is a 'unitary' inspectorate, providing independent inspection services and policy advice for DE and other government departments. ETI is responsible for inspecting educational and youth provision and inspects a range of providers, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and special schools, education other than at school, the youth service, institutes of further education, initial teacher education and educational provision within the prison service.

Qualifications Regulatory Bodies

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)[76] (England)

Ofqual is a rule-making regulatory body with statutory supervisory and enforcement powers. It is independent of government and reports directly to Parliament. Ofqual is accountable for the regulation of regulated qualifications, examinations and assessments in England. Where qualifications which form part of an apprenticeship

[73] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted

[74] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/767160/Apprenticeship_Accountability_Statement_1819.pdf

[75] https://www.etini.gov.uk/

[76] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual

are listed on the Register of Regulated Qualifications, they are subject to Ofqual regulation. Ofqual is one of the external quality assurance providers for the end-point assessment taken by apprentices.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)[77], (Northern Ireland)

CCEA is a non-departmental public body reporting to DE(NI). It is an educational body that brings together curriculum, assessment and examinations.

CCEA has the dual role of both Awarding Organisation (AO) and Regulator. It is the main Northern Ireland AO for School General Qualifications (GCSEs, AS and A levels). CCEA Regulation is responsible for the accreditation and quality assurance of all qualifications offered in Northern Ireland, including General School Qualifications and Professional and Technical (Vocational) Qualifications.

The Office for Students[78] (OfS) (England)

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) established the Office for Students (OfS) as the independent regulator of higher education in England. The OfS came into existence on 1 January 2018 and aims to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

Quality Assurance Bodies

UK Higher Education Quality Assurance Body: The Quality Assurance Agency[79] (QAA)

The QAA is an independent body that manages the Quality Code and the FHEQ on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment[80] (UKSCQA). QAA works to support the safeguarding of standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world.

The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment[81] (UKSCQA)

The UKSCQA provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements. The UKSCQA includes representation from all administrations of the UK higher education sector. It includes academic, student and professional/regulatory members, as well as representatives from QAA. It is responsible for strategic oversight of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education: baseline regulatory requirements, including the FHEQ and UK Quality Code for

[77] http://ccea.org.uk/
[78] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/
[79] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/
[80] https://ukscqa.org.uk/
[81] https://ukscqa.org.uk/

higher education, providing strategic direction for projects designed to ensure the reliability of degree standards, advising on support requirements for academic governance, and developing and providing strategic understanding of transnational education.

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education[82] (the Institute) (England)

The Institute is an employer led non-departmental public body, set up in 2017. Its functions include ensuring the quality of apprenticeships and providing advice to the Government on future funding provision for apprenticeship training. It works with employer groups, known as trailblazers, to develop apprenticeship standards and assessment plans, as well as making recommendations on funding bands to the Department for Education for each apprenticeship standard. It is accountable for designing and operating approvals and review processes for standards and assessment plans (having regard to the policy criteria set by the government), and for advising employers on the policy and process for developing standards and end-point assessments for apprenticeships.

The Institute is responsible for development, procurement, approval and quality assurance of the qualifications which underpin each of the new T Levels, and for operational delivery oversight of the T Level framework.

Funding provision

Education and Skills Funding Agency[83] (ESFA) (England)

The ESFA is the executive agency of the Department for Education accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults in England. It is responsible for the £58 billion budget for the education and training sector, and apprenticeships (including higher and degree apprenticeships). More specifically, it ensures that public funds are properly spent, it achieves value for money for the tax-payer and delivers the policies and priorities set by the Secretary of State. The ESFA regulates academies, further education and sixth-form colleges, and training providers, intervening where there is risk of failure or where there is evidence of mismanagement of public funds. For both apprenticeships and technical education, the ESFA is responsible for the end-to-end delivery of these major reform programmes in England.

Education Authority (EA) (Northern Ireland)

The EA is a government sponsored non-departmental public body of the Department of Education. The EA is the funding authority for all schools and is responsible to DE for ensuring that efficient and effective pre-school, primary and secondary education

[82] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/
[83] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency

services are available to meet the needs of children and young people, including those with special education needs, and for ensuring the provision of efficient and effective youth services. The EA is accountable for the funding provided directly to it and for the funding delegated to grant-aided schools.

The Department for the Economy (DfENI)

DfENI is responsible in Northern Ireland for funding general and vocational education in further education colleges for 16- to 19-year-olds, for public funding for post-19 adult education and training, and for funding work-based learning (e.g. apprenticeships) and youth training programmes, which are available from age 16.

Government funding is provided in accordance with DfENI priorities. Funding for adult education and training and work-based learning and youth training is increasingly aimed at ensuring a strong and vibrant economy, through the development of professional and technical skills which will help employers to innovate. It is also aimed at supporting social inclusion by providing those with low level or no qualifications, or who have other barriers to learning, with the skills and qualifications needed to find employment and become economically active.

The learning landscape in England and Northern Ireland

A diverse range of institutions and organisations is involved in delivering education and training in England and Northern Ireland. This information is intended to support the responses to the EQF referencing criteria in Chapter 5 of this report. Table 7 illustrates in broad terms the main stages and providers of education and training.

Table 7: The main stages and providers of education and training in England and Northern Ireland

Phase of education	Type of institution		Typical age
Higher and further education	Further education institutions	Higher education institutions (HEIs) (universities and other HEIs)	18+
	Technical, applied or academic qualifications, apprenticeships, GCE AS-level and GCE A-level examinations, and T levels (usually taken at age 17 and 18 respectively) provide access to further and higher education and the world of work		
	Further education institutions, sixth form colleges and other training providers	School sixth form	16 -18 years
Secondary education	General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) in academic subjects (usually taken at age 16) and other technical qualifications provide access to post-compulsory general/academic and technical studies and the world of work		
	Secondary schools		11-16 years
Primary education	Primary schools		4-11 years
Pre-school and nursery education	Pre-school settings which include maintained nursery schools, nursery schools attached to maintained primary schools, voluntary playgroups, private day nurseries and childminders		

Types of school in England and Northern Ireland

In England and Northern Ireland the school categories are state funded (publicly funded) and Independent. Most schools are state funded. Most schools follow the National Curriculum for England,[84] although this is not compulsory for all schools.[85] All state funded schools in Northern Ireland follow the Statutory Curriculum.[86] State funded schools are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in England and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland. Independent schools are fee-paying and follow their own curriculum. Table 8 shows the number of each type of provider type in England and Northern Ireland.

Table 8: Number of Providers

	England	Northern Ireland
Primary schools	16,766	813
Secondary schools	3,436	196
Special schools	1,043	39
Independent schools	2,320[87]	14
Further education colleges	257[88]	6
Universities	116[89]	3

Compulsory school age and stages in England and Northern Ireland

Compulsory attendance at school is from the ages of 5 in England[90] and 4 in Northern Ireland to age 16. Since 2015, young people in England are required to continue in learning or training until age 18. Raising the participation age (RPA) does not mean young people must stay in school; they can choose one of the following options:

- full-time education, such as school or college;
- apprenticeships, work-based learning; and

[84] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4
[85] https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school
[86] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/statutory-curriculum
[87] School numbers taken from Figure A, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf
[88] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[89] Taken from OfS Register, 12.08.2019
[90] As set out in section 8 of the Education Act 1996. In practice most children start school in the September after their 4th birthday

- part-time education or training if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering for at least 20 hours a week.

Qualifications in England and Northern Ireland

Qualifications and Pathways - age 14-16 years

Most 14-16 year olds study in a school environment. Schools must offer pupils aged 14–16 years a range of courses leading to recognised qualifications. The outcomes of these external exams and associated qualifications are used to gain access to a range of post-16 options, including access to two further years' study in school known as Sixth Form (16–18 years), a sixth form college (in England only) or a further education college. Further education and sixth-form colleges are also able to enrol pupils aged 14-16 years to complete full-time study programmes that include technical qualifications alongside general qualifications, including English and mathematics.

The most widely studied qualifications from age 14-16 are GCSEs, but other qualifications can also be taken including, for example, Technical Awards, and in Northern Ireland only, Occupational Studies. These vocational/applied qualifications cover RQF entry level to level 2 and can form a valuable part of a general education, preparing pupils for life and work.

GCSEs

GCSEs are available in a wide range of subjects. GCSEs are designed and awarded by AOs, and must meet the content requirements set by the government education departments (DfE in England and DE in Northern Ireland), and the assessment requirements set by the regulators (Ofqual in England, CCEA Regulation in NI). Grades are awarded on a scale that covers both levels 1 and 2 of the RQF. Grades 3 to 1 in England (which equate to grades D – G in Northern Ireland) signify RQF level 1 achievement, while grades 9 to 4 in England (which equate to grades A* - C in Northern Ireland) signify RQF level 2.

Whilst many GCSE subjects require all students to cover the same content, and one set of assessments are developed to include questions targeting all of the grades available, other subjects have assessments that are tiered, with Foundation Tier assessments targeting grades 1-5 and Higher Tier assessments targeting grades 4-9 (or grades D-G and C-A* respectively in Northern Ireland). Students wishing to continue studying a subject at A level are generally expected to achieve a grade 4 or 5 (grade C or C* in Northern Ireland) at GCSE in the relevant subject, though this is a matter for the school or college concerned.

In 2017/8, around 4.7m GCSE certifications were issued in England across the 276 subjects in which they are offered, with 180,910 certifications in Northern Ireland.

Students usually take about 8-10 GCSE examinations in different subjects, which usually include mathematics and English language. GCSEs are available to all ages and provide a stepping stone to further study in schools and colleges, as well to other work based learning programmes such as apprenticeships or employment.

Technical Awards

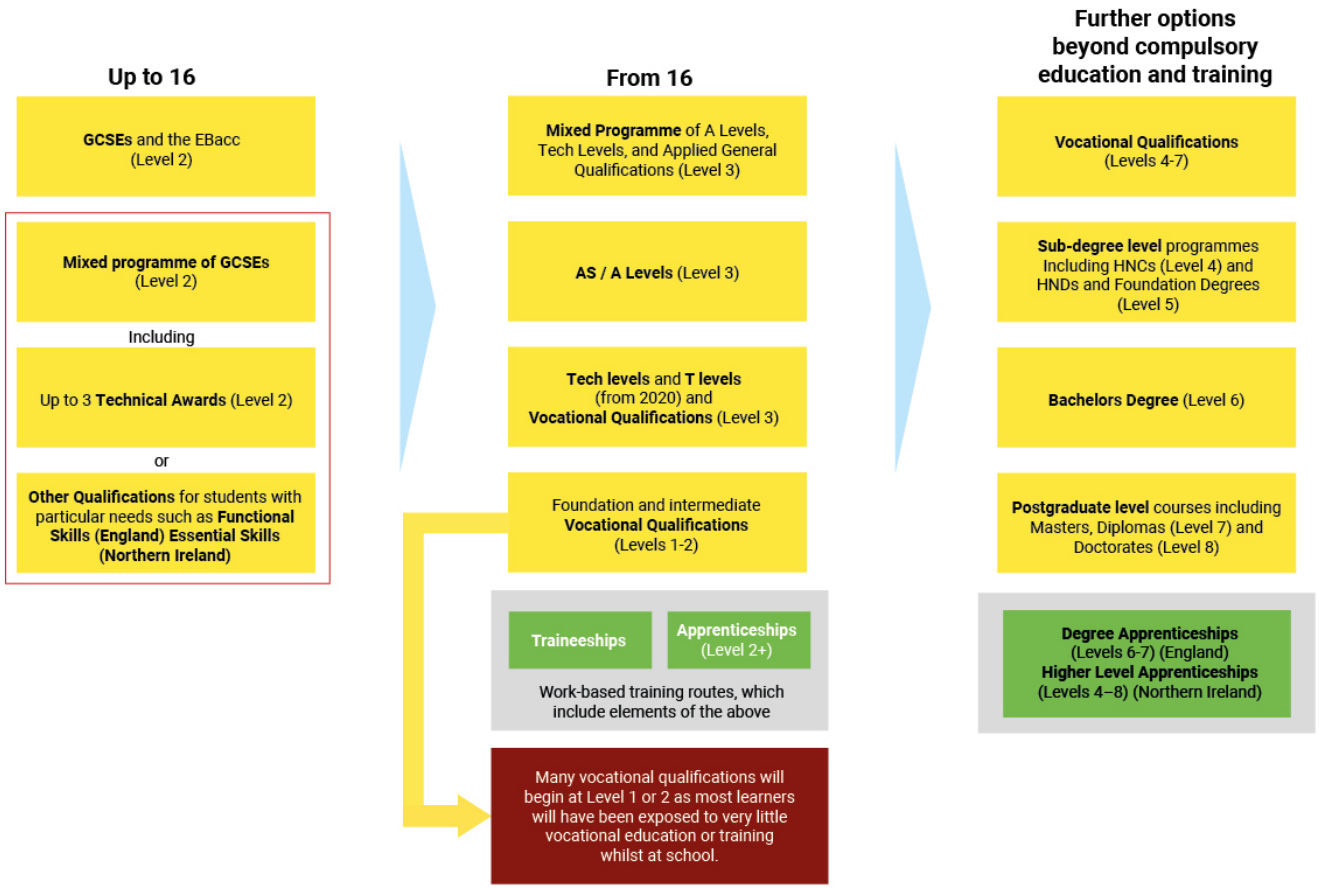
Alongside GCSEs, students can study Technical Awards, which are technical qualifications at RQF level 1 and 2 that provide students with applied knowledge and practical skills. They cover a range of subjects such as the arts, engineering, technology, social care and sport, helping pupils to develop applied knowledge and practical skills.

Occupational Studies (Northern Ireland only)

This qualification is targeted at learners working towards, or at, Level 1 and 2. Learners with Occupational Studies qualifications generally use them together with GCSEs and other qualifications for entry into further study, training or employment. The Occupational Studies qualification allows learners to learn for work, through work and about work, and it provides the potential for this learning to take place in out-of-school contexts.

There are various academic and technical routes a learner can follow, as shown in Figure 4. These progression routes, and the qualifications within them, are described below.

Figure 4: Academic and technical progression routes[91]



[91] Adapted from: https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/guide-skills-system

Qualifications and Pathways – age 16-18 years

At age 16, learners have the option to move on to other learning and employment destinations. In England, while *education* is compulsory until the age of 18, *school* is compulsory to 16, and post-16 education in England and Northern Ireland can take a number of forms. Students over 16 typically study in a school sixth form, a Further Education (FE) College, or in England only, a separate sixth form college. Table 9 shows the number of students enrolled in each phase of education in England and Northern Ireland for 2017/18.

Table 9: Number of students 2017/18

	England[92]	Northern Ireland[93]
Pupils in primary education	4.7 million	173,700
Pupils in secondary education (post-primary schools in NI)	3.3 million	140,500
Other schools, including special and independent schools	760, 400	6,300
Further education students	2.2 million[94]	77,900[95]
University students[96]	1.9 million	54,460

Students in England and Northern Ireland typically study level 3 qualifications such as A levels or Applied General qualifications, and some will study a mix of qualifications (often with level 2 qualifications), combining academic and technical/vocational qualifications.

Learners aged 16 years or over can also undertake training to an occupational standard delivered through a job (such as an apprenticeship), or a traineeship. Traineeships are education and training programmes that are combined with work experience to prepare trainees for their future careers by helping them to become 'work ready'.[97]

92 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf

93 https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Revised%2029%20April%202019%20-%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20funded%20pre-school%20e....pdf

94 https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf

95 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/FE-Activity-Statistical-Bulletin-13-14-to-17-18.pdf

96 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers

97 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/traineeship-information-for-trainees

T Levels, which will be taught from 2020, will offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience over a two-year technical programme.

For 16–18 year olds there are three main qualification pathways – academic, technical and applied, and work based learning. Within these current pathways, qualifications are changing and evolving to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners and employers and to support the raising of the participation age to 18 in England. The Department for Education consulted on proposed changes to the post-16 qualifications landscape in England in 2019.[98]

1. **Academic route: studied at school/college and can lead to university, an apprenticeship or employment**

A levels (Advanced level) (RQF level 3) can be used for university entrance. Students tend to take three A levels, or a combination of A levels with other academic, vocational or technical qualifications.

A levels are not the only qualifications available within the academic route, which has become more flexible in recent years with the increased take up of qualifications, such as the Extended Project Qualification, which is a research skills-based qualification taken alongside A levels, and the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge Pre-U, which are both composite qualifications that include separate skills-based components.[99]

2. **Technical and applied route:[100] studied at college/school or in an apprenticeship and can lead to higher education**

Technical Certificates are RQF level 2 qualifications which specialise in a specific industry or prepare students for a particular job in sectors where employers recognise entry at this level (for example, construction trades, social care and hairdressing). Technical Certificates also provide access to Tech Levels or an apprenticeship.

Tech Levels are RQF level 3 qualifications, and like Technical Certificates, are vocational and can equip students with the specialist knowledge they need for a specific occupation, such as engineering, computing or hospitality. They also support progression to higher education. An AO wishing to offer a Tech Level is required by

[98] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-post-16-qualifications-at-level-3-and-below-in-england

[99] Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subject qualifications can also be taken as a stand-alone qualification

[100] The DfE in England is currently undertaking a technical education reform programme, which means the technical education landscape in England is changing. See Chapter 6 Future Directions for more.

the Department for Education to gain the written support for the qualification of a trade or professional body, or at least five employers.

Applied general qualifications[101] are studied at college/school and can lead to university, an apprenticeship or a job. These are advanced (RQF level 3) qualifications that equip students with transferable knowledge and skills. They provide learning in a vocational area rather than for a single occupation, for example applied science, business or sport, and enable learners to develop transferable knowledge and skills. Applied general qualifications include BTECs and OCR Cambridge qualifications as well as a range of other vocational qualifications.
An AO wishing to offer an applied general qualification is required by the Department for Education to gain the written support of at least three higher education providers.

3. Apprenticeships/ Work Based Learning

An apprenticeship is a job with training to industry standards. Apprentices can either progress from one level to another, or start at higher levels, depending on their ability and qualifications already achieved. Apprentices work alongside experienced staff, gaining job-specific skills whilst earning a wage and taking time for study related to their role (usually one day a week, or equivalent). It usually takes one to two years to complete one level and up to four years to finish the two levels depending on their complexity and the apprentice's ability.

Apprenticeships (England)

In England, the term apprenticeship refers not to a single qualification but to the total programme of study and work, which must be designed to meet certain requirements.[102] Apprenticeships are currently being created in new sectors and offered by new employers, some of which, such as those in the financial or government sectors, are not traditionally associated with apprenticeships. Many apprenticeships, such as those in engineering, are available at the UK's most prestigious companies.

Apprenticeships are developed by employer groups known as 'trailblazers' who work with the Institute to develop apprenticeship standards and assessment plans.[103] All

[101] The term 'Applied General' is used for level 3 qualifications for post-16 students who want to continue their education through applied learning: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2019-performance-tables-technical-and-vocational-qualifications/applied-general-qualifications
[102] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/developing-new-apprenticeship-standards-overview/
[103] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/forming-a-trailblazer-group/

apprenticeships include end-point assessment,[104] which is subject to external quality assurance by an approved body.[105] Where the external quality assurance body is Ofqual, the end-point assessment is regulated and so the resulting qualification is assigned an RQF level. Apprenticeships are available including regulated qualifications at RQF levels 2-7.

In some cases a qualification may be mandated for all apprentices on an apprenticeship standard, where they meet the policy requirements for including a mandatory qualification. It is possible to deliver the training via a non-mandatory qualification but elements that are not required for the apprenticeship cannot be funded by the apprenticeship levy. Qualifications may be mandated where they are:

1. a regulatory requirement; or
2. a requirement of a professional body;
3. required by employers in the labour market on such a widespread basis that an apprentice would be significantly disadvantaged without it (known as the 'hard sift' criterion).[106]

Table 10: Apprenticeship levels

Apprenticeship	RQF level of qualification[107]	Equivalent education level
Intermediate	2	GCSE
Advanced	3	A level
Higher	4,5,6 and 7	Foundation degree and above
Degree	6 and 7	Bachelor's or master's degree

Training for Success (Northern Ireland)

DfENI's Training for Success (TfS) programme guarantees training of up to 104 weeks (156 weeks for those with a disability) to help young people gain the recognised skills and qualifications to help them progress in their chosen career. TfS is designed to develop relevant occupational and employability skills while addressing both essential skills barriers and personal and social development needs:

- Skills for Your Life – to address personal and development needs where young people have disengaged from learning or face other learning obstacles;

[104] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/developing-an-end-point-assessment-plan/
[105] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/quality/external-quality-assurance/
[106] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/developing-new-apprenticeships/developing-and-writing-an-apprenticeship-occupational-standard/
[107] Not all apprenticeships include regulated qualifications

- Skills for Work – to help young people gain skills and a vocationally related qualification at level 1 to help gain employment and/or to progress to higher level training at level 2. The programme is delivered by providers in the voluntary and private sectors as well as FE colleges.

ApprenticeshipsNI[108] (Northern Ireland)

ApprenticeshipsNI offers over 100 different apprenticeships frameworks at level 2 and level 3, which are devised by industry bodies and therefore meet the needs of industry. In Northern Ireland, apprenticeships are currently available at level 2,[109] level 3[110] and Higher Level Apprenticeships[111] from level 4 upwards.

The Apprenticeships programme offers training, across a wide range of apprenticeships, to people aged 16 and over. An apprentice is a new or existing employee, in a Northern Ireland-based company, working with experienced staff to learn and develop skills. An apprentice also receives 'off-the-job' training, usually on a day-release basis with a training provider, to work towards achieving vocational qualifications and Essential Skills qualifications (application of number, communication and ICT).

The apprentice, training provider and employer meet to discuss the apprentice's training needs and develop a training programme for the apprentice. Usually the apprentice is with the employer four days a week and with the training provider one day a week.

The different types of apprenticeships available at each level and the standards and criteria required to complete the apprenticeship programme are set out in apprenticeship frameworks for level 2 and level 3.

A level 2 apprentice works towards achieving a specified level 2 vocational qualification and the specified essential skills qualifications in application of number, communication and ICT at level 1 or 2.

A level 3 apprentice works towards achieving a specified level 3 vocational qualification and the specified essential skills qualifications in application of number, communication and ICT at level 2.

[108] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/types-apprenticeships
[109] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/level-2-frameworks-apprenticeships
[110] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/level-3-frameworks-apprenticeships
[111] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/higher-level-apprenticeships

On completion of the apprenticeship, the apprentice receives the relevant qualification certificates from the AO and an apprenticeship certificate from the Department for the Economy.

The Northern Ireland Administration introduced Higher Level Apprenticeships at RQF levels 4 and 5 from September 2017. Higher Level Apprenticeships at level 6 and 7 became mainstream from September 2018. Degree Apprenticeships at levels 6 and 7 are covered in the higher education section.

Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs) (England) and

Essential Skills Qualifications (Northern Ireland)

Functional Skills and Essential Skills qualifications are examples of key qualifications available at RQF entry levels 1, 2 and 3 as well as RQF levels 1 and 2. The qualifications in England and in Northern Ireland serve similar purposes. They are designed to provide reliable evidence of a student's achievements against content that is relevant to the workplace as well as a foundation for progression into further study or employment.

The qualifications in English, maths and ICT are designed for learners in education, training, work and everyday life situations who would like to gain a nationally recognised qualification. Students can study these qualifications to equip them with the skills they need for everyday life and work. They have been designed with employers' needs in mind and take on a real-life and work problem-solving approach to developing literacy and numeracy skills. They are typically taken by adults, apprentices and students in 16-19 study programmes.

In England, English and maths Functional Skills Qualifications have been reformed. New FSQs in English and maths have been taught since September 2019 and have increased in size from 45 to 55 guided learning hours. ICT Functional Skills Qualifications are also being reformed. They will be replaced by Digital Functional Skills Qualifications in 2021. Unlike English and maths, it is proposed that they will be only awarded at RQF entry level 3 and RQF level 1.

Mixed learning programmes

The academic and technical pathways do not operate independently of each other. Many students follow a learning programme that includes a combination of academic, technical and applied qualifications.

Learning programmes comprising a mixture of academic and technical qualifications are well established. They meet the needs of many students and allow access to many higher education courses.

