Cross-Referencing Qualifications Frameworks

by John Hart   **No. 49, June 2009**

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) is a meta-framework of eight 'reference levels' defined by short level descriptors designed to facilitate the process of relating national and sectoral systems to one framework. It is intended that, by 2012, all EU countries will be able to include a reference to EQF levels on certificates for qualifications in their national systems. The intention is to promote both learner and worker mobility within the European Community by making qualifications intelligible and transferable across national boundaries.

This *Briefing* examines the process of *referencing* the levels of qualifications frameworks to the EQF, notes how much the process depends on interpretation of the level descriptors, and argues that additional indicators and benchmarks are required if the referencing is to be meaningful.

► If qualification frameworks and systems are to be referenced to the EQF there is a need to establish what constitutes sufficient and appropriate evidence of a match.

► Matching will come through a comparison of level descriptors, but this is not a straightforward process and requires interpretative judgement.

► Different approaches to such comparisons are possible and each has strengths and weaknesses.

► Other 'external' references will be required to make sense of this process and provide indicators or benchmarks which can explain and justify the evidence for referencing.

Introduction

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) was formally adopted by the European Parliament and Council at the beginning of 2008 following five years of work by a European Commission Technical Working Group (TWG) and a wide-ranging consultation on the proposals.

Among the emerging criteria for referencing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) to the EQF is the requirement that there should be a *demonstrable link* between the NQF and the reference levels of the EQF, but this poses the question of what might constitute sufficient and appropriate evidence of a link. This briefing explores that issue, drawing on work to reference the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) to the EQF.

Level descriptors state typical outcomes of learning at each level in a framework. They are generally related to categories, or *domains*, of outcomes of learning such as forms of knowledge, understanding, intellectual skills, practical skills, work-related roles and practices, responsibilities, independence and creativity.

The descriptors themselves tend to be formulated as bullet points or short statements, although some frameworks use a paragraph of text, usually in a standardised form, for each level.

The nature of level descriptors

The number and nature of domains used in frameworks around the world varies considerably. The EQF uses three domains: *knowledge*, *skills* and *competence*.

Box 1. The outcome domains of the EQF

The domains of the EQF are defined as follows:
- *knowledge* - theoretical and factual
- *skills* - cognitive (logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)
- *competence* - responsibility and autonomy

The SCQF, on the other hand, uses a distinctive 5-domain approach for its descriptors, which were launched in 2001. The CQFW