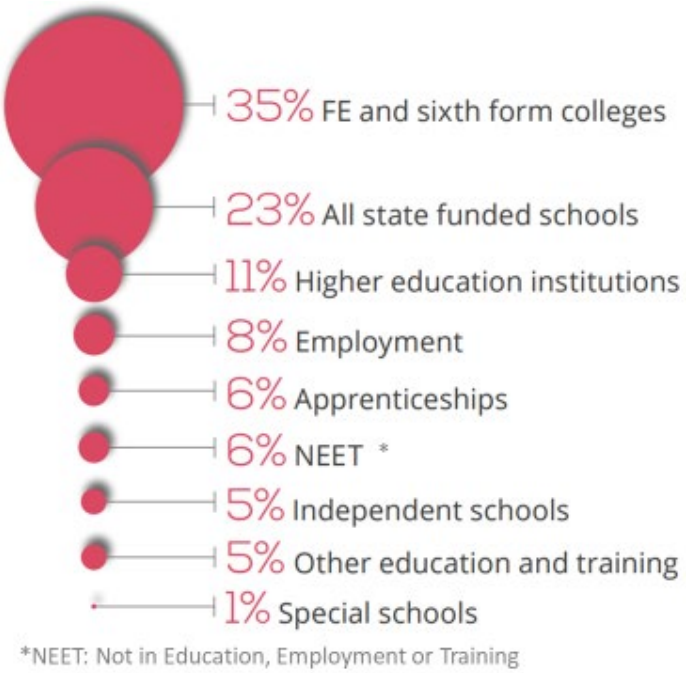
Further Education (FE) in England

The Department for Education is responsible for FE policy and funding, as well as apprenticeships (through the ESFA) and wider skills policies.

FE colleges provide technical and professional education and training for young people, adults and employers. They support students to progress to higher levels of learning and/or develop valuable employability skills, helping to develop their career opportunities. Sixth form colleges provide education to 16 to 18-year-olds enabling them to progress to university or higher level vocational education or employment.

There are 257 colleges in England, of which 57 are sixth form colleges. Colleges educate and train 2.2 million people (as at 2016/2017),[112] which includes 761,000 16-18 year olds and 1.4 million adults. 314,000 of these learners (including 76,000 16-18-year olds) are apprentices carrying out their learning element through a college.

Figure 5: Where 16 to 18 year olds are studying or working in England[113]



Higher education is also offered in approximately 200 colleges that also offer further education. These colleges cater for one-third of English students aged under 19 entering higher education through UCAS.[114,115] Seven colleges have foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP), while two have taught degree awarding powers

[112] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[113] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[114] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[115] UCAS is the independent charity providing information, advice, and admissions services to inspire and facilitate educational progression https://www.ucas.com/about-us/who-we-are

(TDAP).[116] In 2016/17 149,000 people were studying higher education in a college, including Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and foundation degrees.[117]

Further Education (FE) in Northern Ireland

Further education colleges are non-departmental public bodies. Management responsibility lies with each individual college's governing body.

Further education in Northern Ireland has traditionally occupied the sphere between compulsory school education and higher education, delivered by universities. As such, the largest group of people in further education tend to be those aged between 16 and 19, but many other age groups undertake full or part-time FE. FE colleges are the main providers of sub-bachelor level professional and technical education and training in Northern Ireland.

FE colleges also play a central role in raising levels of literacy and numeracy and in up-skilling and re-skilling through a broad range of courses.

Northern Ireland's six FE colleges operate across over 40 campuses and through over 400 outreach community locations. There is also a College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) which delivers a range of agri-food and land based courses and degrees to post-graduate level.

In Northern Ireland in 2017/18, over 77,900 individuals enrolled on courses in FE colleges, with 155,510 enrolments in total. There were 66,308 HE enrolments in Northern Ireland in 2017/18. Of these, 54,460 (82.1%) were at HEIs and 11,848 (17.9%) were at FE colleges (excluding CAFRE) as illustrated in Table 11 below.

Table 11: HE enrolments in FE colleges in Northern Ireland[118] (excl. CAFRE)

	2017/18
Level 4 (e.g. HNC, HLA)	3,340
Level 5 (e.g. HND, HLA, Foundation degrees)	7,652
Level 6 (Bachelor's degree, HLA)	785
Level 7 (Master's degree, HLA)	71
Total	11,848

Of these 11,848 HE enrolments in FE colleges in 2017/18, 4,256 were aged 19 and under, 3,179 were aged 20-24 years, and 4,413 were aged 25 and over.

[116] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[117] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/College%20Key%20Facts%202018-19.pdf
[118] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/further-education-activity-northern-ireland-201718

Higher Education

Approximately 2 million[119] students were enrolled in the higher education system for 2017/18 (1.9 million in England, 54,000 in Northern Ireland). In 2018, 18-year-old entry rates were at their highest recorded levels in England. About one third of 18-year-olds go on to higher education (England 34%, Northern Ireland 35%).[120]

Level 3 qualifications for access to higher education

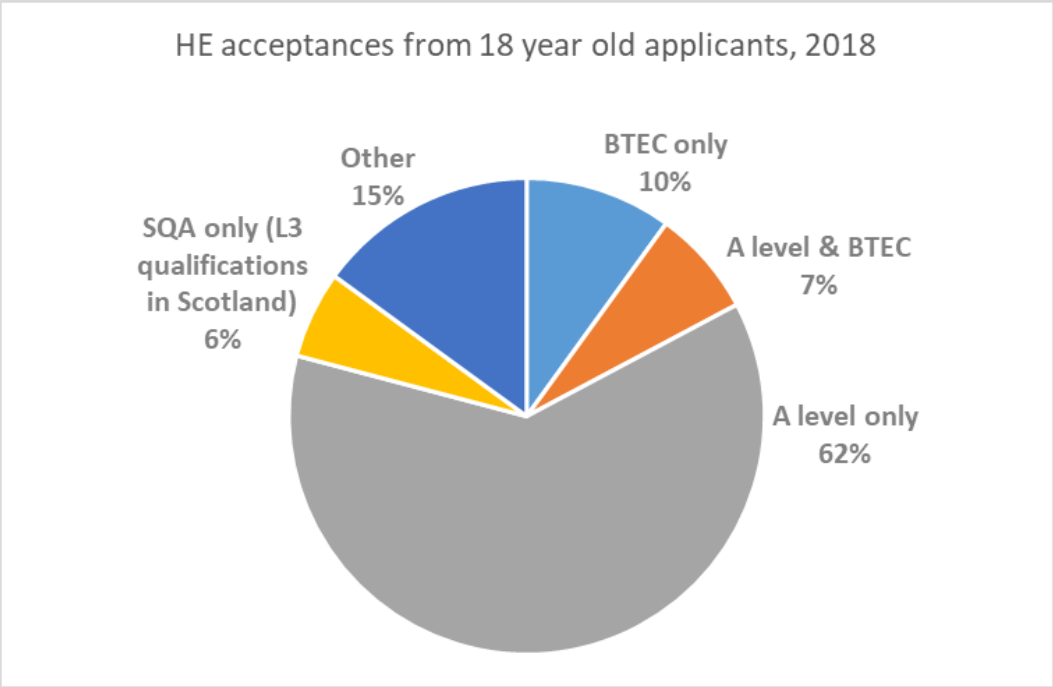
Students normally enter higher education as undergraduates from age 18 onwards. A broad range of RQF level 3 qualifications is used for entry onto undergraduate degree courses, or first degrees, including teacher training courses. Entrance requirements are set by the institution and are often stated in terms of the points qualifications earn on the tariff specified by UCAS.[121] Each higher education provider makes their own decisions on admissions.

A level qualifications are the most widely used level 3 qualifications for university entry, but there are points available for other qualifications. The number of UCAS tariff points earned depends on the level of achievement e.g. grade A*-E at A level, or Pass, Merit, Distinction in National Awards, Certificates or Diplomas. Within England the Access to Higher Education Diploma is a level 3 qualification (regulated by QAA) which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university.

[119]Data for UK higher education is collated and analysed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA https://www.hesa.ac.uk/
[120] https://www.ucas.com/file/187891/download?token=2Oz_i_x7
[121] https://www.ucas.com/about-us

The qualification landscape for university admissions is changing, with a shift in the types of qualifications with which many young people are applying to university.

Figure 6: Acceptances to Higher Education in the UK from UK-domiciled applicants, 2018[122]



Higher education qualifications

Higher education institutions offer a wide variety of vocational, technical and academic qualifications, including certificates of higher education and higher national certificates (HNCs) at level 4, diplomas of higher education, higher national diplomas (HNDs) and foundation degrees at level 5, bachelor's degrees at level 6, and integrated master's degrees and degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science at level 7. Doctoral qualifications at level 8 can be achieved in wide range of subject areas and might be through a research course (PhD), a work-based learning course, or through professional practice (e.g. DProf, EdD). Apprenticeships in England are available at levels 2-7 including Degree Apprenticeships, where a degree award is part of the apprenticeship; and Higher Level Apprenticeships in Northern Ireland are also available at levels 4 to 8.

The typical first degree offered at England and Northern Ireland universities is the bachelor's degree with honours, which usually lasts for three years. Vocational foundation degrees, typically lasting two years (full-time), are also available in some institutions. Many institutions now offer an integrated master's degree, particularly in STEM subjects, as a first degree, which typically lasts for four years, the first three

[122] https://www.ucas.com/file/198496/download?token=aCOhfgUC

years running parallel to the bachelor's course. During a course of study leading to their first degree students are known as undergraduates.

Students who have completed a first degree can apply for postgraduate and graduate courses. These include:

- Graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, professional graduate certificates in education – level 6 courses aimed at those who have already completed a bachelor's degree, often as conversion courses.
- Postgraduate certificates, postgraduate diplomas, postgraduate certificates in education – level 7 courses shorter than a full master's degree.
- Master's degrees (typically taken in one year, though research-based master's degrees may last for two) – taught or research master's degrees at level 7.
- Doctorates (typically taken in three years) – research degrees at level 8, the top level of the qualifications frameworks, often requiring a master's degree for entry. These may be purely research based (PhD/DPhil) or research and practice (professional doctorates).

Higher education institutions

All English and Northern Ireland universities award degrees at RQF/FHEQ levels 6 – 8 i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral level. Undergraduate / sub-degree awards are made at RQF/FHEQ levels 4 and 5 and include HNC, HND and foundation degrees.

Further study can lead to postgraduate qualifications at master's and doctorate levels, and for a qualification to a professional body.

Higher Education Providers (England)

September 2019 data from the Register held by the Office for Students[123] shows there are 386 registered higher education providers in England. Registered providers may award research degrees, taught degrees or foundation degrees. Registered providers might also deliver degrees in association with a degree awarding body. The register is 'live' and continuously updated.

Higher Education Providers (Northern Ireland)

The principal providers of higher education in Northern Ireland are three universities and two university teaching colleges. Alongside these, six further education colleges and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provide higher education qualifications. The six FE colleges and CAFRE provide approximately

[123] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/the-ofs-register/

20% of level 4 and 5 (Year 1 and 2 of higher education) provision in Northern Ireland.[124]

Apprenticeships at Higher Education levels

Historically, apprenticeships have been available at education levels below those of higher education. Recent changes have provided for apprenticeships to be introduced in England and Northern Ireland at levels 4-8 (although none are available yet at level 8).

Higher and Degree Apprenticeships (England)

In England, higher and degree apprenticeships are available at levels 4 to 7, with proposals in place for level 8 apprenticeships.[125] They combine work with study and may include a work-based, academic or combined qualification or a professional qualification relevant to the industry. Higher apprenticeships may include a regulated qualification or a non-regulated e.g. professional qualification. Degree apprenticeships,[126] as the name implies, include a degree qualification at levels 6 and 7 (full bachelor's and master's), and were introduced in 2014.

The apprenticeship itself is not a qualification and, therefore, does not appear on the FHEQ. When designing a degree qualification as part of an apprenticeship programme, higher education providers must ensure the degree learning outcomes align with the relevant level on the FHEQ e.g. foundation degree at level 5 FHEQ (Short Cycle QF-EHEA); bachelor's degree with honours at level 6 FHEQ (First Cycle QF-EHEA). Apprentices who meet the requirements for award of a higher education qualification and the requirements for the apprenticeship will receive both the HE award and the (separate) apprenticeship certificate. Quality assurance requirements for HE awards within an apprenticeship are the same as HE awards that do not form part of an apprenticeship.

Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLA) (Northern Ireland)

In Northern Ireland, apprenticeships between levels 4 – 8 on the FHEQ are called Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs) and will include a degree if awarded at levels 6-8.

The Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA*)* programme for Northern Ireland, launched in September 2017, provides opportunities at levels 4 and 5, and at levels 6 and 7 from

[124] https://www.economyni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Essential%20Skills%20Interactive%20PDF%20%28revised%29.pdf

[125] At the time of writing, proposals were in place in the nuclear and clinical academic fields: https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/?levelFrom=8

[126] The term 'degree' is protected; degrees can only be awarded by organisations with Degree Awarding Powers https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/reviewing-higher-education/degree-awarding-powers-and-university-title. It can only be applied to in a limited number of awards, as identified within the FHEQ https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

September 2018. The apprenticeships blend on and off the job training while ensuring quality and achievement of the full apprenticeship award. HLAs are primarily based on a single higher level qualification at a particular level, for example, a HLA at level 5 is generally a foundation degree.

The apprentice is in paid employment while working towards an industry approved qualification, and the apprenticeship lasts a minimum of two years. Off-the-job training at levels 4 and 5 is provided through the six local FE Colleges and the College of Agriculture (CAFRE), with the three local Universities providing training at level 6 and above.

HLAs from level 4 to level 8 provide training and a recognised higher qualification while in paid employment. HLAs take a minimum of two years to complete and the apprentice works towards achieving a higher- level qualification at a particular level. For example, a higher level apprentice at level 5 will receive a foundation degree and a level 6 apprentice will receive an honours degree. On completion of the HLA, the apprentice receives the relevant AO or university qualification certificate and a HLA certificate from the Department for the Economy.

5. Responses to the EQF Referencing Criteria

The referencing process conducted in England and Northern Ireland gathered evidence to address all of the EQF criteria.[127] The bodies responsible for qualifications policy and for the RQF and FHEQ have addressed each criterion in turn and a summary of the responses follows.

Criterion 1:

The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.

There were three principal bodies that managed the referencing process for the two qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland (the RQF and the FHEQ). These were Ofqual, the regulator of qualifications in England, CCEA Regulation, the regulator of qualifications in Northern Ireland, and QAA, the quality assurance agency for higher education in the UK. These three organisations collaborated in managing the process to reference the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF. Ofqual[128] and CCEA Regulation were designated the joint England/NI EQF National Coordination Point (NCP) in 2009.

Whilst these three bodies managed the report production, relevant government departments in England and Northern Ireland were closely involved throughout the process, as active members of the Steering Group, contributing text and reviewing drafts (see Steering Group members and Terms of Reference, Annex 1).

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

While the Department for Education is responsible for policy in respect of the qualifications taken by students aged 16-19 years, and for decisions on the curriculum, including how this is reflected in any subject content expectations for particular qualifications, Ofqual sets the regulatory framework within which certain qualifications are designed, delivered and assessed.[129]

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[127] See Annex III for referencing criteria: https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ceead970-518f-11e7-a5ca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

[128] Ofqual took over NCP responsibility from the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, QCDA, which closed in 2012.

[129] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/749790/Memorandum_of_understanding_between_the_DfE_and_Ofqual.pdf

Ofqual was established in 2010 as the statutory regulator of qualifications (other than higher education qualifications) and exams in England. Ofqual is directly accountable to Parliament and is independent of government, as a non-ministerial[130] government department[131] established under section 127 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009[132] (the ASCL Act). Ofqual is a regulator with statutory supervisory and enforcement powers.

The ASCL Act sets out the following five statutory objectives for Ofqual:

1. The qualifications standards objective is to secure that—
   - regulated qualifications give a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, and
   - regulated qualifications indicate —
     - a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable regulated qualifications, and
     - a consistent level of attainment (but not over time) between regulated qualifications and comparable qualifications (including those awarded outside the United Kingdom) which are not regulated.
2. The assessments standards objective is to promote the development and implementation of regulated assessment arrangements which—
   - give a reliable indication of achievement, and
   - indicate a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable assessments.
3. The public confidence objective is to promote public confidence in regulated qualifications and regulated assessment arrangements.
4. The awareness objective is to promote awareness and understanding of:
   - the range of regulated qualifications available,
   - the benefits of regulated qualifications to learners, employers and institutions within the higher education sector, and
   - the benefits of recognition under Section 132 of the Act to bodies awarding or authenticating qualifications.
5. The efficiency objective is to secure that regulated qualifications are provided efficiently and in particular that any relevant sums payable to a body awarding or authenticating a qualification in respect of which the body is recognised under Section 132 of the Act represent value for money.

[130] A non-ministerial department is a government department in its own right, but does not have its own minister. However, it is accountable to Parliament through its sponsoring ministers. A non-ministerial department is staffed by civil servants and usually has its own estimate and accounts

[131] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/public-bodies-reform

[132] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/section/127

The ASCL Act includes the following in relation to Ofqual:

1. Objectives – the things that Ofqual aims to achieve, which relate to qualifications standards, assessments standards, public confidence, awareness and understanding of regulated qualifications, and efficiency/ value for money.
2. Duties - the things that Ofqual must take into account, and give regard to, in the way it operates (to learners, stakeholders, employers and so on).[133]
3. Functions - the things that Ofqual must do; or has the power to do if it chooses, which relate to qualifications, AOs and other key areas under its remit such as National Assessments (regulated, statutory early years and national curriculum assessments, taken during state funded primary education for progression monitoring and school accountability purposes).

This translates into a regulatory system whereby:

- Participation in the regulatory system is voluntary – AOs do not have to be regulated, although they can only offer regulated qualifications if they are.
- Ofqual's regulatory powers apply to AOs but its objectives relate to qualifications. Ofqual regulates qualifications through the AOs that award them.
- The ASCL Act requires Ofqual to consult and provide reasons for many of its actions.
- The ASCL Act allows Ofqual to create legally binding rules, such as the General Conditions of Recognition[134] (the Conditions). Enforcement powers can only be used in relation to breaches of Ofqual rules.
- When Ofqual takes action it must consider its objectives and duties as well as what its statutory powers allow it to do.

The Act sets out the duties that must be met and the powers that may be exercised by Ofqual in seeking to meet these objectives. Schedule 9 of the Act sets out arrangements for Ofqual's governance.

Schedule 9 of the Act gives Ofqual's statutory powers and responsibilities to the Ofqual Board.[135] The Board delegates some of its powers to the Chief Regulator who in turn delegates some powers to Executive Directors and other members of staff. The current Ofqual Board consists of the Ofqual Chief Regulator as well as board members with executive experience in school and FE management, other public services, youth organisations and AOs.

The Board as a whole is responsible for ensuring that Ofqual complies with its statutory responsibilities as set out in the Act, all other relevant legislation and

[133] under the Equality Act 2010, section 149: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/149
[134] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook
[135] https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about/our-governance

government accounting rules in relation to its use of public funds. The Board is entrusted with public funds and therefore has a particular duty to observe the highest standards of corporate governance. This includes ensuring and demonstrating integrity and objectivity in the transaction of its business and, wherever possible, following a policy of openness and transparency in the dissemination of its decisions.[136]

Another key advisory group is the Standards Advisory Group, which is a committee of the Ofqual Board. It reviews research and makes recommendations about how Ofqual should maintain standards of qualifications, and comprises members of the Board and independent assessment specialists from higher education, AO research arms, and independent consultants. During 2018-9 Ofqual employed 192 full-time equivalent staff.

CCEA Regulation (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment)

CCEA is a public body reporting to the Department of Education (DE), it is responsible for the three areas of curriculum, assessment and examinations. CCEA has the dual role of both awarding organisation and regulator. It is the main Northern Ireland awarding organisation for School General Qualifications (GCSEs, AS and A Levels).

CCEA Regulation functions independently from CCEA Awarding Organisation. To assist in the separation of duties the Regulatory Advisory Committee supports CCEA Council in exercising its responsibilities for regulation and accreditation.

CCEA receives core funding from DE, and supplements this with fees from the provision of qualifications. CCEA Regulation receives funding from the Department for the Economy (DfE) for the regulation of Professional and Technical qualifications in Northern Ireland and provision of advice and guidance on qualifications.

The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1998[137] established the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). CCEA's duties and functions are detailed in the Order (Articles 73 to 80). In summary, these include to:

- continually review all aspects of the curriculum, examinations and assessment for grant-aided schools and colleges of further education;
- undertake statutory consultation on proposals relating to legislation involving curriculum, examinations or assessment;

136 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752926/Ofqual_Governance_Framework.pdf

137 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/contents

- advise DE on matters concerning curriculum, assessment, examinations and external qualifications;
- develop qualifications, conduct qualifications and assessments and moderate relevant qualifications and assessments, ensuring that educational standards are recognised as equivalent to those upheld by other similar UK bodies;
- accredit and provide advice on approval of qualifications;
- publish and disseminate information relating to curriculum, assessment and examinations;
- develop and produce teaching support materials for schools; and
- carry out research and development.

In respect of its regulatory role, Articles 75 and 76 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 states:

'CCEA shall develop and publish criteria for the accreditation of relevant external qualifications, and accredit, where such criteria are met, any qualifications submitted for accreditation.'
'CCEA shall keep under review all aspects of relevant external qualifications, and publish and disseminate information relating to relevant external qualifications.'

CCEA Regulatory work includes:

- the recognition and monitoring of AOs and evaluating their qualifications against published criteria and Conditions;
- the approval and monitoring of AOs offering qualifications in Northern Ireland, ensuring that they have the capability to offer these qualifications and that they meet the General Conditions of Recognition.[138] AOs that are approved must continue to comply with the Conditions of Recognition and are subject to monitoring by CCEA Regulation;
- regulation and development activities for skills qualifications, particularly Essential Skills; and
- working closely with the Qualifications Regulators in England (Ofqual) and Wales (Qualifications Wales) to ensure that the standards of general and skills examinations available in Northern Ireland are equivalent and comparable to examinations conducted by bodies or authorities exercising similar functions elsewhere in the UK.

CCEA is accountable to its Council of non-executive members and consists of a Chairperson and ten other members appointed by the Department of Education

[138] http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/compliance/general_conditions_recognition

(DE). The Council includes representatives from education, industry and commerce. The chairperson and members serve on the Council for four years. During 2017–18 CCEA employed 346 staff, of which 13 are CCEA Regulation staff.

The Regulatory Advisory Committee includes no more than two Council members, the Chief Executive, nominated officers of the Council and at least ten individual representatives, with a particular knowledge, expertise or interest in qualifications development and regulation. The group provides advice to the Council relating to regulatory activities such as the recognition and monitoring of AOs and accreditation of their qualifications. The committee also considers the impacts of broader issues, advising on procedures for maintaining standards in qualifications with the rest of the UK, matters such as the nature and scope of frameworks, particularly in the wider European context, developments in qualifications in Ireland, and criteria and design principles for accredited qualifications to ensure that accredited qualifications add value to the Northern Ireland society and economy.

The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent body, a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It works to "safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world" and checks "that students working towards a UK qualification get the higher education they are entitled to expect."[139]

QAA is funded by subscriptions from HE providers, contracts and agreements with the UK funding councils and organisations and by other contracts for work relating to HE oversight, consultancy and business development work in the UK and internationally.

QAA works across all four nations of the UK, with a leading role in higher education quality assurance in each nation, ensuring comparability and the shared benefits of UK-wide approaches.

QAA fulfils two key roles in relation to the EQF referencing work. Firstly, QAA manages the FHEQ on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA), which was established in 2016 to provide "sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements that are shared across the UK". The QAA verified the compatibility of the FHEQ with the QF-EHEA[140] in 2008.

[139] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/
[140] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/verification-of-the-compatibility-of-fheq-with-fq-ehea.pdf

The second role involves monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK higher education, in order to operate an effective quality assessment system for England and Northern Ireland.

In England, QAA works as the Designated Quality Body for the Office for Students[141] (OfS) in order to fulfil two main purposes:[142]

- to enable the OfS to assess the quality of, and standards applied to, higher education provided by English higher education providers and in particular to enable the OfS to determine whether:
    - providers that have applied to be registered with the OfS satisfy any applicable initial registration condition relating to the quality of, or the standards applied to, higher education that they provide; and
    - registered higher education providers satisfy any applicable ongoing registration condition relating to the quality of, or the standards applied to, higher education that they provide.
- to help inform the OfS's decisions as to the authorisation, variation or revocation of Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) by providing advice to the OfS regarding the quality of, and the standards applied to, higher education.

Collaborative work on the EQF referencing report

During the process of referencing the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF, the three relevant bodies for England and Northern Ireland (Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA) worked closely together, seeking advice and endorsement of the report at both the drafting and finalisation stages from key stakeholders via the jointly managed steering group.

The steering group consisted of members with a wide range of experience and knowledge, with representation from across England and Northern Ireland, and included international experts. Steering group members represented all mainstream education sectors (HE, vocational and technical education, school), as well as key organisations in training, government, trade unions and the education and skills funding agency. The steering group terms of reference and a full list of members are provided in Annex 1.

The referencing work also involved a significant level of collaboration between all four of the UK administrations, facilitated by a joint working group of all UK NCPs and other key UK stakeholders, the UK Coordination Group for European Vocational Education and Training Initiatives (UKCGVETI). The UKCGVETI shared advice and guidance on framework referencing, as well as ensuring a coordinated UK response

[141] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/
[142] Section 23(2) of HERA: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/section/23

to the EU as required. Scotland presented its re-referencing report to the EQF Advisory Group in December 2018, and England, Northern Ireland and Wales were consulted in the development of that report. Similarly, Scotland supported the work of England and Northern Ireland and of Wales as they prepared their reports for submission to the EQF Advisory Group in May 2019.

Since 2009, Ofqual and CCEA Regulation have worked together as the EQF national coordination point (NCP) for England and Northern Ireland, and jointly produced the referencing report in 2010.

Criterion 1 Summary

The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process has been stated. These bodies have worked together to agree the referencing position and prepare this report.

Criterion 2:

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.

The national qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland are the RQF and the FHEQ. The evidence presented in this section supports a clear and demonstrable link between the levels of these frameworks and the levels of the EQF.

2010 Referencing Outcome

England and Northern Ireland first mapped the national qualifications framework to the EQF in 2010. This produced a clear referencing between the levels of the QCF, which was the principal qualifications framework at the time, and those of the EQF, as presented below.

Table 12: 2010 QCF – EQF referencing outcome

	QCF level										
QCF	E1	E2	E3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
EQF	-		1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8
	EQF level										

2019 Referencing Approach

Since 2010 the QCF has been replaced by the RQF. The RQF mirrors the levels that were used in the QCF. This means that the mapping of the QCF to the EQF in 2010 should translate directly to the RQF. Whilst amendments were made to the level descriptors to form the RQF, the meaning of the levels, the number of levels, their relationship to each other and their public status remains exactly the same. Nonetheless, a further review of the mapping was carried out to evaluate whether the RQF does still support the 2010 conclusions for level to level relationships with the EQF.

In 2010 the FHEQ was not referenced directly to the QCF or the EQF. The FHEQ had been mapped to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) in November 2008 as part of the Bologna Process to verify the compatibility between the two frameworks.[143]

[143] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/verification-of-the-compatibility-of-fheq-with-fq-ehea.pdf

The 2019 mapping process therefore included a re-examination of the descriptors of the RQF, as well as an examination of the FHEQ, in relation to those of the EQF. The process confirmed the relationship established in 2010, and produced a clear referencing between the FHEQ, the RQF and the EQF.

Table 13: 2019 RQF – EQF referencing outcome and examination of FHEQ – EQF, including QF-EHEA

RQF	E1	E2	E3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
FHEQ							4	5	6	7	8
QF-EHEA								Short Cycle	First Cycle	Second cycle	Third cycle
EQF		-	1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8

Approach to mapping the three frameworks

The RQF and the FHEQ had not previously been directly referenced to the EQF. However, the RQF is based on the levels of the QCF (referenced to the EQF in 2010) and the FHEQ is linked to the EQF through the self-certification process carried out in 2008. The referencing process reported here is a fresh approach and is thorough and comprehensive. It is described in full in Annex 2.

The following approach was taken. Taking the 2010 referencing position of the QCF and the self-certification outcome for the FHEQ as starting points, for each of the levels of the RQF and FHEQ:

1. The descriptors were compared to the EQF level previously matched
2. The descriptors were compared to the EQF level immediately below the level previously matched
3. The descriptors were compared to the EQF level immediately above the level previously matched
4. A best fit position was determined

Each domain of the RQF and the FHEQ could be separately matched to each of the three EQF descriptors (Knowledge, Skills and Responsibility and Autonomy). However, in the RQF, the FHEQ and the EQF, each framework level is to be judged by taking an overview of the two (RQF) or three (FHEQ/EQF) descriptors. It is therefore more appropriate to compare each RQF and FHEQ level to each EQF level by reading across the descriptors for the levels.

The 2017 EQF Recommendation (para 21) established that the EQF is compatible with the QF-EHEA and its cycle descriptors and therefore the conclusion can be

drawn that the self-certification process for the FHEQ shows compatibility of levels 5 to 8 with levels 5 to 8 of the EQF (further detail presented in Annex 2).

The FHEQ level descriptors are included in the tables for levels 4 – 8 inclusive to show how these map to both the RQF and EQF.

Comparing the descriptors

A two-stage process was used to determine a level to level relationship between the RQF and the EQF levels.

1. A full textual analysis of each of the level descriptors of the RQF was made in relation to the EQF descriptors at three consecutive levels.
2. The textual analysis was then further analysed from a best fit perspective to determine which EQF level aligns closest to the RQF descriptors.

The same two-stage process was used to establish the relationship between the FHEQ and the EQF.

Table 14 below illustrates the outcomes of this two-stage procedure. The RQF and FHEQ at level 5 is used for this example. The full analysis is presented in Annex 2.

Table 14: Outcome of referencing RQF and FHEQ level 5 to the EQF

RQF level 5		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information, concepts and ideas. Is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them.	Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods, cognitive and practical skills to address broadly defined, complex problems. Use relevant research or development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results.	
FHEQ level 5		
Knowledge descriptor (Will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed	Use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making

The ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge	problems arising from that analysis Effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively Undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations	
EQF level 4		
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
EQF level 5		
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
EQF level 6		
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
RQF Analysis		

The level 5 Knowledge descriptor for both the RQF and the EQF require theoretical knowledge. RQF level 5 requires an awareness of the nature and scope of the area of study or work and an understanding of different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them. This compares well with the EQF level 5 requirement for an awareness of the boundaries of knowledge of a field of work or study. Level 4 of the EQF requires less precise knowledge of the boundaries of knowledge of a field of study or work. The EQF at level 6 requires a critical understanding of a field of knowledge, which is not required by the RQF at level 5.

In terms of Skills, the RQF at level 5 requires skills to be applied in broadly defined complex problems. This compared to the EQF requirement at level 5 for skills to be applied to abstract problems. The EQF at level 6 specifies unpredictability in these contexts, which is a step beyond the RQF level 5 requirement.

The RQF at level 5 is specific about the need to be able to evaluate actions, methods and results and this goes beyond the EQF requirement at level 4 and falls short of the managerial evaluation required at EQF level 6. The RQF level 5 requirement better matches the review of performance required at EQF level 5.

FHEQ Analysis

The underlying factual and theoretical knowledge of the area of study link FHEQ level 5 and EQF level 5 and this link is strongly reinforced by the awareness of the limits of the area of knowledge.

In terms of the FHEQ level 5 skills descriptor, the map to the EQF is evident at level 4 and level 5 but is not clear at EQF level 6. The EQF level 5 requirement for creative solutions to abstract problems is not explicit in the FHEQ level 5 descriptor.

The FHEQ level 5 responsibility component and the element of the skills descriptor which demands that they have skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations support a link to EQF level 5.

Best fit outcome: there is a good match between RQF level 5, FHEQ level 5 and EQF level 5.

When the provisional mapping of the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF was established it was subjected to scrutiny by qualifications users and the bodies responsible for the frameworks. The mapping was made available to the Steering Group, to UKGCGVETI and to all the constituencies they represent. This scrutiny confirmed the level to level relationship included in Table 13 above.

The confirmatory mapping is seen as reflecting the status quo and public understanding in terms of level to level relationships between the three frameworks. However, whilst the mapping outcomes were confirmed, the mapping exercise did reveal a number of differences between the descriptors at level 4 of the RQF and level 4 of the FHEQ. These do not affect the EQF or QF-EHEA relationships, which are robust: instead, they relate to the strength of the links between the two England and Northern Ireland frameworks: the RQF level 4 descriptor includes ‘addressing problems that are complex and non-routine’, which is not a feature of the FHEQ. This may be further explored in the future by reviewing the learning outcomes of these levels.

Summary: Criterion 2

The 2010 referencing of QCF levels to EQF levels has stood the test of time. The use of these relationships in the RQF and FHEQ has not led to any challenges to the decisions made in 2010.

The EQF levels have been published on the database of qualifications and many publications (local and national) have disseminated the outcome of the 2010 referencing process. Peer learning events with experts from other countries have provided the opportunity to examine in depth the relationship of England and Northern Ireland levels with the EQF (for example in the context of qualifications at EQF level 5 and for school leaving qualifications).

As in some other EU countries, the issues of consistency faced at European level for qualifications at level 5 and school leaving qualifications have also been felt within the national context. Whilst no challenges to the RQF - EQF or the FHEQ – EQF (and QF-EHEA) relationships have been raised, the mapping exercise has provided an additional level of insight into the relationships between the domestic frameworks in England and Northern Ireland, which will be further explored in future work.

Criterion 3:

The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

In England and Northern Ireland (as elsewhere in the UK), qualifications are designed according to regulatory criteria and become a specification that is used by learning providers, teachers, students and wider stakeholders. One aspect of the regulatory process is that a qualification has to be based on a set of learning outcomes. These learning outcomes determine what level the qualification can take in the RQF or the FHEQ as the outcomes are compared to the RQF/FHEQ descriptors.

The UK has a history of using learning outcomes that goes back to the 1980s, with the development of purely outcome-based national vocational qualifications (NVQs). Today it is common practice for qualifications to be specified in terms of what learners need to be able to demonstrate they know and can do in order to be awarded a qualification. An important aspect of the UK approach to qualifications is that outcomes should be specified, but the provider determines the curriculum and learning approach.

RQF and Learning Outcomes

The RQF level descriptors 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 reflect, but simplify, the descriptors used in the former QCF and the EQF.

All regulated qualifications must be based on learning outcomes to meet the General Conditions of Recognition. For example, Condition E1.1 requires that qualifications must have an objective, which must be clearly stated and which the qualification must fulfil, and that objective must lead to a benefit to the learner:

> *Condition E1.1 An awarding organisation must ensure that each qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available –*
>
> *(a) has a clear objective in accordance with this condition, and*
>
> *(b) meets that objective.*

Condition E1.2 The objective of a qualification must be such as to lead to a benefit for Learners who have reached a specified level of attainment, and may include –

(a) preparing Learners to progress to a qualification in the same subject area but at a higher level or requiring more specific knowledge, skills and understanding,

(b) preparing Learners to progress to a qualification in another subject area,

(c) meeting relevant programmes of learning,

(d) preparing Learners for employment,

(e) supporting a role in the workplace, or

(f) giving Learners personal growth and engagement in learning.

Further, AOs must ensure that the specification, or syllabus which must be published, sets out the following:

Condition E3.2 An awarding organisation must ensure that the specification for a qualification sets out –

(a) the qualification's objective,

(b) any other qualification which a Learner must have completed before taking the qualification,

(c) any prior knowledge, skills or understanding which the Learner is required to have before taking the qualification,

(d) units which a Learner must have completed before the qualification will be awarded and any optional routes,

(e) any other requirements which a Learner must have satisfied before the Learner will be assessed or before the qualification will be awarded,

***(f) the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of the qualification (giving a clear indication of their coverage and depth**),*

(g) the method of any assessment and any associated requirements relating to it,

***(h) the criteria against which Learners' levels of attainment will be measured (such as assessment criteria or exemplars**),*

(i) any specimen assessment materials,

(j) any specified levels of attainment,

(k) where the awarding organisation is required to make such an assignment under General Condition E7 (Total Qualification Time), the number of hours which it has assigned to that qualification for each of Total Qualification Time and Guided Learning,

(l) any value for credit which it has assigned to that qualification and any Component of that qualification, and

(m) the level or levels which it has assigned to that qualification and any Component of that qualification.

Condition E3.3 An awarding organisation must ensure that the specification for a qualification is clear, accurate and communicates, to the reasonable and informed person –

***(a) what the qualification requires of the Learner in respect of each of the details that is applicable to the qualification**, and*

(b) how the qualification is fit for purpose.

Condition E3.4 An awarding organisation must promptly amend the specification for a qualification following any revision by it of –

(a) the number of hours which it has assigned for Total Qualification Time or Guided Learning,

(b) the level or levels which it has assigned to that qualification or any Component of that Qualification, or

(c) any value for credit which it has assigned to that qualification or any Component of that qualification.

The AO must also ensure that the assessment is fit for purpose and can be delivered, with the following aspects relating to learning outcomes being central to this Condition:

Condition E4.2 In designing such an assessment, an awarding organisation must in addition ensure that the assessment –

(e) allows each Learner to generate evidence which can be Authenticated,

***(f) allows each specified level of attainment detailed in the specification to be reached by a Learner who has attained the required level of knowledge, skills and understanding,** and*

(g) allows Assessors to be able to differentiate accurately and consistently between a range of attainments by Learners.

Regulated qualifications must be assigned an RQF level. The RQF level is determined using descriptors of two categories: knowledge and understanding; and skills. Qualifications can only be awarded as a result of an assessment, and achievement against specified levels of attainment of knowledge, skills and understanding.

AOs have to develop qualifications using learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

An example is the City and Guilds level 3 NVQ Diploma in Professional Cookery,[144] which consists of a range of units each of which cover the guided learning hours, the

[144] https://www.cityandguilds.com/qualifications-and-apprenticeships/hospitality-and-catering/hospitality-and-catering/7133-hospitality-and-catering-level-3#tab=information

credit value, unit aim and learning outcomes. Two learning outcomes in Unit 203 illustrate this:

Figure 7: Examples of learning outcomes in a City and Guilds L3 Diploma

Outcome 7 Be able to prepare, cook and hold food safely

The learner can:

27. Check food before and during **operations** for any **hazards**
28. Follow correct procedures for dealing with food hazards
29. Follow organisational procedures for items that may cause allergic reactions
30. Prevent cross-contamination between different types of food
31. Use methods, times, temperatures and checks to make sure food is safe following operations
32. Keep necessary records up-to-date

What you must cover:

1. Operations

a) Defrosting food
b) Preparing food, including washing and peeling
c) Cooking food
d) Reheating food
e) Holding food before serving
f) Cooling cooked food not for immediate consumption
g) Freezing cooked food not for immediate consumption

2. Hazards

a. Bacteria and other organisms
b. Chemical
c. Physical
d. Allergenic

Outcome 8 Know how to prepare, cook and hold food safely

The learner can:

K39. State why it is necessary to defrost foods before cooking
K40. State when it is necessary to defrost foods before cooking
K41. Describe how to safely and thoroughly defrost food before cooking
K42. Describe how to recognise conditions leading to safety hazards
K43. State what to do if any food safety hazards are discovered
K44. State the importance of knowing that certain foods cause allergic reactions
K45. Describe organisational procedures to deal with foods possible of causing allergic reactions

K46. State what to do if a customer asks if a particular dish is free from a certain food allergen
K47. Describe how cross-contamination can happen between different food types
K48. Describe how to avoid cross-contamination between different food types
K49. Explain why thorough cooking and reheating methods should be used
K50. State cooking and reheating temperatures and times to use for food being worked with
K51. Describe how to check that food is thoroughly cooked or safely reheated
K52. State the importance of making sure that food is at the correct temperature before and during holding, prior to serving it to the customer
K53. State the types of foods that may need to be chilled or frozen because they are not for immediate consumption
K54. Describe how to safely store food not for immediate consumption

The example below illustrates an extract from the specification for OCR Level 1 and 2 Cambridge National qualifications in Health and Social Care.[145] This specification covers three qualifications: award, certificate and diploma, dependent on the number of units taken (2, 4 and 8 respectively). Each unit is described in learning outcomes, with the mark scheme for Unit R023 (Understanding body systems and disorders) provided against each learning outcome, with progression between each mark band clearly and consistently presented.

Figure 8: Example OCR Cambridge National Level 1 and 2 mark scheme

LO1: Know how body systems work[1]		
MB1: 1–3 marks	**MB2: 4–6 marks**	**MB3: 7–8 marks**
Demonstrates **basic** knowledge of how the cardiovascular system works. Provides **basic** information to illustrate the structure of the cardiovascular system making **few** links between structure and function. Provides a **basic** description of the system functionality making **limited** use of terminology but demonstrating a **basic** understanding.	Demonstrates **sound** knowledge of how the cardiovascular system works. Provides **clear** information to illustrate the structure of the cardiovascular system making **some** links between structure and function. Provides a **clear** description of the system functionality, making **some** effective use of terminology and demonstrating a **sound** understanding.	Demonstrates **detailed** knowledge of how the cardiovascular system works. Provides **detailed and coherent** information to illustrate the structure of the cardiovascular system making **many** links between structure and function. Provides a **comprehensive** description of the system functionality, **effectively** using terminology which demonstrates a **clear and thorough** understanding.

[145] https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/82369-specification.pdf

LO3: Be able to interpret data obtained from measuring body rates with reference to the functioning of healthy body systems		
MB1: 1–6 marks	**MB2: 7–11 marks**	**MB3: 12–15 marks**
Demonstrates **limited** confidence in measuring body rates.	Demonstrates **some** confidence measuring body rates.	Demonstrates **confidence and competency** measuring body rates.
A **limited** interpretation of data obtained from measuring body rates and comparing against the norms making **limited** reference to the functioning of healthy body systems.	A **reasonable** interpretation of data obtained from measuring body rates and comparing against the norms making **some** reference to the functioning of healthy body systems.	A **thorough** interpretation of data obtained from measuring body rates and comparing against the norms making **detailed** reference to the functioning of healthy body systems.
There will be **some** errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.	There will be **minor** errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.	There will be **few**, if any, errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.
Draws upon **limited** skills/knowledge/understanding from other units in the specification.	Draws upon **some relevant** skills/knowledge/ understanding from other units in the specification.	**Clearly** draws upon **relevant** skills/knowledge/ understanding from other units in the specification.

Further, the performance descriptors for each of the qualification grades are provided.

Figure 9: Example qualification outcomes presented as performance descriptors

3.4 Performance descriptions

The performance descriptors indicate the level of attainment associated with Distinction at Level 2, Pass at Level 2 and Pass at Level 1. They are for use at awarding meetings. They give a general indication of the levels of attainment likely to be shown by a representative learner performing at these boundaries.

Performance descriptor – Distinction at Level 2

Learners will be able to work with confident independence to create material which reflects thoughtful planning, skilled development and perceptive evaluation.

They will be able to apply knowledge, understanding and skills in a variety of health and social care contexts - exploring, identifying, selecting and using a range of health, social and early year care values to provide quality care. They will be able to use a range of skills and abilities confidently that add value in the workplace and in higher education.

They will be able to produce work that is complete and coherent, demonstrating originality and depth of understanding.

They will be able to:

- Recall a wide range of information regarding social issues within health, social care and early years settings
- Perceptively analyse health, social care and early years care situations
- Create solutions which demonstrate detailed consideration of the requirements of people who use services
- Understand and use a wide range of health, social care and early years terminology correctly
- Use techniques efficiently to search for, select and store appropriate information effectively, in a

Some groups of qualifications must comply with additional regulatory conditions, such as A levels, which must meet the subject content requirements as defined by the Department for Education. As illustrated below, the subject content, contained within the subject level conditions for A levels in modern foreign languages[146] includes learning outcomes, which AOs must address.

Figure 10: Subject content objectives for A level modern foreign languages

Aims and objectives

3. AS and A level specifications in a modern language must enable students to:

- enhance their linguistic skills and promote and develop their capacity for critical thinking on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of the language, culture and society of the country or countries where the language is spoken
- develop control of the language system to convey meaning, using spoken and written skills, including an extended range of vocabulary, for both practical and intellectual purposes as increasingly confident, accurate and independent users of the language
- develop their ability to interact effectively with users of the language in speech and in writing, including through online media
- develop language learning skills and strategies, including communication strategies to sustain communication and build fluency and confidence
- engage critically with intellectually stimulating texts, films and other materials in the original language, developing an appreciation of sophisticated and creative uses of the language and understanding them within their cultural and social context
- develop knowledge about matters central to the society and culture, past and present, of the country or countries where the language is spoken

146 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/610131/GCE_Subject_Level_Conditions_for_MFL__April_2017_.pdf

Also contained within the subject level conditions are the assessment objective requirements, which are the required proportions of marks to be rewarded in the qualification for the demonstration of specified knowledge, skills or understanding. For example, A levels in modern foreign languages must meet the following assessment objective weightings:

Figure 11: Assessment objectives for A level Modern Foreign Languages

	Objective
AO1	Understand and respond: ▪ in speech to spoken language including face-to-face interaction; ▪ in writing to spoken language drawn from a variety of sources.
AO2	Understand and respond: ▪ in speech to written language drawn from a variety of sources; ▪ in writing to written language drawn from a variety of sources.
AO3	Manipulate the language accurately, in spoken and written forms, using a range of lexis and structure.
AO4 (AS)	Show knowledge and understanding of, and respond critically to, different aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken.
AO4 (A level)	Show knowledge and understanding of, and respond critically and analytically to, different aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken.

When they develop an A level in a modern foreign language, AOs must meet the requirements of the subject content, the assessment objectives, and all the regulatory conditions, such as those relating to learning outcomes presented above.

RQF and Validation of non-formal and informal learning

The General Conditions for Recognition of both Ofqual and CCEA Regulation refer to recognition of prior learning (RPL) in relation to 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 (where appropriate) to a reduction of funding so that only the activities that are delivered are paid for.

Any RQF qualification can be achieved in full or in part through the recognition of prior non-formal[147] and informal[148] learning, providing the AO and its centres have policies and procedures in place which comply with the relevant General Condition of Recognition (Condition E10, below). In practice, demand from learners is very low, and rules in place around funding mean that this approach is less widely promoted by learning providers, who are funded for qualification teaching rather than for achievement of qualifications. Further, AOs are not required to have a policy for RPL, with the result that it is not common for qualifications to be awarded based wholly on recognition of prior learning.

> ***Condition E10 Recognition of Prior Learning***
>
> *E10.1 Where an awarding organisation has in place a policy for the recognition of prior learning it must –*
>
> *(a) ensure that the policy which it has in place enables the awarding organisation to award qualifications in accordance with its Conditions of*
>
> *Recognition,*
>
> *(b) publish that policy, and*
>
> *(c) comply with that policy.*
>
> *E10.2 For the purposes of this Condition, 'recognition of prior learning' is the –*
>
> *(a) identification by an awarding organisation of any learning undertaken, and/or attainment, by a Learner –*

[147] Non-formal learning is a purposive, but voluntary, learning that takes place in a diverse range of environments and situations for which teaching/training and learning is not necessarily their sole or main activity.

[148] Informal learning, from the learner's standpoint at least, is non-purposive learning, which takes place in everyday life contexts in the family, at work, during leisure and in the community.
Both: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary/-/glossary/All

(i) prior to that Learner taking a qualification which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, and

(ii) which is relevant to the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of that qualification, and

(b) recognition by an awarding organisation of that learning and/or attainment through amendment to the requirements which a Learner must have satisfied before the Learner will be assessed or that qualification will be awarded.

In England, progress and achievement in learning that does not lead to a regulated qualification (mainly adult and community learning, or for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) can be recognised through a five-stage process, complementary to RPL, known as RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement).[149] Using RARPA standards is mandatory in order for learning that does not lead to a regulated qualification to receive funding, as set out in the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) rules.[150] While RARPA does not lead to any form of certification, it is a method of quality assurance and supports progression from non-formal to formal learning, and the system is also used by some providers offering regulated qualifications.

One strength of the current RPL arrangements in England and Northern Ireland is the link to the RQF, allowing for non-formal and informal learning to be recognised in the context of a recognised qualification with currency. In addition, the regulators Ofqual and CCEA Regulation have oversight of regulated qualifications acquired via RPL. For the most part, "there is no question of whether the outcomes of validation are 'trusted' by stakeholders and in society, since they are the same outcomes"[151] (European Commission et al), as regulated qualifications awarded through RPL (and the standards used) are the same as those earned through formal learning opportunities. However there are instances where it may not be possible to report learning achievements in the form of a grade; instead, the outcomes of RPL might be either 'pass' or 'fail', together with a transcript of assessed learning outcomes.

In England and Northern Ireland there is no single centralised policy on RPL or validation of non-formal and informal learning provision; responsibility for deciding on and implementing validation arrangements sits with the AOs.[152] The process is designed to allow for RPL validation where it is relevant, but not to impose an overly

[149] https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/updated-rarpa-guidance-and-case-studies/

[150] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833607/AEB_2019-20_rules_September_Version_3.pdf

[151] http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/united-kingdom-european-inventory-nqf-2018

[152] Ofqual and CCEA Regulation recognise 155 and, respectively, 99 AOs which can award credits and qualifications in England and Northern Ireland.

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. 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.

In England there are currently no plans to review the policies and practices for the validation of non-formal and informal learning provision: however, in Northern Ireland the development of a digital Personal Learning Record (dPLR) is a draft Programme for Government commitment. The Department for the Economy is continuing to work to develop the dPLR working with other departments and stakeholders. The dPLR seeks to provide a digital platform to combine formal and informal learning episodes, employment experiences alongside employer feedback and to allow citizens to record employability/ transversal skills.

RQF and Credit

The predecessor to the RQF (QCF) had very specific qualification design rules whereby qualifications had to be designed from units with learning outcomes, assessment criteria, a QCF level and credit value. The RQF does not include these prescriptive design rules for qualifications, however to help people understand better how qualifications relate to each other, RQF qualifications use a consistent approach to describing the size of a qualification (how long, typically, learners take to complete the qualification) and for describing the level of difficulty of a qualification.

In relation to describing the size of qualifications, General Condition E7[153] requires AOs to:

> *In respect of each qualification it makes available (or proposes to make available), assign a number of hours to that qualification for:*
>
> *a) Total Qualification Time, and*
>
> *b) Guided Learning*

Values for Total Qualification Time (TQT), including guided learning, are calculated by considering the different activities that learners would typically complete to achieve and demonstrate the learning outcomes of a qualification. They do not include activities which are required by a learner's teacher based on the requirements of an individual learner and/or cohort. Individual learners' requirements and individual teaching styles mean there will be variation in the actual time taken to complete a qualification. Values for TQT, including guided learning, are estimates.

[153] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications

Some examples of activities which can contribute to TQT include:

- Independent and unsupervised research/learning
- Unsupervised compilation of a portfolio of work experience
- Unsupervised e-learning
- Unsupervised e-assessment
- Unsupervised coursework
- Watching a pre-recorded podcast or webinar
- Unsupervised work-based learning
- All guided learning (including classroom-based learning supervised by a Teacher, work-based learning supervised by a teacher, live real-time webinars or telephone tutorials with a teacher, e-learning supervised by a Teacher in real time, and all forms of assessment which take place under the supervision of teacher).

Ofqual developed guidance[154] for AOs to ensure the consistent use of TQT. Although it is not mandatory for RQF qualifications to have credit, TQT can easily be used by AOs to assign credit to qualifications and qualification components. Credit is calculated as one tenth of the TQT. The other UK frameworks – the SCQF, CQFW and FHEQ use the same basis for calculating credit which means credit is consistently applied to qualifications and qualification components (units) across the UK easing recognition and mobility of qualifications across the UK countries. Condition E8 sets out the following requirements in relation to credit:

> *E8.1 An awarding organisation may assign a value for credit to a qualification, or a component of a qualification, which it makes available or proposes to make available.*
>
> *E8.2 Where an awarding organisation assigns a value for credit to a qualification, that value must be equal to one tenth of the Total Qualification Time assigned to that qualification, rounded to the nearest whole number.*
>
> *E8.3 Where an awarding organisation makes any revision to the number of hours which it has assigned to a qualification in respect of any element of Total Qualification Time, it must –*
>
> 1. *(a) review each value for credit which it has assigned to that qualification and any Component of that qualification, and*
> 2. *(b) revise that value if appropriate.*

[154] www.gov.uk/government/publications/total-qualification-time-criteria

Regulated qualifications and the seven EQF credit principles

In the General Conditions of Recognition, a component is subject to many of the same rules as a qualification, and is defined as:

A discrete part of a qualification which –

(a) focuses on specific areas of the knowledge, skills and understanding assessed for the qualification, and

(b) has a specific set of criteria against which Learners' performance will be differentiated.

The following table reviews the England and Northern Ireland approach to credit with the EQF credit principles.

Table 15: Review of credit systems for qualifications in England and Northern Ireland with the EQF credit principles

Principles for credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	General Conditions of Recognition (GCR)	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)
1. Credit systems should support flexible learning pathways, for the benefit of individual learners.	The General Conditions of Recognition facilitate flexible learning pathways by ensuring a consistent system is used for determining credit values, where an AO chooses to do so. *E8.1 An awarding organisation may assign a value for credit to a qualification, or a Component of a qualification, which it makes available or proposes to make available.* Where an AO offers unit based qualifications, learners can achieve units and be awarded unit certificates. The different sizes of qualifications support flexible learning pathways and	The FHEQ sets out the qualifications descriptors for higher education; it does not include reference to credit and credit frameworks. This is provided in supplementary information: Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England[155] and Academic credit in higher education in England – an introduction[156] Credit is used by the majority of higher education institutions in England and NI; it is not compulsory, the university uses

[155] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks
[156] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/academic-credit-higher-education-in-england-an-introduction.pdf

	allow learners to build on their learning and tailor learning to suit their needs. *D6.1 An awarding organisation may only make available a qualification which uses a unit or Rule of Combination developed by another person where it reasonably believes that –* *(a) the unit or Rule of Combination complies with the requirements relating to it that are set out in any Regulatory Document, and* *(b) in the development of the unit or Rule of Combination, due regard has been had to the guidelines and principles of good practice set out in any Regulatory Document.* Qualification titling requirements support clarity within and across AOs. *E2.2 An awarding organisation must, in addition –* *(b) take all reasonable steps to ensure that the title allows Users of qualifications to identify similar units or qualifications which it makes available or are made available by other awarding organisations.*	its autonomous powers to use, or not use, credits. Where credits are used they are assigned to an amount of learning at a level within the FHEQ. Credits are awarded for achievement of learning outcomes and are accumulated to achieve a higher education award. For instance a bachelor's degree (with honours) is, typically, 360 credits (120 at each of levels 4, 5 and 6). Where credits are awarded for modules or units of study they can be used towards further study at the same level, progression to another level, transfer to another institution and/or onto another course. Consistency in qualifications titling (FHEQ) and credit level and sizes enable flexibility for learners to undertake flexible learning within the relevant framework. The institution receiving a request from a learner for credit transfer determines how the credits can be used.
2. When designing and developing qualifications, the learning outcomes approach should be systematically used to facilitate the transfer of (components of) qualifications and progression in learning.	Learning outcomes are required in regulated qualifications: *E3.2 An awarding organisation must ensure that the specification for a qualification sets out –* *(f) the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of the qualification (giving a clear indication of their coverage and depth)*	In Northern Ireland, the FHEQ requires that: *5.6 For each individual programme of study and qualification, specific statements about the intended learning outcomes are drawn up and approved by the degree-awarding body which is awarding the qualification. The outcomes are expected to align with the qualification descriptor for the relevant level and also*

	(h) the criteria against which Learners' levels of attainment will be measured (such as assessment criteria or exemplars).	*with any relevant subject benchmark statements.* In both England and Northern Ireland, the FHEQ also requires that: *6.17 ... the award of higher education qualifications is premised on the demonstrated achievement of outcomes rather than years of study.* Units of learning that contribute to a course of study make use of learning outcomes that contribute to the overall award. Units of learning e.g. individual modules, multiple modules and whole courses are defined in terms of learning outcomes that can be used to facilitate the transfer of learning.
3. Credit systems should facilitate transfer of learning outcomes and progression of learners across institutional and national borders.	All the Qualifications Frameworks in the UK calculate credit in the same way, which means that credit values ascribed to qualifications and qualification components are consistently determined across both institutional and national borders. This eases recognition and supports mobility of qualifications. *E8.2 Where an awarding organisation assigns a value for credit to a qualification, that value must be equal to one tenth of the Total Qualification Time assigned to that qualification, rounded to the nearest whole number.* Each component assigned a credit value must have a level assigned: *E9.2 Where an awarding organisation assigns a value for credit to a component of*	The use of credit systems, the FHEQ and learning outcomes enable transparency across subjects, providers and countries, within UK, across EU and internationally. Consistency in establishing credit values and levels of learning facilitates cross-border transfer of credits and progression of learners The guidance on academic credit arrangements[157] states: *7. credit can serve a number of different functions…it also provides a basis for recognising learning achieved in other institutions or elsewhere*.

[157] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks

	a qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available, it must assign a level to that component.	
4. Credit systems should be underpinned by explicit and transparent quality assurance.	Individual components or units to which credit is assigned are subject to the same quality and monitoring rules as all regulated qualifications: *J1.2 Unless the context suggests otherwise, in these conditions – (i) a 'qualification' means a regulated qualification (and includes any units of that qualification)*	Individual components or units to which Credit is assigned are subject to the same quality and monitoring rules as all higher education qualifications and awards: The Quality Code and the sections of the FHEQ which are relevant to each nation apply to all awards made by degree awarding bodies including award of credits e.g. individual or groups of modules and full awards e.g. Certificates of HE, BSc (Hons), PGCE.
5. The credit acquired by an individual should be documented, expressing the acquired learning outcomes, the name of the competent credit awarding institution and, where relevant, the related credit value.	The qualification information should be clear and accessible, and present any credit value: *E3.2 An awarding organisation must ensure that the specification for a qualification sets out – (l) any value for credit which it has assigned to that qualification and any component of that qualification* Results must be issued, and must be clear and comprehensible to users: *H6.1 An awarding organisation must, in relation to any qualification which it makes available –* *(a) issue results for all units and qualifications* *(c) issue results which are clear and readily capable of being understood by users of qualifications* The certificate should clearly reference the learner and the qualification title:	In Northern Ireland, the FHEQ requires that: *5.9 Students are provided with a detailed record of their studies when they leave their programme of study (on completion, or earlier), which gives evidence of their achievement. This may be in the form of a transcript, Diploma Supplement and / or Higher Education Achievement Report*

	I3.2 An awarding organisation must ensure that – *(a) all certificates which it issues clearly and uniquely identify both the Learner and the certificate itself,* *(b) all certificates which it issues clearly display the title of the qualification as it appears on the Register (and any Endorsement known after the qualification is submitted to the Register) and do not include any other title for the qualification.*	
6. Systems for credit transfer and accumulation should seek synergies with arrangements for validation of prior learning, working together to facilitate and promote transfer and progression.	Condition E10 facilitates the identification of prior learning where the policy to do so enables the award of qualifications in accordance with the Conditions. Prior learning must be relevant to the knowledge, skills and understanding to be assessed in that qualification, and that learning must be recognised by amending the assessment requirements for that Learner to be awarded that qualification. *E10.2 For the purposes of this Condition, 'recognition of prior learning' is the –* *(a) identification by an awarding organisation of any learning undertaken, and/or attainment, by a Learner –* *(i) prior to that Learner taking a qualification which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, and* *(ii) which is relevant to the knowledge, skills and understanding which will be assessed as part of that qualification, and* *(b) recognition by an awarding organisation of that learning and/or attainment through*	An individual university's RPL regulations will state the policy for recognition of prior learning, the arrangements for transfer of credits from prior certificated learning, or the award of credits for prior experiential learning Condition F2 in the OfS Regulatory Framework (England) requires that: *The provider must provide to the OfS, and publish, information about its arrangements for a student to transfer.*

	amendment to the requirements which a Learner must have satisfied before the Learner will be assessed or that qualification will be awarded.	
7. Credit systems should be developed and improved through cooperation between stakeholders at the appropriate national and Union levels.	Credit systems are well embedded and understood in the UK and based on the same principles thus ensuring a consistent UK approach to credit. The UK has been actively engaged with the implementation of ECVET and is using ECVET to promote transnational mobility, to ensure a quality experience for the learner/worker and recognition/validation of their learning. UK ECVET Experts are promoting and encouraging organisations involved in mobility to use ECVET in geographical mobility.	The FHEQ and the higher education credit framework are developed through cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders representing the four UK nations and including students, funding bodies, professional bodies and other sector representative bodies. The QAA documentation includes names, roles and organisations for those involved in their development.

FHEQ and Learning Outcomes

The FHEQ levels are based on qualification descriptors. These are written in terms of learning outcomes through a series of statements at each level showing what a graduate at that level will be able to demonstrate and do and the qualities that they will have. The Subject Benchmark Statements,[158] which detail subject specific outcomes at each HE level, state the expected outcomes in relation to the subject of study e.g. English, Physics, Architecture, Medicine etc. Compliance with the Subject Benchmark Statements is not a mandatory requirement in England but they are widely used by the sector.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education requires that:

- the academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework;
- the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards;

[158] See link for example Subject Benchmark Statement: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/sbs-creative-writing-16.pdf?sfvrsn=d4e2f781_8

- courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed; and
- from admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.

The advice and guidance for course design and development includes a principle whereby: “definitive course documentation is produced accurately and fairly describing the learning opportunities, intended student outcomes and support offered”[159] and that for assessment: “Assessment methods and criteria are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities”

Good practice within higher education will include the presentation of the course through a course specification where the intended learning outcomes for a course are set out, individual units of study and assessment will state the intended learning outcomes and what is expected of a student to achieve the stated outcomes through grading criteria (see Annex 3).

Qualifications in the FHEQ are awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes, expressed in terms of knowledge, understanding and abilities, and attainment. Qualification descriptors are key to this approach. A qualification descriptor sets out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a particular type of qualification (for example a bachelor's degree with honours). The qualification descriptors describe the threshold academic standard for those qualification types in terms of the levels of knowledge and understanding and the types of abilities that holders of the relevant qualification are expected to have.

The outcomes and attributes described in qualification descriptors result from learning acquired on completion of coherent courses of study. These courses, which develop high-level analytical skills and a broad range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher level skills. Individual courses of study have learning outcomes which specify the intended outcomes from that course which must be achieved for the award of a specific qualification from an individual degree-awarding body. The course learning outcomes are required to align with the relevant qualification descriptor.

The FHEQ is also based on the principle that consistent qualification nomenclature for the main qualification types (for example degree, postgraduate diploma) conveys trustworthy information about the level, nature and subject of study.

FHEQ and validation

In Higher Education, HEIs are permitted to develop their own policies and procedures for RPL. RPL is a form of assessment, in that it recognises learning that

[159] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/course-design-and-development

has been achieved. The Expectations, Core and Common Practices in the UK Quality Code, make implicit reference to RPL at admissions and for assessment. In addition, advice and guidance on RPL are incorporated within the Assessment Advice and Guidance which complement the UK Quality Code[160] and which recommends: "information on opportunities for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is readily accessible, and guidance and support in applying for RPL is provided" and that RPL "is consistent with national reference points".

The theme also posits that regulations and requirements for RPL should be clear and explicit with guidance on information that should be included, for example:

- minimum and maximum limits for credit awarded through RPL;
- whether and how RPL will be graded;
- how credit and exemptions will be used for the award and classification;
- process for investigating alleged fraud; and
- processes for considering appeals.

FHEQ, Credit and Credit Transfer

Credit systems are in place in most universities and higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland, with most higher education courses composed of modules with sizes expressed in credit values. Current practice within the UK equates two FHEQ credits to one ECTS (European credit transfer and accumulation system).

Credit transfer within and between institutions is possible; it is used when a learner moves from one course of study to another and where a learner transfers credits from a completed course to gain advanced entry to another course. For example, a graduate with a foundation degree or a Higher National Diploma (HND) can usually gain entry into the final level of study for a bachelor's degree with honours in a related subject area. Where courses are accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body there may be restrictions on credit transfers.

Credit transfers are generally considered for either general or specific credits. General credits are where a learner has achieved, for example, 40 credits of learning at level 4 and transfers to a new course of study requiring 120 credits per year. In this scenario, the 40 credits are transferred into the new course and the learner completes the level with a further 80 credits of study chosen from any of the level 4 modules available in the new course. Specific credits are where the credits transferred into a new course are aligned to a specific module within the new course;

[160] http://www.qaa.ac.uk//en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment

the learner must complete the remaining 80 credits from the remaining available modules.

Some higher education providers offer awards completed through credit accumulation, rather than as part of a pre-designed course, most notably the Open University, where learners study self-selected modules of varying sizes to complete each level of study to achieve a higher education award. There are no restrictions on which module a learner chooses within each level of study. Learners can transfer credits awarded by other organisations.[161]

The QAA provides guidance on academic credit arrangements[162] which notes that each higher education institution will determine what credit it will accept for purposes of accumulation or transfer and that the application of the guidelines on credit are a matter for individual institutions to decide at their discretion; in line with the autonomous nature of universities in the UK.

Summary: Criterion 3

The RQF and the FHEQ descriptors are based on learning outcomes, and the regulatory and quality assurance processes associated with them underline the ways learning outcomes should be used in assessment and awarding of qualifications. This kind of understanding and practice is deeply embedded in the ways qualifications frameworks, qualifications and assessment and awarding processes work in the UK.

The RQF and the FHEQ enable the validation of non-formal and informal learning in England and Northern Ireland; the process of validation is left to the learning provider to structure in ways that satisfies the quality assurance regulations of AOs. The RQF sets the ground rules for use of credit although it does not require it. Similarly, the FHEQ enables a consistent approach for credit for those HE institutions that choose to use it, although it does not make this a specific requirement.

[161] http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/faqs/what-are-cats-points-or-credits and http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/

[162] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks and https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/academic-credit-higher-education-in-england-an-introduction.pdf

Criterion 4:

The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

The procedures by which qualifications are recognised in the RQF and the FHEQ are transparent, being publicly available via clearly worded documents on relevant websites.

Before AOs or degree awarding bodies are able to award regulated qualifications in the respective framework, they must be recognised by the relevant regulator(s) as competent bodies, with a clear understanding of what is required of qualifications in that framework.

Further, there are additional criteria and accreditation processes in place for certain groups of qualifications, so that only qualifications that meet these criteria, and that are offered by bodies that are recognised by the regulators to award those qualifications, are submitted to the frameworks.

Once the qualifications are submitted to the frameworks, monitoring and quality assurance activities are carried out to check ongoing compliance with the regulator(s) requirements.

The role of awarding organisations (AOs)

AOs develop qualifications, design and deliver the assessments and award the resulting certificates. Qualifications test knowledge, skills and understanding of a subject and are awarded to learners who demonstrate the required level of attainment.

AOs offer qualifications to meet the need of their customers – learners, schools, colleges and training providers that offer the courses that lead to their qualifications – and to meet government policy requirements as relevant. AOs develop the exams, tests and other assessments that learners take to achieve their qualifications.

Recognition of AOs to offer regulated qualifications

AOs that want to offer regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland must be recognised by the relevant qualifications regulator(s) in England and/or Northern Ireland (Ofqual and CCEA Regulation respectively), by demonstrating they satisfy the regulators' Criteria for Recognition.[163] Once recognised, AOs can submit regulated qualifications (which must comply with the General Conditions of Recognition[164] and any relevant qualification and/or subject level Condition) to the

[163] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criteria-for-recognition
[164] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook

Ofqual Register of Regulated Qualifications whereby they automatically become RQF qualifications.[165] In some cases, qualifications will be subject to an accreditation or technical evaluation process before being admitted to the Register of Regulated Qualifications.

Once recognised, an AO must continue to comply with the General Conditions of Recognition and keep its approach to the design, development, delivery and award of qualifications under review.

The regulators use a number of tools in combination to gather evidence about an AO's compliance. In England, certain groups of qualifications, (such as GCSEs, AS and A levels) must go through the Ofqual accreditation process[166] before they are entered onto the Register of Regulated Qualifications as part of the RQF, while other qualifications may be placed directly onto the Register by recognised AOs. In Northern Ireland, all qualifications must go through the CCEA Regulation accreditation process before they are entered onto the Register.

All AOs offering qualifications on the RQF are subject to ongoing monitoring and compliance activity, once they are recognised by Ofqual and/or CCEA Regulation and must comply with the General Conditions of Recognition. Monitoring and compliance reviews are based on risk profiles developed using information from key touchpoints with each AO (for example during accreditation or upfront evaluation reviews), and other information such as qualification type or learner cohort size.

Audit and compliance work provides assurance that individual or groups of AOs are managing risks appropriately, for example ensuring the right systems and people are in place in terms of capacity and expertise, and it can also highlight concerns that must be addressed. The work may take the form of proactive thematic reviews, for example considering malpractice, monitoring of internal assessors or centre controls, or may be more targeted, responsive investigations, for example into suspected non-compliance within an AO.

Accreditation of non-HE qualifications in England and Northern Ireland

The qualifications regulators for non-HE qualifications are Ofqual in England and CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland. Although these bodies have similar functions, they were established under different acts which give them different degrees of independence and statutory powers. For example, in Northern Ireland CCEA was established under The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which stipulates that CCEA must accredit all qualifications. As it would be very resource-intensive to put all qualifications through an accreditation process, CCEA Regulation select a sample of qualifications submitted for accreditation, on a quarterly basis, by those

[165] www.register.ofqual.gov.uk
[166] https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/09/24/gsce-as-and-a-level-reform-the-accreditation-process/

AOs who are recognized to operate in Northern Ireland. The sample of qualifications are selected using a risk rating procedure. The CCEA Regulation Handbook sets out the detail of the accreditation process.[167]

In England, Ofqual was established under section 127 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009[168] (the ASCL Act) which allows Ofqual to set an accreditation requirement for individual qualifications (or types of qualification). Ofqual decides which qualifications are to be subject to accreditation based on a risk analysis, such that often high volume, high-stakes qualifications must be accredited. From November 2014, qualifications subject to an accreditation requirement include GCSE qualifications; GCE qualifications; and certain technical qualifications.

Ofqual may sometimes require some or all qualifications from any particular AO to be submitted for accreditation – for example, when an organisation has only recently been recognised, or if Ofqual have other specific concerns about an organisation or a particular qualification. Before an accreditation requirement may be imposed, Ofqual must hold a public consultation.

In Northern Ireland and England, where an AO submits a qualification for accreditation (or the closely related upfront technical evaluation), it is required to submit a specification, sample assessment materials including mark schemes, and in the case of GCSE and GCE qualifications, an assessment strategy.[169]

In England and Northern Ireland, during the accreditation process, regulatory officers convene a panel of regulators and subject assessment experts to review the specification and other materials against the regulator's General Conditions of Recognition and any other conditions relevant to the qualification. For example, for the purposes of accrediting a GCE qualification in a particular subject (e.g. Music), the relevant Conditions include:

- GCE Qualification Level Conditions[170] (and Design Principles in Northern Ireland)
- GCE Subject (Music) Level Conditions[171] (criteria in Northern Ireland)

During the accreditation review, key considerations relate to Ofqual's statutory objectives around ensuring qualifications are valid and reliable and that the level of

[167] For further detail on the CCEA accreditation process, see Section 4: http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/accreditation/guidance/CCEA%20Reg%20AO%20Handbook.pdf
[168] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/section/127
[169] The assessment strategy covers all of the AO's internal quality assurance processes that relate to the qualification assessment design, delivery, marking, moderation, appeals, certifications and so on.
[170] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements
[171] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-subject-level-conditions-and-requirements-for-music

demand is appropriate. The review is dependent on clear and appropriate descriptions of learning outcomes in qualification specifications. The accreditation review considers the materials provided and scrutinises the proposed approach to assessing the qualification to consider whether the level of demand is appropriate for the qualification level.

Once an AO's qualification has been accredited by CCEA Regulation for use in Northern Ireland or by Ofqual for use in England, the AO can upload the qualification to the Register of Regulated Qualifications.

Audit and Compliance of AOs

All AOs offering qualifications on the RQF are subject to ongoing monitoring and compliance activity, as they are recognised by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation and hence must comply with the General Conditions of Recognition.

Audit and compliance work considers whether individual or groups of AOs are managing risks appropriately, for example ensuring the right systems and people are in place in terms of capacity and expertise. This work may take the form of proactive thematic reviews, for example considering malpractice, monitoring of internal assessors or centre controls, or may be more targeted, responsive investigations, for example into suspected non-compliance within an AO. If the regulators determine that there has been a breach of requirements, regulatory action can be taken.[172]

Allocating a level to an RQF qualification

The General Conditions of Recognition (the Conditions) require AOs to include the level of the qualification in the qualification title (condition E2) and to take a consistent approach to determining the level of regulated qualifications.

The regulatory requirements for assigning a level to a qualification or qualification component are included in condition E9 and are as follows:

Condition E9 Qualification and Component levels

E9.1 An awarding organisation must assign one or more levels to each qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available.

E9.2 Where an awarding organisation assigns a value for credit to a Component of a qualification which it makes available or proposes to make available, it must assign a level to that Component.

E9.3 An awarding organisation must adhere to any requirements, and have regard to any guidance, which may be published by Ofqual/CCEA Regulation and revised from time to time in assigning –

[172] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/regulatory-actions-and-interventions-by-ofqual

(a) a level to a qualification,

(b) more than one level to a qualification, and

(c) a level to a Component of a qualification.

E9.4 An awarding organisation must –

(a) keep under review each level which it has assigned to a qualification or a Component of a qualification,

(b) in particular, review that level following any revision by Ofqual/CCEA Regulation of any requirements published under this Condition, and

(c) revise that level if appropriate.

E9.5 Following any review by Ofqual/CCEA Regulation of a level assigned to a qualification or a Component of a qualification an awarding organisation must revise that level in any manner specified by Ofqual/CCEA Regulation.

There is no single prescribed methodology for assigning a level to a qualification. However, in 2015, when the RQF replaced the QCF, Ofqual published guidance to which AOs must have regard when assigning a level to a regulated qualification. This guidance can be accessed in the Ofqual handbook[173] and is included in Annex 4.

In addition to the guidance, the regulatory activities, including the accreditation of qualifications and audit and compliance of AOs, consider whether these level requirements are met by the AOs.

Ofqual's Regulatory Strategy Statement (March 2015)[174] explains Ofqual's regulatory approach, including its expectations of AOs and the tools and methodologies that assure Ofqual that AOs are offering qualifications which comply with the regulatory requirements. It also sets out what Ofqual is likely to do if AOs are not compliant.

Process for inclusion in the FHEQ

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is a "key reference point for UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality. It enables providers to understand what is expected of them and what to expect from each other."[175]

The Quality Code sets out a sector-agreed series of expectations for standards and quality.

The expectations for standards are:

[173] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook
[174] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofquals-regulatory-strategy-statement
[175] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

- The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the FHEQ; and
- The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.[176]

Sector recognised standards include characteristics statements, subject benchmark statements, PSRB requirements, and are agreed on a nation-by-nation basis.

In Northern Ireland, the Operating Model for Quality Assessment was introduced in 2016, which was a new, risk-based approach to external oversight in place of the previous cyclical inspections. Universities' Annual Progress Reviews confirm that benchmark regulatory requirements continue to be met. Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland that deliver higher education are subject to Quality Review Visits.[177]

In England, providers registered with the OfS must satisfy the conditions of registration that relate to quality and standards. New applicants must have a Quality and Standards Review[178] by the QAA which assesses whether a provider is meeting all of the core practices of the Quality Code. The QAA's advice following this review is then used by the OfS as it determines whether the provider meets the relevant conditions of registration.

Where the OfS wishes to gather evidence about whether a registered provider continues to satisfy its condition of registration, it may ask the QAA to assess whether the provider is continuing to meet the core practices of the Quality Code. When the QAA is asked to assess core practices relating to standards it will assess whether the provider is delivering qualifications that meet the relevant requirements of the FHEQ.[179] For this reason, the Expectations of the Quality Code 2018 are deliberately aligned with the OfS's conditions of registration, notably including condition B5, that providers "must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications at level 4 or higher."

[176] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code
[177] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-review-visit
[178] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-and-standards-review
[179] In England the relevant requirements are set out in the Regulatory Framework in paragraphs 342, 345 and 346

Table 16: The Office for Students' quality and standards conditions and the Expectations of the Quality Code

Condition of registration	Quality Code Expectation
B1. The provider must deliver well designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.	Expectation for Quality: Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.
B2. The provider must support all students, from admission through to completion, with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.	Expectation for Quality: From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.
B3. The provider must deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers, and/or enable further study.	This does not form part of the Quality Code.
B4. The provider must ensure that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards.	Expectation for standards: The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.
B5. The provider must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications at level 4 or higher.	Expectation for standards: The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.

The Access to Higher Education Diploma is a nationally recognised level three qualification specifically developed as an access route to higher education for adult learners. QAA has regulated the qualification through the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1997.[180] The courses are designed and awarded to align with the qualifications frameworks throughout the UK as noted in the 'Qualifications can cross boundaries' leaflet and the UK Government website.[181]

[180] https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk
[181] https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels

Summary: Criterion 4

The procedures by which qualifications are recognised in the RQF and the FHEQ are transparent. The procedures are clearly worded, publicly available and well understood by the relevant organisations.

The procedures for including qualifications in the RQF and the FHEQ are similar in that specific requirements are set before an organisation can submit a qualification to the frameworks, with both frameworks setting specific requirements in certain areas.

Once the qualifications are entered onto the frameworks, a range of monitoring and quality assurance activities consider whether ongoing compliance is maintained.

Criterion 5:

The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this recommendation.

Key bodies involved in the national quality assurance system, and the roles they play in relation to specific groups of qualifications, are presented in the table below.

Table 17: Accountability for key qualification types[182]

	Qualification types		
	Non-degree qualifications	**Apprenticeships**	**Degrees / HE qualifications**
Qualifications framework	**RQF**	**RQF/FHEQ/none[183]**	**FHEQ**
Qualification level/s	**Entry level 1 - 8**	**Technician (2-3)** **Higher Technician (4-5)** **Professional (6+)**	**Levels 4-8**
Overall accountability for quality	DfE (England) DfENI and DE(NI)	DfE (England) DfENI	OfS (England) DfENI
Standards / content development review and approval	DfE (England) DfENI	The Institute (England) DfENI	Universities and higher education institutes with Degree Awarding Powers
Quality of teaching/ training provision	Ofsted/ ETI (NI)	Ofsted/ ETI (NI) L2-3 In England: OfS L4+ where inc HE qualification or where provider is registered	OfS DfENI and QAA (NI)
Quality of qualifications in RQF	Ofqual/ CCEA Regulation	Ofqual/ CCEA Regulation	Not applicable
Quality of HE qualifications	Not applicable	Not applicable: L2-3 In England: OfS L4+ where inc HE qualification or where provider is registered	OfS with QAA as DQB (England) DfENI and QAA (NI)

[182] Based on: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-accountability-statement
[183] As not all apprenticeships include qualifications

RQF qualifications

In England and Northern Ireland, national quality assurance functions are provided by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation for regulated non-degree qualifications in the RQF focus on AOs that offer regulated qualifications and by the education inspection bodies Ofsted (in England) and ETI (in Northern Ireland) in relation to the institutions that teach regulated non-degree qualifications.

The RQF forms an integrated part of the regulated qualification system in England and Northern Ireland. Awarding Organisations (AOs) that seek to offer regulated qualifications in England and Northern Ireland must be recognised by the qualifications regulators in England and Northern Ireland (Ofqual and CCEA Regulation respectively) by demonstrating they meet the regulators' Criteria for Recognition.[184] Once recognised, AOs can submit qualifications (which must comply with the Ofqual and CCEA Regulation General Conditions of Recognition) to the Register of Regulated Qualifications.[185]

Quality assurance for these qualifications is based on reviewing the extent to which the AO complies with the Conditions, which cover the full range of quality assurance considerations from assessment design to delivery, marking, reviews and certifications.

Apprenticeships

In England, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (the Institute) is responsible for the quality of apprenticeships, in all areas excluding any component qualifications, that is: developing and maintaining quality criteria for the approval of apprenticeship standards and assessment plans, and supporting the development of standards and assessment plans by employer groups.

End-point assessment is the independent confirmation that the apprentice, on completing the apprenticeship, is occupationally competent.[186] Not all end-point assessments are regulated, but all end-point assessments are subject to external quality assurance, which is the process of ensuring the end-point assessment is fair, consistent and robust. Some apprenticeships include regulated qualifications, as well as the end point assessment.

Ofqual is responsible for the regulated RQF qualifications that may form part of an apprenticeship and for end-point assessment where Ofqual is the designated external quality assurance body for that apprenticeship standard.

[184] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criteria-for-recognition
[185] https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/
[186] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/quality/external-quality-assurance/

For higher level apprenticeships, the OfS employs a risk-based approach to quality assurance, defined by a high quality threshold for initial entry to the Register and ongoing monitoring of all providers on the OfS Register. OfS and Ofsted quality assessment processes for level 4 and 5 apprenticeships are complementary, as established by the apprenticeship pilot. The two organisations exchange information to evaluate the quality of apprenticeship provision. As part of the ongoing pilot, the OfS will provide information and data to Ofsted to inform its risk assessment process and areas of focus for inspections.[187]

Further Education and contracted training provision up to level 3 (Northern Ireland)

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has responsibility for providing inspection services for Departmental provision up to and including level 3. This encompasses provision in Further Education colleges as well as the contracted training programmes Training for Success (TfS) and ApprenticeshipsNI.

All ETI inspections are based on the ETI's published Inspection and self-evaluation Framework[188] and all organisations undergoing inspection are expected to demonstrate the required standards of quality in the following areas: outcomes for learners; quality of provision, and leadership and management, including safeguarding, care and welfare.

Quality Improvement Planning is an important aspect of the quality assurance model. All colleges of Further Education in NI, and all contracted training providers, are required to self-evaluate their provision on an ongoing basis, and to plan effectively to drive and sustain quality improvement. Each year, organisations are required to submit Quality Improvement Planning returns, utilising the published information published by the ETI.[189] These returns must include a review of actions taken to improve quality over the previous year; a plan for the year ahead; and an assurance statement signed by a chief executive or equivalent. These submissions are reviewed by the ETI and the Department's Quality Improvement Advisor, and each organisation receives a written response. In cases where the required standards are not met, the organisation will be subject to Inspection, using one of the inspection

[187] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/degree-apprenticeships/degree-apprenticeships-for-higher-education-providers/checking-the-quality-of-apprenticeships/

[188] See the Framework at https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/inspection-and-self-evaluation-framework-isef-effective-practice-and-self-evaluation-4

[189] https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/quality-improvement-scrutiny-inspection-guidance-sept-18.pdf

models outlined above. On occasion, the Quality Improvement Advisor will carry out support visits to assist delivery organisations, where appropriate.

Higher Education Qualifications

In Higher Education the FHEQ forms part of the quality baseline for both England[190] and Northern Ireland; the FHEQ is managed by the QAA on behalf of the UKSCQA. DfENI and the OfS are the regulatory bodies responsible for quality assurance in Northern Ireland and England, respectively.

Condition B5 in the General Ongoing Conditions of Registration[191] requires that: "The provider must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications at level 4 or higher". Where concerns are raised about potential non-compliance, restrictions may be placed on the provider until compliance can be assured. Failure to comply with this condition can result in a higher education provider being removed from the register.

The UK Quality Code for higher education includes the expectation for standards that: "The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework" and a core practice for standards that: "The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks."

The risk-based approach in use in England involves Quality Standards Reviews of a provider through an annual random sampling approach or to address concerns raised by or with the Office for Students.

ENQA reviews of QAA

The Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)[192] has conducted two cyclical reviews of QAA since 2008. In 2013[193] the review was against the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) 2005[194] and reported "full compliance in all criteria". The most recent review, in 2018,[195] was against the ESG 2015[196] which includes a requirement that "the qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and,

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[190] In England the relevant requirements in the FHEQ are set out in the Regulatory Framework in paragraphs 342, 345 and 346

[191] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/conditions-of-registration/initial-and-general-ongoing-conditions-of-registration/

[192] https://enqa.eu/index.php/about-enqa/

[193] https://enqa.eu/index.php/reviews/review-reports-and-decisions/?keyword=qaa&submit=SEARCH&check_date=on&from_day=01&from_month=01&from_year=2013&to_day=01&to_month=01&to_year=2014

[194] https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ESG_3edition.pdf

[195] https://enqa.eu/index.php/reviews/review-reports-and-decisions/

[196] https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area."

The QAA was assessed as "in compliance with the ESG" and the report noted 11 commendations and that the QAA was fully compliant in 13 of the 14 standards. The report stated that the QAA makes "valuable contributions to protecting student interests and towards higher education quality advancements internationally" and in his letter to the QAA,[197] the ENQA president stated that "the [ENQA] Board appreciates QAA's firm commitment to quality enhancement and commends specifically its enhancement-led approach in thematic analysis".[198]

EQF Principles of Quality Assurance and RQF and FHEQ Quality Assurance Systems

The following two tables compare the quality assurance systems of England and Northern Ireland with the EQF principles of quality assurance.

Table 18: Roles of education and training bodies in England and Northern Ireland in relation to the EQF principles of quality assurance (see footnotes [199],[200],[201],[202] in table

[197] https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Letter-ENQA-to-QAA_160718.pdf
[198] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/european-plaudits-for-qaa-and-uk-higher-education-quality-assurance
[199] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook in England or http://ccea.org.uk/regulation/compliance/general_conditions_recognition in NI
[200]https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-inspection-framework-education-skills-and-early-years-from-september-2015
[201] https://www.etini.gov.uk/articles/inspection-and-self-evaluation-framework-isef
[202] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

	Ofqual/ CCEA Regulation	Recognised awarding organisations	Ofsted	Education and Training Inspectorate NI	QAA	Office for Students	Higher Education Institutions
Area of coverage	All recognised awarding organisations All regulated qualifications	QA of all regulated qualifications and centres that offer them	Maintained schools, FE and skills provision and registered early years settings	Education and training at all stages: early years to FE and work-based learning	Higher Education Institutions; Higher education providers, UK Higher Education	Higher Education Providers; Registered Providers	Degree awarding bodies; higher education providers
Processes	General Conditions of Recognition (GCR)[1]	Proprietary qual development/QA processes, which comply with GCR	The Common Inspection Framework[2]	The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework[3]	UK Quality Code[4] FHEQ	Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England	Internal QA; compliance with UK Quality Code and FHEQ
EQF Principles: QA requirements should cover:							
1. Design of qualifications	GCR E1, E4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Valid & reliable assessment	GCR D1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement	GCR A5, D3, E7, E8, E9, H3, I2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Inclusion of stakeholders at all stages in the process	GCR D3, D4, E1, E2, E9, H4, H6, I4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Self-assessment & external review	GCR B2, D3, D4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Integration into management structures	GCR A5, B1, B2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. Clear, measurable objectives, standards and guidelines	All GCR and accompanying Guidance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Appropriate resources	GCR A5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Regular review of bodies/agencies responsible for QA	GCR A8, B2, B3, B4, B6, B7, B8, C1, C2, C3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. Electronic accessibility of evaluation results	GCR B2, B3, B4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The following table shows how the RQF and FHEQ quality assurance processes are consistent with the quality assurance principles[203] for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the EQF.

Table 19: Review of quality assurance systems for qualifications in England and Northern Ireland with the EQF quality assurance principles

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
In accordance with national circumstances and taking into account sectoral differences quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should:		
Address the design of qualifications as well as application of the learning outcomes approach	RQF Qualifications must be designed to comply with the General Conditions of Recognition. These Conditions require AOs to design and develop qualifications so that: - qualifications have an objective, including defined outcomes for learners (including progression in education or employment) - AOs gain support for a proposed qualification from potential users; - qualifications can accurately differentiate between learners' levels of attainment.	Qualifications in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) must be designed with reference to that framework and meet all expectations set out within the Quality Code The descriptors within the FHEQ set a series of learning outcomes on which learners are assessed. Degree Awarding Bodies design their qualifications to align with the descriptors set out in the FHEQ and using the named titles given. The framework and descriptors enable comparisons to be made across subjects, institutions, levels and modes of study. The qualifications awarded accurately differentiate learners' levels of attainment.
Ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards and address the process of certification	General Conditions of Recognition require regulated qualifications to be 'fit for purpose', including that they are: - valid; - reliable; - comparable; - manageable; and - minimise bias	The UK Quality Code requires that: - academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the FHEQ - value of qualifications awarded to students over time is in line with sector-recognised standards - courses are well-designed, provide a high quality

[203] http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9620-2017-INIT/en/pdf

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
	The GCR also requires that qualification certificates are issued to learners following appropriate marking, moderation and following any appeals, and clearly state relevant information including the qualification level.	academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed The Quality Code includes a core practice that the "provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent".[204]
Consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement	Ofqual and CCEA Regulation undertake a programme of audits to ensure that AOs are compliant with regulatory requirements. Feedback from users of qualifications and centres of learning is explicitly sought. Awarding organisations are also required to periodically review their own approaches to the award of qualifications, and to review qualifications on a regular basis to ensure they remain fit for purpose and (for vocational/professional/ occupational qualifications), are based on the most recent NOS as relevant. Where AOs are dissatisfied with the outcome of this quality assurance, they may appeal regulatory decisions.	The Quality Code includes two common practices, which apply in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: - The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement; and - The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement. In Northern Ireland, Higher Education Providers currently work under the Revised Operating Model for Quality Assessment and are subject to an Annual Provider Review. In England, the OfS regulates at a provider level to ensure a baseline of protection for all students and the taxpayer. It sees the dynamic of providers responding to informed student choice as the best mechanism for driving quality and improvement, and will regulate at the sector level to enable this. Final year students undertake the National Student Survey (NSS),

[204] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
		which provides feedback on a range of criteria that can be compared within and across institutions and subjects. Outcomes of the NSS are widely used as an indicator of student satisfaction and to inform the sector of an institution's performance, as rated by their graduates.
Involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process	Quality assurance for regulated qualifications ensures that learners, centres and AO employees (as 'whistleblowers') can raise concerns with Ofqual and CCEA Regulation. The views of stakeholders are sought in Ofqual and CCEA Regulation research and evaluation programmes. New regulatory requirements which potentially impact on AOs, learners or centres are subject to public consultation before being implemented.	Consultation is widely undertaken by, for example, the QAA, the regulators, the UKSCQA. This might be UK-wide or within country, as appropriate. Such consultations will include as broad a range of stakeholders as is relevant to the consultation; demographic data is normally collected to show the range of sectors and organisations responding. Where practice is under review, or reassessment, the QAA, and/or other relevant bodies, consults widely across all potential stakeholders to ensure the widest relevant input is accessed. Core principles within the Quality Code require that: - The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent. - The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience. A common practice (not mandatory in England; mandatory in NI) requires that:

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
		- The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise. Higher education courses that are new, or being reviewed, will involve a wide range of stakeholders in review, design and validation. Whilst courses are in train a provider will regularly seek input and feedback from all those involved in the course, its assessment and the graduates from the course. Where stakeholders have concerns about higher education there are measures in place to provide clearly articulated routes for raising such concerns, or complaints.
Be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review	Awarding organisations are required to submit annual self-assessed Statements of Compliance to Ofqual and CCEA Regulation to demonstrate compliance with the General Conditions of Recognition. Monitoring and scrutiny activities are conducted by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation in regard to AO compliance with the General Conditions of Recognition. AOs conduct reviews of their centres to review compliance with regulatory requirements.	Providers in England and those in Northern Ireland are evaluated under consistent evaluation methods although the precise nature of the methods varies in each nation. The evaluation methods used all include self-assessment and external review. Guidance on each review method is available to providers who are undergoing review.
Be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level	The AO must appoint a Responsible Officer for the purpose of regulated activities. The AO's Governing Body (board of directors or equivalent) must approve the annual statement relating to its compliance with the General Conditions of Recognition.	The Quality Code includes a core practice for standards that states: - Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
	Awarding organisations are required to ensure that any third parties undertaking any part of the development, delivery or award of regulated qualifications act in a way that ensures compliance with regulatory requirements.	or how courses are delivered or who delivers them. And one for quality that states: - Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.
Be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines	Ofqual and CCEA Regulation regulatory requirements are set out in the form of: - Criteria, which must be met in order to attain recognition - Conditions, to which recognition is subject - Guidance, to which AOs must have regard. Ofqual and CCEA Regulation are required to publish a regulatory framework that sets out the approach to monitoring and enforcement functions under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009[205] and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 respectively.	The OfS, in England, set conditions that higher education providers must meet for initial and on-going registration. The OfS monitors the providers through a series of metrics and publishes the criteria on which these are based. In Northern Ireland, the Annual Provider Review draws on existing data and information to reach a judgment on quality and standards. Where the QAA undertakes a review of a higher education provider, it monitors the provider's compliance with: - the Quality Code in Northern Ireland - the Quality Code Expectations and Core Practices and the specific sections of the FHEQ that apply under the regulatory framework in England.
Be supported by appropriate resources	Ofqual and CCEA Regulation are sponsored and funded by the UK Government and NI Government respectively to undertake the functions outlined in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children	QAA is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. It receives funding from the UK Government / OfS / DfENI to provide quality assurance

[205] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/section/134

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
	and Learning Act 2009 and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 respectively. These include the quality assurance processes outlined above. The criteria for recognition (Section C) state that AOs must have appropriate resources and financing for the development, delivery and award of any qualification which it may make available as a recognised AO.	activities in higher education in England and Northern Ireland.
Include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies, carrying out quality assurance	The General Conditions of Recognition require recognised AOs to provide an annual statement relating to its compliance with the General Conditions of Recognition. Further evidence of this assurance is provided through other regulatory interventions and monitoring and scrutiny activities conducted by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation. Ofqual is held to public account by the UK Parliament at the Education Select Committee, which monitors the policy, administration and spending of the DfE and its associated arm's length bodies such as Ofqual. Further, Ofqual is subject to periodic organisational reviews by government. Similarly, CCEA Regulation is accountable to DE(NI) and DfENI for its performance.	The QAA is regularly reviewed by ENQA; most recently in 2018. The ENQA report[206] stated: that QAA was assessed as "in compliance with the ESG"; it noted 11 commendations and that the QAA was fully compliant in 13 of the 14 standards.
Include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results	Awarding organisations are responsible for uploading their qualifications onto the Register of Regulated Qualifications.	The QAA publishes the evaluation results of reviews in Northern Ireland on its website

[206] https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/External-review-report-QAA-FINAL.pdf

EQF QA principles	RQF	FHEQ
	Results of evaluation work carried out to review the standard of qualifications, including in relation to RQF levels, are published on the Ofqual and CCEA Regulation websites. A recent example is the evaluation of the reformed assessment of A level science practical skills[207].	which provides electronic accessibility. In England, assessments of degree awarding powers are published by the QAA, following confirmation from the OfS, however Quality and Standards Reviews are not published. The ENQA 2018 is accessed through a hyperlink on the QAA website[208].

[207] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/practical-skills-of-a-level-science-students-study-4
[208] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/european-plaudits-for-qaa-and-uk-higher-education-quality-assurance

Criterion 6:

The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.

The quality assurance bodies described in Criterion 5, and presented below in figure 20, have all been involved in the production and review of the report and the evidence presented. These bodies support this final report and confirm their agreement that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practices.

Table 20: QA bodies for each framework and their role in the EQF referencing work

QA bodies	Qualifications Framework	Role in Referencing
Ofqual	Qualifications Regulator (England)	Managed referencing process and report production, joint NCP
CCEA Regulation	Qualifications Regulator (Northern Ireland)	Supported referencing process and report production, joint NCP
QAA	Quality Assurance of HE Qualifications (UK)	Supported referencing process and report production
OfS	Office for Students	Provided feedback and comments on report drafts

Further, as described in Criterion 5, all AOs and degree awarding bodies are responsible for the quality of the RQF or FHEQ qualifications that they offer. Criterion 5 also describes the quality assurance arrangements for learning providers, as required by the RQF and FHEQ.

The AOs that develop regulated qualifications that sit in the RQF play a critical role in quality assurance. Their representative bodies, the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), were represented on the steering group and have endorsed the outcomes of this report. Similarly, degree awarding bodies that develop qualifications in the FHEQ are represented by Universities UK which was represented on the steering group and has endorsed this report.

Criterion 7:

The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.

International experts played a key role in the production of the final report, providing advice and expertise during the drafting stage and in preparation for each of the EQF Advisory Group meetings.

The experts, Horacy Dębowski from the Central Examinations Commission, Poland and John O'Connor, from Quality and Qualifications Ireland, were chosen following discussion with the other UK EQF National Coordination Points, the SCQFP (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership) and Colleges Wales/Colegau Cymru. These colleagues were also referencing their qualifications frameworks to the EQF, and recommended inviting the same experts to provide advice and guidance to the England and Northern Ireland referencing work. We agreed that these experts, who were also working on EQF referencing reports with colleagues in Scotland and Wales, would be best placed, not only given their knowledge and experience working with national qualifications frameworks and the EQF, but also to help ensure consistency in the approaches taken to produce the individual UK reports.

The international experts attended our scheduled Steering Group meetings. They also provided written comments on drafts of our report and on the final report, prior to presentation to the EQF Advisory Group. Written statements from the international experts are included in Annex 5.

Criterion 8:

The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.

The three competent national bodies for England and Northern Ireland in relation to the national qualifications frameworks (Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA) will each publish this single referencing report in full, on behalf of the UK and Northern Ireland government departments. The report includes the evidence addressing each of the criteria as well as statements of endorsement to certify the referencing of the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF and the self-certification of the FHEQ to the QF-EHEA.

Statements of endorsement will be provided by the relevant government departments as well as members of the England and Northern Ireland EQF referencing steering group. The steering group included members with a wide range of experience and knowledge, with representation from across England and Northern Ireland: from a wide range of education sectors (higher education, VET, school and voluntary); key education bodies; education and training government bodies and funding agencies; UCAS; learners; social partners; and international experts.

The production of the referencing report was a collaborative work, involving colleagues throughout the government departments and all steering group members, who, with the benefit of international expert guidance, met to discuss the work and the contents of the report at meetings, contributed specific areas of the report, and reviewed the drafts and final report. The resulting report is therefore a joint production, coordinated by Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA.

Criterion 9:

Within six months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

The three national bodies for England and Northern Ireland in relation to the national qualifications frameworks (Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA) all consent to the publication of, and use of information contained within, the referencing report, on the official EQF platform for reasons of qualification comparison purposes.

Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA will publish the England and Northern Ireland referencing report on their organisation websites once the EQF advisory group has accepted the final report.

Criterion 10:

Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

The Ofqual Register[209] of Regulated Qualifications is a publicly accessible online database of all of the regulated qualifications in the RQF. The database presents the RQF level alongside the EQF level of every qualification on the Register, allowing the EQF levels to be noted.

Ofqual and CCEA Regulation require AOs to ensure that all qualification certificates clearly and distinctly state the RQF level of the qualification. AOs may also choose to state the EQF level on certificates, but this is not a regulatory requirement. This non-mandatory approach resulted from a consultation carried out with AOs, which found little appetite to make this change – perhaps, because the EQF level is readily available on the online Register. To date, whilst some AOs do present the EQF level on qualification certificates, this is not widespread.

There is no requirement for degree-awarding bodies to include the EQF level on a qualification certificate, as the FHEQ was not directly referenced to the EQF prior to this referencing work. Documentation published by the QAA will, where relevant, include reference to the EQF and its alignment with the FHEQ.

In England and Northern Ireland, the certificate supplement is not compulsory and is not an individualised statement, in the same way that the diploma supplement is for higher education qualifications. Demand for the certificate supplement has been low, but these are issued with EQF levels included by a small number of AOs.

[209] https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/

6. Future directions

Looking to the future, a range of developments will likely affect the qualifications available in England and Northern Ireland. These will be accommodated within the existing qualifications frameworks. Many of these developments are underway, while others have yet to take shape. Some focus on specific qualifications, while others have a broader scope.

The Department for Education in England is currently undertaking a review of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below, excluding GCSEs and A levels. The government's aim is to simplify the landscape and streamline the current offer to ensure all qualifications approved for funding have a distinct purpose, are necessary, support progression to further study or employment, and are of high quality.

A key part of the aim to improve the vocational and technical education available to 16-19 year olds is the development of T Levels, a new suite of two-year technical programmes to be phased in for teaching from 2020. The content for T Levels is being designed by employers and will cover 25 employment areas. T Levels will offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on-the-job' experience during an industry placement of at least 45 days. Students will take a Technical Qualification during the course, which will be a regulated qualification within the RQF at level 3.

In Northern Ireland, the Administration is currently implementing major reforms of Northern Ireland's professional and technical education and training. The reformed system of Apprenticeships, from level 3 through to level 8, and youth training, in the form of Traineeships at level 2, will encourage progression and build on the existing model of the Apprenticeships Northern Ireland Programme to develop a more employer-led system. The Northern Ireland Administration introduced Higher Level Apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5 in September 2017. Higher Level Apprenticeships at level 6 and 7 are now mainstream. The phased implementation plan is on schedule to deliver the reformed vision for Apprenticeships and Youth Training by 2021.

With regard to the frameworks of England and Northern Ireland, a potential area for exploration was revealed during the mapping exercise, which highlighted some minor differences between the descriptors at level 4 of the RQF and level 4 of the FHEQ. Whilst these do not affect the EQF or QF-EHEA relationships, they do relate to the strength of the links between the two England and Northern Ireland frameworks. We will consider these further in the future by reviewing the level 4 descriptors of the RQF and FHEQ, and from that point we can consider any implications for the FHEQ level 4 with the QF-EHEA short cycle.

Another area worthy of investigation relates to the basis of the EQF itself: the use of learning outcomes and how this may be evolving. Some Steering Group members noted that some qualification designers are taking a more flexible approach to qualification design than previously when task specific occupational standards were the basis of a qualification. Increasingly, learning outcomes are not rigidly or explicitly mapped to occupational standards for limited purposes. Instead, programme and teaching specifications are supplemented with curriculum content that can be tailored to specific geographical regions or niche/specialist contexts, to complement the core standards of a qualification.

In higher education, the new regulatory framework in England has enabled a more diverse higher education sector with changes to procedures to achieve degree awarding body status and University title. One of the underlying aims for this change is to encourage more providers to offer higher education to broaden the range of providers, of subjects and to widen participation. It is too early to say whether this aim will be achieved. As regards credit and qualifications frameworks, any new providers who are accepted onto the Office for Students' Register will need to meet that regulator's requirements.

The government is also aiming to incentivise wider provision and uptake of accelerated degrees in England, which are completed one year sooner than their standard equivalents. It has increased the annual fee caps and maximum fee loans applying to accelerated degrees by 20% from the 2019/20 academic year onwards.

It is clear that the context and purpose of the national qualifications frameworks of England and Northern Ireland will continue to evolve. What has also become clear throughout the production of this referencing report, is that the engagement and collaboration characterised by this work are certain to support future developments.

Colleagues in Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA would like to express their sincere thanks to all of those involved in the production and review of this report, and we look forward to future engagement in the international qualifications and frameworks arena.

Annex 1. ENI EQF Referencing Steering Group

Context

The Steering Group's remit is to advise Ofqual and CCEA Regulation (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment) in relation to their work to reference the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), in line with the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union's recommendation.[210]

The recommendation to reference national qualifications frameworks to the EQF applies to Member States. However, there is scope for countries outside the EU (or "third countries") to compare their qualifications levels to the EQF too, in order to facilitate mutual understanding of qualifications between countries. In mapping the RQF to the EQF we will follow the recommendation that Member States:

- reference levels of qualifications within the national qualifications system to the EQF levels;
- promote and apply the European principles for quality assurance in education and training when relating the national qualifications system to the EQF;
- ensure all methodology used to refer national qualifications levels to the EQF is transparent and that the resulting decisions are published;
- provide guidance to stakeholders on how national qualifications relate to the EQF through the national qualifications system;
- ensure the participation of all relevant national stakeholders including, according to national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors and experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level.

We will be mindful to avoid duplication of other relevant initiatives, such as the Bologna Process in higher education where countries compare their higher education frameworks to the European Higher Education Area equivalent (QF-EHEA).

[210] The Qualifications and Credit Framework was referenced to the EQF in 2010. The EU recommend that referencing reports should be updated regularly.

Terms of Reference

The remit of the England and Northern Ireland (ENI) EQF Referencing Steering Group is to support the production of the report to reference the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF.

The aim is to ensure that the report provides a comprehensive, accurate, and accessible overview of the England and Northern Ireland education, training and qualifications systems to readers from around the world, noting on-going developments.

Specifically the remit of the Steering Group is to:

- help ensure the report provides an accurate description of the education, training and qualifications systems and the associated quality assurance arrangements in England and Northern Ireland
- as required, provide information or sources to refer to during the drafting of the report
- review the draft report and comment on the accuracy and clarity of the information presented, taking into account the comments of international experts and others
- endorse and provide comments on the final report before it is submitted to the Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA chief executives and/or directors and then to the EQF Advisory Group in June 2019, and for final amendments and publication thereafter
- promote the final report to relevant stakeholders.

Timeline

Activity	Ofqual/ CCEA
Evidence gathering for each referencing criterion	October – November 2018
Technical mapping of RQF/EQF levels	October – November 2018
Technical mapping of FHEQ/EQF levels	December - January 2019
Drafting first-draft report	November - January 2019
Steering Group meeting 1	21 January 2019
ENI/Wales meeting to discuss reports	January 2019
Feedback from steering group/experts/stakeholders	February 2019
Verbal debrief at EQF Advisory Group	March 2019
Steering Group meeting 2	4 April 2019
Submit final report to EQF advisory group	May 2019
Formal presentation at EQF Advisory Group	June 2019

Membership

The Steering Group included members with a wide range of experience and knowledge, with representation from across England and Northern Ireland: from all the education sectors (HE, VET, school and voluntary); key education bodies; education and training government bodies and funding agencies; trade union; and international experts.

Organisation	Representative
Ofqual (Joint ENI NCP)	Julie Swan (Chair) Rhian Dent
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment Regulation (CCEA) (Joint ENI NCP)	Caroline Egerton
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)	Dr Alison Felce
International experts	Horacy Dębowski, Central Examinations Board (Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna), Poland John O'Connor, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Republic of Ireland
Independent framework expert	Mike Coles
Department for Education (DfE, England)	Ann Miller
Department for the Economy (DfE, Northern Ireland)	John McGuigan
Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education	Simon Perks
Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)	Janet Ryland
Universities UK	Will Hammonds
Ofsted	Neil Redmond King
Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT)	Carina Fagan
Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB)	Ailin O'Cathain
Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)	Andy Walls
Colegau Cymru/ Colleges Wales	Adrian Sheehan
Qualifications Wales	Jack Watkins
Trades Union Congress (TUC)	Kirsi Kekki

Annex 2. Mapping the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF

Mapping the levels of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

A transparent link between the qualifications levels in two countries is helpful for people who are mobile in terms of work or study. Such transparency helps with the recognition of a person's qualifications and experience. The European Qualifications Framework is a single point of reference for all EU countries and avoids the need to make lots of bilateral agreements about links in levels between different countries. To make this happen all EU countries have to map their qualifications levels to the EQF levels, almost all EU countries have completed this process. This mapping of levels is commonly called referencing to the EQF and the UK completed this process for the QCF (now redundant) in 2010. In 2008 the FHEQ was referenced to the European higher education qualifications framework through the Bologna self-certification process[211]. In 2018/19 all the countries of the UK are reviewing their referencing position in the light of changes to national qualifications frameworks and to the EQF. What follows is a suggested referencing of the RQF and the FHEQ to the EQF for England and Northern Ireland.

The RQF

The RQF consists of 8 levels plus an entry level which is subdivided into three levels. Each level has descriptors which set out the requirements for qualifications that may be said to be at that level of the RQF. These descriptors are classified into categories of knowledge requirements and skills requirements.

Table 1: The RQF descriptors

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
Entry Level 1	Progresses along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of knowledge and/or understanding that relate to the subject or immediate environment.	Progress along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of skills that relate to the subject or the immediate environment.
Entry Level 2	Has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and	Carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities. Follow instructions or use rehearsed steps to complete tasks and activities.

[211] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/verification-of-the-compatibility-of-fheq-with-fq-ehea.pdf

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	Knows the steps needed to complete simple activities.	
Entry Level 3	Has basic knowledge and understanding to carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts; and Knows and understands the steps needed to complete structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts.	Carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. Be aware of the consequences of actions for self and others.
Level 1	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 Is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of study or work.	Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined routine tasks and procedures. Select and use relevant information. Identify whether actions have been effective.
Level 2	Has knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures and ideas in an area of study or field of work to complete well-defined tasks and address straightforward problems. Can interpret relevant information and ideas. Is aware of a range of information that is relevant to the area of study or work.	Select and use relevant cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined, generally routine tasks and address straightforward problems. Identify, gather and use relevant information to inform actions. Identify how effective actions have been.
Level 3	Has factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to complete tasks and address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Can interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of the area of study or work. Is aware of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, select and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills, methods and procedures to address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Use appropriate investigation to inform actions. Review how effective methods and actions have been
Level 4	Has practical, theoretical or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to address problems that are well defined but complex and non-routine.	Identify, adapt and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine while normally fairly well-defined.

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work. Has an informed awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Review the effectiveness and appropriateness of methods, actions and results.
Level 5	Has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information, concepts and ideas. Is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them.	Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods, cognitive and practical skills to address broadly defined, complex problems. Use relevant research or development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results.
Level 6	Has advanced practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the theories that underpin them. Can critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information, concepts and ideas.	Determine, refine, adapt and use appropriate methods and advanced cognitive and practical skills to address problems that have limited definition and involve many interacting factors. Use and, where appropriate, design relevant research and development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results and their implications.
Level 7	Reformulates and uses practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce modified conceptions. Understands the wider contexts in which the area of study or work is located.	Use specialised skills to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many interacting factors. Determine and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Design and undertake research, development or strategic activities to inform or produce change in the area of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications.

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	Understands current developments in the area of study or work. Understands different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the area of study or work.	
Level 8	Develops original practical, conceptual or technological understanding to create ways forward in contexts that lack definition and where there are many complex, interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce new knowledge and theories. Understands and reconceptualises the wider contexts in which the field of knowledge or work is located. Extends a field of knowledge or work by contributing original knowledge and thinking. Exercises critical understanding of different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the field of knowledge or work.	Use advanced and specialised skills and techniques to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many complex, interacting factors. Formulate and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Initiate, design and undertake research, development or strategic activities that extend or produce significant change in the field of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications for the field of work or knowledge and its wider context.

The RQF has replaced the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)[212] which was used to make the 2010 EQF referencing position. The QCF was a unit and credit based national qualifications framework for vocational qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales until October 2015. Following a change of government, and an evaluation which found a number of issues relating to the clarity, efficiency and regulatory arrangements of the QCF, the Government announced in March 2015 that the QCF rules would be withdrawn and replaced with the RQF.

Unlike the QCF, the RQF does not set qualification design rules and is simply a hierarchy of levels from entry level to level 8. This hierarchy is intended to be a perfect match to the QCF levels.

[212] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/after-the-qcf-a-new-qualifications-framework

The Framework for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

The national frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies (FHEQ in EWNI and FQHEIS in Scotland) set out the different qualification levels and national expectations of standards of achievement.

The FHEQ consists of five levels, i.e. levels 4-8, which align with levels 4-8 on the RQF. It sets out a hierarchy of qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification type at each of the levels.

Qualification descriptors are generic in nature and can be applied across subjects and modes of delivery. They make clear how the qualification differs from other qualifications, both at that level and at other levels. The qualifications descriptors consist of two parts: firstly, a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification, secondly, a statement of the wider abilities that a typical student would be expected to have developed (the general capabilities of holders of the qualification).

Table 2: The FHEQ descriptors

Level	Descriptor for qualification at this level	Knowledge descriptor (students who have demonstrated…)	Skills descriptor (holders will be able to…)	Responsibility (holders will have….)
4	Certificate of Higher Education • Holders of a Certificate of Higher Education will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. • They will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.	• knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study • an ability to present, evaluate and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, in order to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.	• evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work • communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments • undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment.	• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility
5	Foundation degree; Diploma of Higher Education • Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field	• knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed	• use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis	• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

Level	Descriptor for qualification at this level	Knowledge descriptor (students who have demonstrated…)	Skills descriptor (holders will be able to…)	Responsibility (holders will have….)
	of study, and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, for example HNDs, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. • Holders of qualifications at this level will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.	• ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context • knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study • an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.	• effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively • undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.	
6	Bachelor's degree with honours. • Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound	• a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline • an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline • conceptual understanding that enables the student: ○ to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using	• apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects • critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem • communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both	• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: ○ the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility ○ decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts ○ the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

Level	Descriptor for qualification at this level	Knowledge descriptor (students who have demonstrated…)	Skills descriptor (holders will be able to…)	Responsibility (holders will have….)
	judgements and to communicate them effectively. • Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.	ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline ○ to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline • an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge • the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).	specialist and non-specialist audiences.	
7	Master's degree • Much of the study undertaken for master's degrees is at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Successful students show originality in the application of knowledge, and they understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They are able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they show originality in tackling and solving problems. They have the qualities needed	• a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice • a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship • originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of	• deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences • demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level • continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.	• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: ○ the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility ○ decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations ○ the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Level	Descriptor for qualification at this level	Knowledge descriptor (students who have demonstrated…)	Skills descriptor (holders will be able to…)	Responsibility (holders will have….)
	for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.	research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline • conceptual understanding that enables the student: o to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline o to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.		
8	Doctoral degree • Doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/ or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research. • Holders of doctoral degrees are able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling	• the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication • a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice • the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project	• make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences • continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.	• the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

Level	Descriptor for qualification at this level	Knowledge descriptor (students who have demonstrated…)	Skills descriptor (holders will be able to…)	Responsibility (holders will have….)
	and solving problems.	design in the light of unforeseen problems • a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.		

The EQF descriptors

The EQF is a reference point for all national qualifications frameworks and systems, it has eight levels and three sets of descriptors for each level, and these are Knowledge, Skills and Responsibility & Autonomy.

Table 3: The EQF descriptors

Level	Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and Autonomy
1	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Broad comparison of the three frameworks

The broad architecture of the three frameworks is similar – the RQF and the EQF have eight main levels and the FHEQ has five levels and covers levels 4 – 8 of the RQF and the EQF. All three frameworks are described in terms of outcomes. All frameworks have a component for knowledge and a component for skills. The RQF and the EQF are designed to allow learners of all abilities to access qualifications at all levels; the FHEQ is designed for learners in higher education. In the RQF entry level is divided into three sub levels (Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3) so that the lowest ability learners including learners with special educational needs (SEN) can access qualifications and progress.

The EQF has a third component (Responsibility and Autonomy) which is not explicit in the RQF; the FHEQ includes a third component for responsibility. Whilst progression in the ability to act independently and take responsibility for work and study are both very important qualities, the RQF does not have a separate category for progression in this descriptor as the focus of the change from the QCF to the RQF was to simplify the framework and the regulatory requirements. The level descriptors used for Regulated Qualifications are minimum standards that form part of the regulatory requirements. The regulators expect AOs to build on these baseline requirements by including autonomy and accountability in qualification specifications. This expectation is addressed through further regulatory requirements, including that qualifications are considered fit for purpose such as providing an assessment of competence. Autonomy and accountability are, therefore, still seen as part of qualifications, however, it was not felt to be appropriate to specify the precise nature of this autonomy and accountability through explicit descriptors.

In general, the EQF descriptors are less detailed and more general than the RQF and FHEQ descriptors. The EQF is a meta-framework designed to act as an overarching framework and able to match to the descriptors in national qualifications frameworks and systems. The EQF does not set out to link to specific qualifications. On the other hand, the RQF is designed to enable links to specific qualifications and is necessarily therefore more detailed than the EQF descriptors. Similarly the FHEQ is designed to set parameters for named awards and learning outcomes in higher education and is also more detailed than the EQF.

The language of the frameworks is similar. The ways of describing knowledge and skills uses terms such as basic, advanced, specialised; however, the words may carry different meanings and this needs to be considered in comparing levels. For example the word *basic* usually means an essential foundation or starting point to be built upon but setting the content of basic knowledge or skills can mean different things in different subjects or settings. The same applies when the word *complex* is used to describe the context for work or study. Sometimes different words can be ascribed the same meaning – for example the RQF at level 5 requires skills to be applied in *broadly defined complex problems* and the FHEQ at level 5 requires the holder to *use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical*

analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis. Compare this to the EQF requirement at level 5 for skills to be applied to *abstract problems*. Some interpolation is needed between the words used and the levels of the framework in which they are used. It is likely that the words themselves can never define a level completely and unambiguously without some supporting contextual information.

The relationship between the levels themselves provides some contextual information. For example level 6 follows level 5 and the use of the words *advanced knowledge* should suggest deeper and possibly broader knowledge than that at level 5. Well established taxonomies of knowledge have been used to inform the level descriptors in most frameworks including the RQF, the FHEQ and the EQF.

Mapping the three frameworks

Each component of the RQF and the FHEQ (Knowledge and Skills) could be separately matched to each of the three EQF descriptors (Knowledge, skills and Responsibility and Autonomy). However, in the RQF, the FHEQ and the EQF, each framework level is to be judged by taking an overview of the two (RQF) or three (FHEQ/EQF) descriptors and so it is reasonable to conclude that it is better to compare each RQF and FHEQ level to each EQF level by reading across the descriptors for the levels.

As a starting point the 2010 position was taken since both the EQF levels and the RQF levels have not changed by design since 2010.

Table 4: The alignment of levels established in 2010

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)	European Qualifications Framework
Entry level 1	No match
Entry level 2	No match
Entry level 3	Level 1
Level 1	Level 2
Level 2	Level 3
Level 3	Level 4
Level 4	Level 5
Level 5	Level 5
Level 6	Level 6
Level 7	Level 7
Level 8	Level 8

The FHEQ was not directly aligned to the EQF in 2010. However it is possible to link the FHEQ levels to EQF levels by means of the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In November 2008, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) verified that the FHEQ in England,

Wales and Northern Ireland is compatible with the QF-EHEA Area with the following alignments[213].

Table 5: The alignment of the FHEQ with the QF-EHEA

FHEQ level	QF-EHEA
8	3rd Cycle qualifications (e.g. Doctoral degrees)
7	2nd Cycle qualifications (e.g. Master's degrees)
6	1st Cycle qualifications (e.g. Bachelor's degrees
5	Short cycle qualifications (e.g. Foundation Degrees)
4	

The 2017 EQF Recommendation[214] (para 21) establishes that the EQF is compatible with the QF-EHEA and its cycle descriptors and align in the following way.

Table 6: The alignment of the QF-EHEA levels with the EQF levels

QF-EHEA Cycles	EQF levels
Third Cycle	8
Second Cycle	7
First Cycle	6
Short cycle - linked to or within the first cycle	5

We can therefore draw the conclusion that the self-certification process for the FHEQ shows compatibility of levels 5 to 8 with levels 5 to 8 of the EQF.

Confirming the 2010 mapping

As a check that the referencing position in the table has not changed for each level of the RQF the following procedure was followed. For each of the levels of the RQF:

1. The descriptors were compared to the EQF level shown in table 1 above
2. The descriptors were compared to the EQF level immediately below what is shown in table 1 above
3. the descriptors were compared to the EQF level immediately above what is shown in table 1 above
4. A best fit position was determined.

[213] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/bologna-process-in-he

[214] file://ofqual.internal/DFS/Userdata/Rhian.Dent/Downloads/Council%20recommendation%20of%2022%20May%202017%20on%20the%20European%20Qualifications%20Framework%20for%20lifelong%20learning%20(3).pdf

The tables that follow show the outcomes of this procedure. The FHEQ level descriptors are included in the tables for levels 4 – 8 inclusive to show how these map to both the RQF and EQF.

Table 7: RQF entry level 1

RQF entry level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Progresses along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of knowledge and/or understanding that relate to the subject or immediate environment.	Progress along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of skills that relate to the subject or the immediate environment.	
EQF level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Analysis The learner's progress in attaining some elementary knowledge and their first use of skills are preparations for being able to show basic knowledge and skills. Therefore entry level 1 is designed to provide a route towards achievement equivalent to EQF level 1.		
Best fit outcome: RQF entry level 1 does not map to an EQF level		

Table 8: RQF entry level 2

RQF entry level 2		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and knows the steps needed to complete simple activities.	Carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities. Follow instructions or use rehearsed steps to complete tasks and activities.	
EQF level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
EQF level 2		
Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Analysis Both the RQF descriptors for entry level 2 and the EQF level 1 require that basic knowledge is required and simple tasks can be carried out. The EQF level 1 descriptor implies that less guidance and instruction is required at this level whilst the RQF Skills descriptor suggests a tight structure for tasks to be carried out. This weakens the link between RQF entry level 2 and the EQF level 1. EQF level 2 requires knowledge and skills to be demonstrated in work or study contexts and is therefore significantly a more demanding level than entry level 1. There is possibly a distinction between the 'basic knowledge' (RQF entry level 2) and the 'factual knowledge of a field of work or study' required in the EQF level 2 descriptor and this weakens any possible match with EQF level 2.		
Best fit outcome: RQF entry level 2 partially maps to EQF level 1.		

Table 9: RQF entry level 3

RQF entry level 3		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and knows the steps needed to complete simple activities.	Carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. Be aware of the consequences of actions for self and others.	
EQF level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
EQF level 2		
Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Analysis The entry levels are arranged into three distinct levels in the RQF, which demonstrates an expectation that learners progress through these levels towards RQF level 1. This progression starts with the learner's first steps towards knowing things and how to do things that require the learner to internalise basic knowledge and understanding and be able to carry out tasks. Whilst they may be seen as steps towards RQF level 1, entry level 3 clearly matches EQF level 1 in terms of having basic general knowledge and being able to carry out simple tasks. In terms of EQF level 2, the requirements to contextualise knowledge in work or study situations and to solve problems take the demand beyond that required for RQF entry level 3. It is also likely that the introduction of some autonomy at EQF level 2 is also out of range for RQF entry level 3.		
Best fit outcome: RQF entry level 3 compares well to EQF level 1.		

Table 10: RQF level 1

RQF level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
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 is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of study or work.	Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well defined routine tasks and procedures. Select and use relevant information. Identify whether actions have been effective.	
EQF level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
EQF level 2		
Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
EQF level 3		
Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Analysis The RQF level 1 descriptor requires the use of basic factual knowledge of a subject and this is a good match to the requirements of EQF level 2. Tasks and procedures are 'well-defined' and 'routine' for the RQF level 1 descriptor and these reflect the EQF level 2 descriptor of working in a 'structured context' albeit with 'some autonomy'. It is more difficult to find a direct link to the EQF requirement for Responsibility and Autonomy but the RQF Skills requirement to 'select and use relevant information indicates a level of autonomy that links to EQF level 2. The knowledge of general concepts in EQF level 3 is not part of RQF level 1. EQF level 3 requires the learner to take responsibility for tasks and this is beyond the demand of RQF level 1.		
Best fit outcome: RQF level 1 is a good match to EQF level 2		

Table 11: RQF level 2

RQF level 2		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures and ideas in an area of study or field of work to complete well-defined tasks and address straightforward problems. Can interpret relevant information and ideas. Is aware of a range of information that is relevant to the area of study or work.	Select and use relevant cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined, generally routine tasks and address straightforward problems. Identify, gather and use relevant information to inform actions. Identify how effective actions have been.	
EQF Level 2		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
EQF level 3		
Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
EQF level 4		
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Analysis The RQF descriptor introduces the notion of *ideas* into the knowledge requirements. This suggests the start of a shift towards more conceptual thinking. This is matched well by the knowledge descriptor for EQF level 3. Both RQF level 2 and EQF level 2 require the learner to gather and use relevant information. EQF level 3 also refers to the use of information to solve problems which matches well to the RQF descriptor for level 2.		

The RQF level descriptors at level 2 move from 'tasks' to 'problems'. The EQF descriptors for levels 2 and 3 require learners to solve problems whilst the RQF descriptions require the learner to be able to solve straightforward problems. RQF level 2 is better matched to the descriptor for EQF level 3 than that for EQF level 4. In the EQF level 4 the term 'specific' problems is difficult to define but it probably refers to problems that are not so straightforward as defined in the RQF level 2 descriptor. The RQF descriptor for skills expects a more autonomous approach from the learner, which is more in line with the requirements of EQF level 3 than EQF level 2. EQF level 4 requires self-management which exceeds the requirements of RQF level 2.
Best fit outcome: RQF level 2 is a good match to EQF level 3

Table 12: RQF level 3

RQF level 3		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to complete tasks and address problems that while well defined, may be complex and non-routine. Can interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of the area of study or work. Is aware of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, select and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills, methods and procedures to address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Use appropriate investigation to inform actions. Review how effective methods and actions have been.	
EQF level 3		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
EQF level 4		
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
EQF level 5		
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of

within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
Analysis The RQF introduces the requirement of theoretical knowledge linked to a subject or field of work and this forms a direct link to the EQF knowledge requirement at level 4. However, the RQF descriptor goes further and requires a knowledge of the area of study or work. This links to the EQF level 5 descriptor, which requires a knowledge of the boundaries of knowledge in the field of work or study. The RQF Skills descriptor for level 3 links directly to the EQF level 4 descriptor in terms of cognitive and practical skills. Here the EQF level 5 descriptor goes further and requires a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills which is beyond the RQF level 3 descriptor. There is a good match between RQF level 3 Skills descriptor and the EQF level 4 descriptors for Skills and for Responsibility and Autonomy in terms of the levels of uncertainty in the work contexts. However, the EQF level 5 descriptors go further and set the requirements in unpredictable contexts. The RQF level 3 Skills descriptor requires some evaluative skills and this is well matched in the EQF Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor for level 4.		
Best fit outcome: there is a good match between RQF level 3 and EQF level 4.		

Table 13: RQF level 4 and FHEQ level 4

RQF level 4		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has practical, theoretical or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to address problems that are well defined but complex and non-routine. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work. Has an informed awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, adapt and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine while normally fairly well-defined. Review the effectiveness and appropriateness of methods, actions and results.	
FHEQ level 4		
Knowledge descriptor (Will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
Knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study.	Evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work.	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

An ability to present, evaluate and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, in order to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.	Communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments. Will be able to undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment.	
EQF level 4		
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
EQF level 5		
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
EQF level 6		
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups

RQF Analysis

The RQF level 4 Knowledge descriptor requires practical, theoretical or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work and this is well matched in the EQF levels 4 and 5 knowledge descriptors but is not sufficient to meet the EQF level 6 requirement for advanced knowledge and critical understanding of theories and principles. There is also a good match between RQF level 4 requirements for awareness of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work and the EQF level 5 requirement for awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.

The Skills requirement of RQF level 4 is for cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine. This is well-matched to the EQF level 5 requirements for the cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems. EQF level 6 requires mastery and innovation, which is not part of the RQF level 4 requirement.

The EQF descriptor for Responsibility and Autonomy at level 5 requires skills to be applied in work or study activities where there is unpredictable change. This is more difficult to match to the RQF Skills descriptor for level 4 which requires skills to be applied in contexts that are complex and non-

routine while normally fairly well-defined. However, the EQF level 4 descriptor is possibly better matched to this requirement and to the requirement for evaluation and improvement of work. **FHEQ Analysis** The FHEQ level 4 knowledge descriptor is difficult to map to a single level of the EQF but can be seen to relate to EQF level 4 and EQF level 5 which both indicate demonstration of concepts and principles of an area of study. However, the degree of evaluation and interpretation required at FHEQ level 4 reaches beyond EQF level 4 and closer to the demand of EQF level 5. The skills descriptor contains elements within EQF level 4, however the evaluation element again stretches closer to EQF level 5 because the latter requires creative solutions. The FHEQ level 4 responsibilities requirements for self-management relate closely to the EQF level 4 requirements.
Best fit outcome: There is a good match between RQF level 4 and EQF level 5; there are also some links to EQF level 4. The FHEQ level 4 has links to EQF level 4 but the match is better with EQF level 5.

Table 14: RQF level 5 and FHEQ level 5

RQF level 5		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information, concepts and ideas. Is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them.	Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods, cognitive and practical skills to address broadly defined, complex problems. Use relevant research or development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results.	
FHEQ level 5		
Knowledge descriptor (Will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed. The ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context. Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the	Use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis Effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively Undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.	that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.	
EQF level 4		
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
EQF level 5		
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
EQF level 6		
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups

RQF Analysis

The level 5 Knowledge descriptor for both the RQF and the EQF require theoretical knowledge. RQF level 5 requires an awareness of the nature and scope of the area of study or work and an understanding of different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them. This compares well with the EQF level 5 requirement for an awareness of the boundaries of knowledge of a field of work or study. Level 4 of the EQF requires less precise knowledge of the boundaries of knowledge of a field of study or work. The EQF at level 6 requires a critical understanding of a field of knowledge, which is not required by the RQF at level 5.

In terms of Skills, the RQF at level 5 requires skills to be applied in broadly defined complex problems. This compared to the EQF requirement at level 5 for skills to be applied to abstract problems. The EQF at level 6 specifies unpredictability in these contexts, which not part of the RQF level 5 requirement.

The RQF at level 5 is specific about the need to be able to evaluate actions, methods and results and this goes beyond the EQF requirement at level 4 and falls short of the managerial evaluation required at EQF level 6. The RQF level 5 requirement better matches the review of performance required at EQF level 5.

FHEQ Analysis

The underlying factual and theoretical knowledge of the area of study link FHEQ level 5 and EQF level 5 and this link is strongly reinforced by the awareness of the limits of the area of knowledge. In terms of the FHEQ level 5 skills descriptor, the map to the EQF is evident at level 4 and level 5 but is not clear at EQF level 6. The EQF level 5 requirement for creative solutions to abstract problems is not clearly part of the FHEQ level 5 descriptor. The FHEQ level 5 responsibility component and the element of the skills descriptor which demands that they have skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations support a link to EQF level 5.
Best fit outcome: there is a good match between RQF level 5, FHEQ level 5 and EQF level 5.

Table 15: RQF level 6 and FHEQ level 6

RQF level 6		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Has advanced practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the theories that underpin them. Can critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information, concepts and ideas.	Determine, refine, adapt and use appropriate methods and advanced cognitive and practical skills to address problems that have limited definition and involve many interacting factors. Use and, where appropriate, design relevant research and development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results and their implications.	
FHEQ level 6		
Knowledge descriptor (Will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
A systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline An ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline Conceptual understanding that enables the student: to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline	Apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects Critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution – or identify a range of solutions - to a problem. Communicate information, ideas, problems and	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: • the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility • decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts • the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

An appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge	solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences. Manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).	
EQF level 5		
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
EQF level 6		
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
EQF level 7		
Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams

RQF Analysis

The Knowledge descriptor of the RQF at level 6 requires advanced practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work. This broadly compares to the EQF level 6 requirement for advanced knowledge of a field of work or study. The RQF at level 6 does not require knowledge at the forefront of a field (which is required at EQF level 7). RQF level 6 exceeds the requirements at EQF level 5 of an awareness of boundaries of knowledge.

In terms of Skills, both the RQF at level 6 and the EQF at level 6 require an element of creativity in the setting of unpredictable contexts. The descriptor for level 5 of the EQF does refer to creativity but does not specify the level of unpredictability. At level 7 the EQF demands integration of knowledge from different fields which is outside the scope of the RQF at level 6.

The RQF at level 6 does not cover the managerial aspects required by the EQF at levels 6 and 7 but it does require the evaluative aspects referred to in the descriptors for EQF level 5.

FHEQ Analysis

The key aspect of the FHEQ level 6 knowledge requirement is for the learner to have systematic knowledge of a field of study some of which is at the forefront of the area, this corresponds well to the EQF requirement at level 6 and level 7 although at EQF level 7 there is a requirement for highly specialised knowledge which is not explicit in the FHEQ level 6 descriptor. In terms of skills the FHEQ level 6 requires evidence of extending and applying knowledge and understanding. This maps across EQF levels 5-8 and is possibly best matched to EQF level 6 as EQF level 7 has a requirement to be able to integrate knowledge across disciplines. The FHEQ level 6 responsibility descriptors include the requirement for decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts and this closely matches the EQF descriptors at level 6 for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts.
Best fit outcome: there is a good match between RQF level 6, FHEQ level 6 and EQF level 6.

Table 16: RQF level 7 and FHEQ level 7

RQF level 7		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Reformulates and uses practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce modified conceptions. Understands the wider contexts in which the area of study or work is located. Understands current developments in the area of study or work. Understands different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the area of study or work.	Use specialised skills to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many interacting factors. Determine and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Design and undertake research, development or strategic activities to inform or produce change in the area of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications.	
FHEQ level 7		
Knowledge descriptor (will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship Originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline Conceptual understanding that enables the student: • to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline • to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.	Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences Demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level Continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: • The exercise of initiative and personal responsibility • Decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations • The independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

EQF level 6		
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
EQF level 7		
Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
EQF level 8		
Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

RQF Analysis

The RQF Knowledge descriptor at level 7 requires that conceptual knowledge is transformed into new concepts in contexts that involve many factors. The EQF at level 7 also requires this kind of creativity at the forefront of a field. Level 6 of the EQF does not require this kind of original thinking and level 8 of the EQF takes this creativity further and makes it the whole focus of the descriptor.

The RQF Skills descriptor at level 7 also requires the specialised skills that can lead to new positions of understanding, which is exactly in line with the EQF level 7 skills requirement. The skills required at level 8 of the EQF implies a further advance in innovation in the redefinition of knowledge and professional practice which goes beyond RQF level 7.

The evaluative requirements of RQF level 7 descriptors fit well with the strategic expectations described at EQF level 7.

FHEQ Analysis

The FHEQ level 7 knowledge descriptor for level 7 includes requirements for a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline. It also refers to research and enquiry used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline. These requirements match well to EQF level 7 which also requires working at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research. The EQF level 6 requirement does not focus strongly on research and the level 8 requirement is for interdisciplinary knowledge.

The FHEQ skills descriptor at level 7 demands independent creative working towards new knowledge and this matches very well to the EQF level 7 requirement for research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures. However the EQF level 7 descriptor also requires integration of knowledge from different fields. In terms of the responsibility requirements the FHEQ level 7 descriptor focusses on decision making in unpredictable contexts and this is well matched by the EQF level 6 and 7 requirements for strategic approaches in such contexts. The EQF level 8 requirement goes beyond this and seeks more substantial authority and responsibility.
Best fit outcome: there is a good match between RQF level 7, FHEQ level 7 and EQF level 7.

Table 17: RQF level 8 and FHEQ level 8

RQF level 8		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	
Develops original practical, conceptual or technological understanding to create ways forward in contexts that lack definition and where there are many complex, interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce new knowledge and theories. Understands and reconceptualises the wider contexts in which the field of knowledge or work is located. Extends a field of knowledge or work by contributing original knowledge and thinking. Exercises critical understanding of different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the field of knowledge or work.	Use advanced and specialised skills and techniques to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many complex, interacting factors. Formulate and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Initiate, design and undertake research, development or strategic activities that extend or produce significant change in the field of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications for the field of work or knowledge and its wider context.	
FHEQ level 8		
Knowledge descriptor (Will have demonstrated…)	**Skills descriptor (**will be able to…)	**Responsibilities** (will have…)
The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to	Make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences Continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.		
EQF level 7		
Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
EQF level 8		
Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

RQF Analysis

The Knowledge descriptor of the RQF at level 8 makes the originality of thinking and understanding the dominant characteristic of the level and this corresponds well to the expectation of the EQF level 8 descriptor of thinking at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study. The EQF level 7 descriptor falls a little short of this expectation.

The RQF Skills requirement at level 8 is also concerned with creating new ways of advancing understanding in the most strategic of contexts. Whilst this matches parts of the EQF descriptors at level 7, it is better matched at level 8 of the EQF where advanced strategic practices are required to be shown in research and professional practice.

FHEQ Analysis

The knowledge and skills descriptors for the FHEQ at level 8 require creation of new knowledge through original and advanced scholarship and an understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice. These requirements match well with those of EQF level 8 which requires working with knowledge and skills at the most advanced frontier of a field and professional practice. The FHEQ level 8 descriptor encompasses requirements at EQF level 7.

In terms of responsibility the FHEQ at level 8 requires the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments. This matches well with the EQF level 8 requirements for demonstrating substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity at the forefront of work or study contexts including research. The FHEQ level 8 descriptor encompasses requirements at EQF level 7.

Best fit outcome: There is a good match between RQF level 8, FHEQ level 8 and EQF level 8.

Annex 3. Example higher education grading criteria

Example module guide below provided by the University of Wolverhampton, which specifies what a student will be doing in terms of learning outcomes.

Module Guide: (7SR008) Extended Dissertation

Important: The University is adopting **Canvas** as its new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), replacing **WOLF**. With the exception of modules that started in the previous academic year, all modules will be taught using Canvas. It is possible that the module guides may still refer to the older **WOLF** VLE; assume that these should refer to Canvas. If in doubt, ask your Module Leader.

About

Module Leader Tina SmithTina.Smith@wlv.ac.uk

Contact Information

2017/8 CRYRA Walsall Campus (UW1)

Description

In this module students will negotiate an extended piece of research in consultation with a designated supervisor. Students will draw on knowledge of academic literature and research design, philosophies and techniques to identify an appropriate research methodology, and carry out an extended research project relevant to their area of study. Students will produce either a piece of empirical research, or professionally related, applied practice depending on their area of study.

Pre-requisite Modules

Prohibited Module Combinations

Cannot be taken in conjunction with 7SR006 Independent Study or 7SR007 Dissertation

Learning Outcomes

LO1: Demonstrate a critical awareness and comprehensive understanding of current research, much of which is at the forefront of your discipline, to select an appropriate methodology and associated technologies to utilise in a piece of extended research

LO2: Produce research or practice which demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of skills and knowledge appropriate to your area of study

LO3: Apply knowledge extensively, in original ways and demonstrate a practical understanding of how established techniques are used to create and interpret knowledge in your area of study

LO4: Communicate complex issues systematically and creatively to relevant audiences

Content

Students will engage in independent study supported by specialist supervision which may include the following: literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, theory and research, research methodologies, research questions, practice-as-research & practice-based-research (where appropriate), qualitative/quantitative data analysis (where appropriate). The specific module content will be dictated by the nature of the research each student undertakes and the needs identified by the supervisor. Students will be required to produce a final dissemination of their project in an appropriate manner such as: an empirically based research project, a professional practice based research project, a practice as research project.

Teaching and Learning

Learning Activities

As a Masters student you will be required to undertake independent study as well as attend tutorials to support your development. Learning activities will include lectures, independent study, research and / or practice, formative assessment opportunities, and feedback tutorials.

Blended Learning

1. Where possible, all lecture-produced course documents will be provided in an electronic form via CANVAS.

2. Formative assessment opportunities will occur during face-to-face sessions and online.

5. Assessments will be submitted online, feedback will be provided electronically.

The example grading criteria below show how the learning outcomes are used and how these are transferred and used in assessments for grading criteria.

The Institute of Sport

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON
KNOWLEDGE • INNOVATION • ENTERPRISE

How your work will be assigned a grade

Learning Outcome	100 – 70% (Distinction)	69 – 60% (Merit)	59 – 50% (Pass)	49 – 40% (Fail)	39 –0% (Fail)
LO1: Demonstrate a critical awareness and comprehensive understanding of current research, much of which is at the forefront of your discipline, to select an appropriate methodology and associated technologies to utilise in a piece of extended research.	The work demonstrates evidence of a focused analysis and critique of academic theory and literature highly relevant to the proposed research project. Differing theoretical and academic perspectives and interpretations relevant to the proposed research project have been recognised and ideas synthesised to determine the approach adopted. Ideas are presented succinctly and the project aims and methodology are fully considered and justified with reference to academic theory and literature. There are few errors in referencing, grammar or syntax.	The work demonstrates a capacity to express views based on sound argument and solid evidence from academic theory and literature, which is relevant to the proposed research project, in an articulate and concise way. The work demonstrates a willingness to question and explore theoretical and academic perspectives and interpretations relevant to the proposed research project. A willingness to synthesise ideas from academic theory and literature to determine the approach adopted is evident. Academic theory and literature is put forward to justify the project aims and methodology. There are some small repeated errors in referencing, grammar or syntax.	The work demonstrates clear presentation of major debates and suitable basic academic theory and literature relevant to the proposed research project. The work explores and analyses issues relevant to the proposed research project but is mainly descriptive. There is evidence of engagement with pertinent issues from academic theory and literature to justify the project aims and methodology. There are some repeated errors in referencing, grammar or syntax.	The work demonstrates limited presentation of academic theory and literature relevant to the proposed research project. The work is overly descriptive and provides minimal interpretation and limited analysis of academic theory and literature relevant to the proposed research project. There is little evidence of engagement with academic theory and literature to justify the project aims and methodology.	The work demonstrates little or no understanding of academic theory and literature relevant to the proposed research project. The work is mainly descriptive and provides little or no interpretation and analysis of academic theory and literature relevant to the proposed research project. There is little or no evidence of engagement with academic theory and literature to justify the project aims and methodology.

Annex 4. Guidance on assigning a level to a qualification

Taken from the Ofqual Handbook section 'Level requirements (including level descriptors)'

Assigning a level to a qualification

When assigning a level to each of its qualifications in accordance with Condition E9.1, an awarding organisation must use the level descriptors set out below to select the most appropriate level to assign to that qualification.

Assigning more than one level to a qualification

1. When assigning more than one level to a qualification an awarding organisation must –
    1. (a) be satisfied that the range of achievement recognised by the qualification is sufficient to span more than one level,
    2. (b) use the level descriptors set out below to select the most appropriate levels to assign to that qualification,
    3. (c) have a clear rationale for assigning more than one level to that qualification, and
    4. (d) publish that rationale.

Assigning a level to a component of a qualification

1. When assigning a level to a Component of a qualification in accordance with Condition E9.2 an awarding organisation must –
    1. (a) use the level descriptors set out below to select the most appropriate level to assign to that Component, and
    2. (b) take all reasonable steps to ensure that the level assigned to each Component is appropriate when considered against the level assigned to the qualification as a whole.

Level descriptors

The level descriptors are divided into two categories –

- knowledge and understanding; and
- skills.

There is a knowledge descriptor and a skills descriptor for each level within the framework. The descriptors apply to all the qualifications we regulate, general and vocational, and so many of the descriptors have an "and/or" construction to indicate

their applicability to the knowledge and skills associated with the study of a subject or in preparation for a job or role.

The level descriptors build on those used within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Levels 4-8 are intended to be consistent with the five levels within the Framework for Higher Education Qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ).

The descriptors set out the generic knowledge and skills associated with the typical holder of a qualification at that level. The level descriptors are framed as outcomes and each category starts with a stem statement ("the holder can…") which then links into the outcomes associated with each level of the framework.

The descriptors for the knowledge and skills associated with entry 1 achievement are the exception to this. The entry 1 descriptors are based on a continuum of achievement which can be used to track and recognise progress towards the achievement of student-centred targets.

None of the descriptors is intended to point to the process of learning or to specific assessment methods.

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
Entry 1	Progresses along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of knowledge and/or understanding that relate to the subject or immediate environment.	Progress along a continuum that ranges from the most elementary of achievements to beginning to make use of skills that relate to the subject or the immediate environment.
Entry 2	Has basic knowledge or understanding of a subject and/or can carry out simple, familiar tasks; and Knows the steps needed to complete simple activities.	Carry out simple, familiar tasks and activities. Follow instructions or use rehearsed steps to complete tasks and activities.
Entry 3	Has basic knowledge and understanding to carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts; and Knows and understands the steps needed to complete structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts.	Carry out structured tasks and activities in familiar contexts. Be aware of the consequences of actions for self and others.
L1	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	Use basic cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined routine tasks and procedures. Select and use relevant information.

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	Is aware of aspects of information relevant to the area of study or work.	Identify whether actions have been effective.
L2	Has knowledge and understanding of facts, procedures and ideas in an area of study or field of work to complete well-defined tasks and address straightforward problems. Can interpret relevant information and ideas. Is aware of a range of information that is relevant to the area of study or work.	Select and use relevant cognitive and practical skills to complete well-defined, generally routine tasks and address straightforward problems. Identify, gather and use relevant information to inform actions. Identify how effective actions have been.
L3	Has factual, procedural and theoretical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to complete tasks and address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Can interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of the area of study or work. Is aware of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, select and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills, methods and procedures to address problems that while well-defined, may be complex and non-routine. Use appropriate investigation to inform actions. Review how effective methods and actions have been.
L4	Has practical, theoretical or technical knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to address problems that are well defined but complex and non-routine. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information and ideas. Is aware of the nature of approximate scope of the area of study or work. Has an informed awareness of different perspectives or approaches within the area of study or work.	Identify, adapt and use appropriate cognitive and practical skills to inform actions and address problems that are complex and non-routine while normally fairly well-defined. Review the effectiveness and appropriateness of methods, actions and results.
L5	Has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate	Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods, cognitive and practical skills to address broadly defined, complex problems. Use relevant research or development to inform actions.

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	relevant information, concepts and ideas. Is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them	Evaluate actions, methods and results.
L6	Has advanced practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the theories that underpin them. Can critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information, concepts and ideas.	Determine, refine, adapt and use appropriate methods and advanced cognitive and practical skills to address problems that have limited definition and involve many interacting factors. Use and, where appropriate, design relevant research and development to inform actions. Evaluate actions, methods and results and their implications.
L7	Reformulates and uses practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce modified conceptions. Understands the wider contexts in which the area of study or work is located. Understands current developments in the area of study or work. Understands different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the area of study or work.	Use specialised skills to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many interacting factors. Determine and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Design and undertake research, development or strategic activities to inform or produce change in the area of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications.
L8	Develops original practical, conceptual or technological understanding to create ways forward in contexts that lack definition and where there are many complex, interacting factors. Critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce new knowledge	Use advanced and specialised skills and techniques to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many complex, interacting factors. Formulate and use appropriate methodologies and approaches. Initiate, design and undertake

Level	Knowledge descriptor (the holder…)	Skills descriptor (the holder can…)
	and theories. Understands and reconceptualises the wider contexts in which the field of knowledge or work is located. Extends a field of knowledge or work by contributing original knowledge and thinking. Exercises critical understanding of different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the field of knowledge or work.	research, development or strategic activities that extend or produce significant change in the field of work or study. Critically evaluate actions, methods and results and their short- and long-term implications for the field of work or knowledge and its wider context.

Guidance on level and level descriptors

1. General Condition E9.3(c) allows us to specify guidance to which an awarding organisation must have regard when assigning –
    1. (a) a level to a qualification
    2. (b) more than one level to a qualification
    3. (c) a level to a Component of a qualification

2. We set out our guidance for the purposes of Condition E9.3(c) below.

Who can use the level descriptors?

The level descriptors must be used by awarding organisations when they are assigning a level to a qualification and a Component of a qualification. Level descriptors can also be used by –

- students and other users – to understand and interpret the level of qualifications,
- anyone who wants to understand more about the difference between and relative demand of qualifications at different levels.

How should awarding organisations use the level descriptors?

Awarding organisations should look at the range of level descriptors and identify the descriptor (or where the qualification will have more than one level, the descriptors) which provides the best match with the intended knowledge and skills outcomes for their qualification. Once the awarding organisation has designed the qualification, they could look at the descriptor for the level above and below the proposed level for the qualification and compare the knowledge and skills descriptors for each level with the knowledge, skills and understanding which the holder of the qualification is expected to demonstrate. The fit does not have to be perfect; qualifications might naturally have a more knowledge- or skills-based focus and so will be a better fit with the knowledge or skills descriptor as appropriate.

Awarding organisations can also look at a range of other material to support the selection of the most appropriate level for their qualification including other qualifications at a range of levels, benchmark and content statements and agreed industry statements.

Awarding organisations and users should not expect all qualifications to meet the relevant level descriptor in full. It would not be unusual for smaller qualifications to cover only some of the characteristics set out in the descriptor whereas bigger qualifications, typically taken over a longer period, are more likely to feature more of the characteristics. The descriptors set out what the typical holder of a qualification at that level will know and be able to do based on the best-fit approach described above.

Awarding organisations and users should not expect all of a qualification's content and assessment to be at the level the learner is expected to reach on conclusion of the qualification. This will be particularly true of qualifications delivered over a longer period and which are designed to enable the learner to progress from one level to another within the qualification. In assigning a level to a qualification the awarding organisation should have regard to the amount of content and assessment at the level of the qualification and to the learner's increased ability as the learner approaches the end of the qualification.

How will Ofqual use the descriptors?

We will use the descriptors to inform our review process, particularly when we are exploring how awarding organisations check and verify the given level of their qualification with these descriptors for that level.

- There are conditions on assigning level to qualifications but this is not prescribed by concrete procedures
- Qualification accreditation process
- Monitoring of AOs
- Feedback from stakeholders

Annex 5. Statements from International Experts

The England and Northern Ireland EQF Referencing work drew on the advice of two international experts: John O'Connor, and Horacy Debowski.

The statement from John O'Connor is provided below.

The statement from Horacy Debowski will follow due to extenuating circumstances. Horacy has been involved in significant disruption to the Polish exam series, followed by a serious illness in his family. He has been involved throughout the referencing work however and the resulting report takes on board his interim comments, with only his final statement outstanding. We hope the EQF Advisory Group understand this unique and difficult situation.

Statement on report on Referencing the qualifications frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the levels of the EQF

International Commentator: Dr. John O'Connor, Head of Qualifications and Skills Policy, Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

May 2019

General Observations

The updated referencing report provides a sound basis to confirm and strengthen the relationship between the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The report also references the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) to the EQF for the first time. The report presents evidence against each of the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks or qualifications systems to the EQF as set out in Annex III of the EQF Recommendation reauthorised by the Council of the European Union in May 2017.

In my opinion, the approach and method employed to update the 2010 referencing exercise and the additional evidence presented in this report, serve both to establish a relationship between the FHEQ and the EQF and to confirm and strengthen the historical association between the RQF and the EQF. The updated referencing report was produced consistent with the guidance provided in Note AG 43-4-REV on the Updating of EQF referencing reports as part of the EQF AG work programme 2018-19.

The current report should be read in conjunction with the Welsh and Scottish reports which detail the relationship between the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) with the EQF. Collectively, the three UK updated referencing reports respect the diversity of the national systems of qualifications while maintaining intra-UK coherence and qualifications alignments.

The current report, in establishing a relationship between the FHEQ and the EQF, fulfils the ambition to achieve EQF referencing of all of the UK qualifications frameworks for the first time.

The current report referencing the RQF and the FHEQ in England and Northern Ireland to the EQF, is not without challenges. Simultaneous referencing of two NQFs to the EQF requires a high degree of coordination among key actors. Achieving this for two countries exhibiting a tendency towards increasingly divergent education policy landscapes, adds to the complexity of the exercise. Much care has been taken to respect the integrity of both qualifications frameworks and the integrity of the national qualifications systems in which they operate. Overall the report

acknowledges differences between the two qualifications frameworks and their application within the two distinct qualifications policy environments, while at the same time demonstrating how the qualifications systems of England and Northern Ireland still have much in common.

In my opinion the report provides an accessible and comprehensive description of the education, training and qualifications policy context in England and Northern Ireland. The history and evolution of the RQF in particular is helpful, as is the portrayal of the fairly extensive wave of institutional, statutory and regulatory reform that has been underway since 2010. This context is particularly important given the challenges noted above.

The report aims to enhance intra-UK and international mobility and recognition for holders of qualifications. This is consistent with the primary ambition of the EQF. While the nature of the future UK-EU relationship remains unclear, the report recognises the value of maintaining a European currency for its qualifications system.

The approach to preparing this report has been inclusive and deliberative, utilising existing policy networks and establishing a dedicated steering group to promote and coordinate the work and to establish consensus and agreement. The work has progressed speedily with demanding timelines to complete the task. The report identified issues that will need ongoing and future attention, reflecting the dynamic nature of qualifications systems. The executives at OFQUAL and CCEA along with members of the steering group deserve credit for producing a high-quality report under challenging conditions.

As a member of the steering group I was afforded access to relevant documentation and had good opportunity to comment on earlier drafts of this report. I also acted as an international commentator for both the Scottish and Wales referencing reports. This was helpful, affording me the opportunity to gain a good appreciation of qualifications developments across the UK.

By international standards, the UK has had much experience of working with NQFs. Well known UK experts on NQFs and the EQF contributed to this report, maintaining continuity with the original UK referencing report and offering well informed advice on the current report. The RQF, in its current form, has been the subject of frequent and significant change. The ongoing efforts to balance a responsive, innovative and flexible (general and VET in particular) qualifications system with necessary governance and regulatory arrangements, will likely be of interest to policymakers elsewhere.

Compliance with the referencing criteria

Comments on the extent to which the draft report addresses the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the European Qualifications Framework, as set out in Annex III of the 2017 Recommendation.

Criterion 1: The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Co-ordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.

This criterion is addressed. The institutional, legislative and governance arrangements supporting the both the RQF and the FHEQ are extensively detailed in the report. The report describes the nature and extent of engaging with all relevant national bodies in the updated referencing process.

Criterion 2: There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.

This criterion is addressed.

The 2010 QCF-EQF alignment is maintained notwithstanding the fact that the RQF has since replaced the QCF. The absence of the responsibility and autonomy sub-strand in the RQF is explained in the report: the relevant national authorities are of the view that this change has not substantively altered the basis for maintaining the 2010 alignments.

The proposed FHEQ-EQF alignment is supported by detailed technical analysis of the respective level descriptors. This strand of the work, referencing the FHEQ to the EQF, was conducted cognisant of the outcomes of the self-certification of the FHEQ and the QF-EHEA conducted in 2008 and also taking account of the relationship between the EQF and the QF-EHEA articulated in the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

The proposed alignment of FHEQ level 4 with EQF level 5 has prompted some domestic reflection of the relationship between VET and Higher Education qualifications at this level, reflected in the commitment to revisit the respective FHEQ/RQF/EQF alignments as part of the further development and implementation of the EQF in England and Northern Ireland. The co-location of short cycle higher education (SCHE) qualifications and other qualifications that are considered part of higher education but not classified as SCHE qualifications, both at EQF level 5, is not necessarily problematic and not unique to England and Northern Ireland. Importantly, the report presents a transparent mapping of the respective level descriptors and the FHEQ-EQF alignments are endorsed by the steering group and relevant qualifications authorities. This issue does challenge the EQF-AG to consider

its guidance to participating countries on the implications of updated EQF referencing reports on pre-existing or first time QF-EHEA self-certification exercises.

Criterion 3: The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

This criterion is addressed.

The UK education and training system has a long tradition of learning outcomes-based qualifications. The way that learning outcomes are implemented under the RQF and the FHEQ is detailed in the report. Useful examples of learning outcomes referenced qualifications are presented in the report. The respective arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning within the sub-systems operation the RQF and the FHEQ are detailed. The potential for both frameworks to promote learning outcomes and enable validation practice is evident. The report includes a helpful mapping of credit arrangements in England and Northern Ireland and their compatibility with the principles for credit as set out in Annex V of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Criterion 4: The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

This criterion is addressed.

The procedures for inclusion are made transparent in the report. Such procedures are integrated within national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements for the RQF and the FHEQ. There is evidence too that such procedures are not just in place, but that they are generally effective given the widespread acceptance of the level of qualifications for employment or for further study.

Criterion 5: The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this Recommendation.

This criterion is addressed.

As with other recent referencing reports, my sense is that the principles in Annex IV will need further refinement so that participating countries can best present aspects of their quality assurance systems that promote confidence in their NQFs. If comparable analysis of quality assurance arrangements supporting qualifications is of interest to the EQF community, again, some further consideration and guidance on how consistency with the principles in Annex V is to be demonstrated will be

required by the EQF-AG. Currently, in my opinion, the principles are open to a fairly liberal interpretation which the EQF-AG will need to decide is a good thing or not.

The current report does provide an extensive description of quality assurance arrangements that underpin the RQF and FHEQ and the delivery of education and training programmes that lead to qualifications included within the two frameworks. The report takes each of the principles set out in Annex V and maps them against relevant quality assurance procedures governing each framework. A variety of qualification types are selected, and the traceability of their QA infrastructure is presented. Tables presented are clear and informative.

The positive outcomes of the latest (2018) ENQA review of the QAA is used as part of the evidence presented in this section. The report notes the significance of ensuring the appropriate levelling of qualifications within relevant qualifications frameworks, becoming a mandated requirement under the revised European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area (2015).

With less reliance now being placed on the use of institutional reviews in the QA system for higher education in England and Northern Ireland, it will be interesting to observe how FHEQ 'levelling' of qualifications within HE institutions are ensured.

Criterion 6: The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.

This criterion is addressed.

Criterion 7: The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.

This criterion is addressed.

Criterion 8: The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.

This criterion is addressed.

At the time of writing, I have not yet seen the written endorsements of this report by the relevant national authorities. This is because the final report has yet to complete

the final stages of governance and official sign off. The report commits that such certification is imminent, and I fully expect to observe full compliance with this criterion in the report presented to the EQF-AG.

Criterion 9: Within six months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

This criterion is addressed.

Provision for addressing this criterion is clearly evident.

Criterion 10: Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

This criterion is addressed.

END

03 June 2019

Horacy Dębowski

Comments on Referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework. Report of June 2019.

International Commentator: Horacy Dębowski, Vice director of the Central Examination Board in Poland (CKE)

General observations

1. The presented report updates the referencing of the qualifications frameworks used in England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework, namely the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

Regulated Qualifications Framework was designed on the basis of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which was referenced to the European Qualifications Framework in the 2010 joint UK referencing report. Framework for Higher Education Qualifications is referenced for the first time to the EQF.

Each framework is functioning in different qualifications system jurisdictions and is governed by different institutions, has separate level descriptors and procedures of inclusion and the quality assurance mechanisms.

It should also be outlined that the RQF level descriptors are mirrored by the regulated qualifications pillar of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and that FHEQ is also being used in Wales in the higher education sector.

2. The report complements two updated referencing reports produced by the other UK countries: Scotland and Wales. Scotland submitted the updated report to the EQF AG in December 2018. Wales is scheduled to present the report to the EQF AG at the same time as England and Northern Ireland in June 2019. To ensure consistency across the UK referencing report all the UK EQF NCPs have cooperated closely with each other. Cooperation also took place within the UK Coordination Group for European Vocational Education and Training Initiatives (UKCGVETI).

3. Producing the updated report for England and Northern Ireland, similarly as in the other UK countries, results from the changes in the formal education system (general, VET, higher) and changes in the qualifications system especially with regards to:

- replacing QCF with the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), and as a result change of its character (from transformative into communicative framework) and in the structure and content of level descriptors;

- changes in the institutional set-up in which new institutions have become responsible for the qualifications frameworks management

The report indicates also that more broad changes in the UK's qualifications frameworks and systems have been introduced as a "consequence of the devolution of responsibilities for certain civil functions from the UK government in London to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to the governments in Wales and Scotland".

4. Taking the above into account, updating the UK referencing report from 2010 with regards to England and Northern Ireland is relevant and justified and in compliance with the EQF AG guidelines and in particular EQF AG note 43-4 on updating referencing reports from December 2017. The rationale for updating is explained clearly and convincingly in the report.

5. The context of the possibility of the UK leaving the European Union is indicated in the report but is not presented as the main reason for the updating exercise.

6. The report documents well the fulfilment of the ten criteria as indicated in the Council Recommendation of May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework.

The report addresses the ten criteria clearly and adequately and provides confidence about alignment of the England and Northern Ireland qualifications frameworks with the EQF level descriptors and principles.

Analysis of the level descriptors of the RQF and FHEQ to the EQF has been completed thoroughly providing strong evidence of the linkages with the EQF. This work has been done by the UK eminent experts who were also involved in the design and development of the EQF.

7. The updated report duly addresses feedback and comments given to the first report by the EQF Advisory Group in 2010. Feedback and comments given by the EQF AG in 2010 were subject to many discussions within the Steering Group and they were important for the team of authors.

8. The process of work on the report was very transparent from the perspective of an international observer. Both international experts were invited to be members of the England and Northern Ireland EQF Referencing Steering Group on updating the referencing report and participated in the e-mail discussions between group members and also during two meetings held in January 2019 and April 2019 at the Ofqual premises in England.

Both of the international experts were also members of the Referencing Steering Groups in Scotland and Wales. This gave us the opportunity to gain understanding of the adopted approaches across all the UK countries and to better understand the context of the updated referencing report for England and Northern Ireland.

International experts provided written comments in two rounds of work on the report. Despite the high intensity of work, we had all opportunities to express our questions and comments on the report and the report team duly analysed and addressed each of them.

The following issues, among many others, were raised during discussions with the international experts:

- rationale for updating the report, including the context of "Brexit" and changes in the education and qualifications system in England and Northern Ireland over the last years;
- comments and feedback given by the EQF AG to the UK referencing report submitted in 2010;

- relations between education and qualifications systems across the UK countries and the rationale for preparation of the three updated reports instead of one;
- involvement of stakeholders in production of the report especially regarding representatives of employers and trade unions;
- structure of the report, the order and titles of chapters and sub-chapters, to ensure the most possible transparency for readers from abroad;
- terminology regarding types of qualifications included in the RQF and FHEQ;
- the role of the qualifications register in the qualifications systems of England and Northern Ireland;
- rationale for reduction of autonomy and responsibility category from the Regulated Qualifications Framework and its effect on the linkages with the EQF;
- indication of the strength of the linkages between RQF and FHEQ and the EQF levels used in the report;
- size of RQF and FHEQ jurisdictions in terms of types and number of qualifications awarded, learners, awarding bodies, funding, etc.
- the role of the UK government and governmental departments in the referencing process;
- logic of credit accumulation and transfer arrangements;
- structuring the description in the report to show fulfilment of Criterion 5;
- to include a more detailed description of the existing procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the RQF, especially regarding inclusion of qualifications which are not under state direct supervision; and
- plans to include EQF levels on RQF and FHEQ qualification certificates.

9. The report is divided into six chapters and five annexes. The structure of the report is clear from an external observer perspective. Authors of the report managed to provide complex subject matter - referencing qualifications systems of two countries, having two NQFs to the EQF levels and principles - in an accessible and informative way. I had been impressed observing how the report became clearer with each consecutive draft version and, in my view, the team of authors did a tremendous job in this respect.

10. The report is rich with information regarding context of development and historical background of the NQFs in England and Northern Ireland. Responses to referencing criteria are complemented with many examples of adopted solutions, fragments of regulations, procedures, examples of learning outcomes, assessment criteria, quality assurance procedures and others. This should be considered as a strength of the report.

Very informative and relevant are chapters 2-4 which precede responses to the EQF referencing criteria. In particular, I valued information regarding the size of sub-sectors of the qualifications system in terms of types and numbers of qualifications awarded, learners, awarding bodies, etc. Information provided in these three chapters also illustrate how large and diverse the qualifications systems in England

and Northern Ireland are, which are based on the qualifications frameworks (RQF and FHEQ).

In this context, we have discussed whether the description of the qualifications systems should be one of the referencing criteria and this issue might be, in my view, discussed at the EQF AG forum. Description of the qualifications system constitutes an indispensable part of any referencing report and enables a better understanding of the responses to the ten referencing criteria.

Compliance with the referencing criteria

Below are presented comments on the extent to which the report addresses the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the European Qualifications Framework, as set out in Annex III of the 2017 EQF Recommendation.

Criterion 1: The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.

The criterion is fulfilled.

The report clearly and extensively presents the responsibilities and competences of institutions and bodies governing the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in England and Northern Ireland and their involvement in the referencing process.

For the purpose of updating the referencing report, the England and Northern Ireland Referencing Steering Group was formed, which comprised institutions and bodies in charge of the RQF and FHEQ, ministerial departments and the relevant stakeholders representing different areas of the qualifications system (general, VET, HE, regulated), trade unions, experts from Wales and Scotland preparing their reports, and two international experts. Members of the Steering Group actively participated in the production of the report by providing input to the report, commenting on its draft versions and by participation in the group meetings.

It might be worth noting that employers organisations were not members of the Steering Group (at least not explicitly) which might result from the UK industrial relations traditions and arrangements, and should not be considered as a deficiency.

***Criterion 2: There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF*.**

The criterion is fulfilled.

The report documents well linkages of the RQF and FHEQ to the European Qualifications Framework. Each framework has its own sets of level descriptors. The RQF, which was designed on the basis of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) framework (which was referenced to the EQF in the 2010 UK joint report), distinguishes two level descriptors domains - knowledge and skills, whereas FHEQ distinguishes knowledge, skills and responsibilities domains.

To demonstrate the link between the level descriptors of the two frameworks a thorough mapping analysis was conducted, which is presented in Annex 2 of the report. The starting points in the mapping analyses of the RQF and FHEQ were the outcomes of mapping QCF against EQF descriptors in 2010, and the mapping of the FHEQ against the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area in November 2008, conducted within the Bologna Process.

The mapping analysis gives confidence in matching the RQF and FHEQ level descriptors to the EQF.

Criterion 3: The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems

The criterion is fulfilled.

The qualifications system in England and Northern Ireland, similarly as in the whole UK, has a long tradition in using learning outcomes dating back to the 1980s. Learning outcomes are used as the main point of reference in designing qualifications, assessment, validation, quality assurance and assigning NQF levels to qualifications in the regulated qualifications and higher education areas.

The report provides examples of usage of learning outcomes in different types of qualifications in the general, vocational and higher education sectors. It shows the richness of approaches and how learning outcomes have been embedded in practice.

The report explains the scope of usage of the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the credit accumulation and transfer procedures. Additionally, with regards to credit accumulation and transfer arrangements, the report addresses in detail each principle for credit systems as defined in the Annex V of the EQF Recommendation of 2017.

Criterion 4: The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent

The criterion is fulfilled.

The report presents procedures and practices for inclusion of qualifications in the RQF and FHEQ which are used in England and Northern Ireland.

The procedures of allocating NQF levels to qualifications in the RQF and FHEQ must be in line with stated regulatory criteria and standards and be externally quality assured. The primary points of reference in the allocation of an NQF level are learning outcomes. The report explains clearly and in detail the submission, accreditation and quality assurance processes for entering qualifications into the RQF and FHEQ.

Valuable information regarding procedures for inclusion of qualifications are provided by hyperlinked materials (regulations, guidebooks, leaflets).

Criterion 5: The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this Recommendation

The criterion is fulfilled.

The report addresses this criterion by providing a general overview of the quality assurance processes and procedures for the two qualifications frameworks in England and Northern Ireland and later by addressing each principle on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV of the EQF Recommendation for the RQF and FHEQ.

With regards to the higher education sector, the report indicates full compliance of HE in England and Northern Ireland with the European Standard Guidelines 2005 and 2015.

The description provided in Criterion 5 shows strong alignment of the quality assurance systems in England and Northern Ireland regarding RQF and FHEQ with the EQF principles.

Criterion 6: The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.

The criterion is fulfilled.

The report was prepared by the relevant quality assurance bodies for the RQF and FHEQ in England and Northern Ireland - Ofqual, CCEA Regulation and QAA, and includes their statements that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice. The other relevant quality assurance bodies and agencies were engaged in the updating work as members of the Referencing Steering Group.

Criterion 7. The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.

The criterion is fulfilled. See commentary above.

Criterion 8: The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.

The report states that “the three competent national bodies for England and Northern Ireland in relation to the national qualifications frameworks (Ofqual, CCEA

Regulation and QAA) will each publish this single referencing report in full, on behalf of the UK and Northern Ireland government departments".

The report includes letters of endorsement of competent authorities and declares that more of them will be attached to the report before its presentation at the EQF AG forum in June 2019.

The report separately addresses each of the EQF referencing criteria for RQF and FHEQ. The report does not respond explicitly to self-certification criteria and procedures.

Criterion 9: Within six months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

Publication of the report will be done by the three competent bodies for the RQF and FHEQ. All these bodies agree to publish the updated report once it is approved by the EQF AG.

Criterion 10: Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

All qualifications included in the RQF or FHEQ must indicate their levels respectively. Similarly as in the other UK countries, awarding bodies may indicate EQF level on their certificates but there is no formal requirement to do so. This decision was made after consultation with the national stakeholders.

With regards to the FHEQ, the report states that having completed referencing of the FHEQ to EQF, QAA will, where relevant, include reference to the EQF and its alignment with the FHEQ.

The report does not indicate whether there are plans to make obligatory inclusion of EQF level on RQF and FHEQ qualification certificates.

END

Annex 6. Letters of endorsement

Provided below are the letters of endorsement from the Department for Education (DfE, England), a joint letter of endorsement from the Northern Ireland departments, the Department for the Economy, (DfENI) and the Department for Education (DENI), and letters from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Office for Students (OfS).

Department for Education

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23/09/2019

To whom it may concern,

Referencing the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the Framework For Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The Department for Education (DfE) is the ministerial department responsible for education in England. I can confirm that the DfE has been involved in the process of referencing the RQF and FHEQ to the EQF in 2019 and producing the final report.

Ann Miller represented DfE on the Steering Group to support this work, and has ensured that she and wider DfE colleagues were able to contribute to and comment on the drafts and the final version of the referencing report.

I can confirm on behalf of DfE that the report reflects the current education and training landscape in England and that DfE colleagues are happy to endorse this updated referencing report.

Yours faithfully,

Jacquie Spatcher
Head of Qualifications Division
Department for Education

Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT 19 7PR

Department for the Economy

Adelaide House
39-49 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FD

Wednesday 15th May 2019

To whom it may concern,

Re: Referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework

On behalf of the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Department for Education (DE), I can confirm that the report fully reflects the education and training landscape in Northern Ireland and that Departmental officials Clement Athanasiou (DfE) and Joan Cassells (DE) are happy to endorse the final report.

Yours faithfully,

Clement Athanasiou
Vocational Education Policy Branch

Joan Cassells
14-19 Curriculum Entitlement Team

QAA

10 May 2019

Chief Executive
Douglas Blackstock

Southgate House
Southgate Street
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GL1 1UB

01452 557004
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To whom it may concern

QAA can confirm that it has been involved in the updating of the Referencing of the RQF and FHEQ to the EQF process in 2019. Dr Alison Felce has represented the QAA on the Steering Group established to oversee this process, that she has worked with Ofqual and CCEA Regulation on the production of the report and that the QAA has had opportunity to input to and comment on the various drafts and the final version of the updated referencing report.

I can confirm on behalf of QAA that the report reflects the current quality assurance arrangements in England and Northern Ireland in respect of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), of the key quality assurance role of QAA in those arrangements and that QAA is happy to endorse this updated referencing report.

Yours faithfully

Douglas Blackstock
Chief Executive

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27 September 2019

Dear Alison

Referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework

Thank you for sharing the report on referencing the Qualifications Frameworks of England and Northern Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework. I can confirm that we have reviewed the report and that it correctly represents the Office for Student's regulatory arrangements for registered higher education providers in England.

If you require any additional information or have any further questions, please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Dr Scott Court
Head of Standards and Quality
Scott.Court@officeforstudents.org.uk

Chair – Sir Michael Barber Chief Executive – Nicola Dandridge CBE

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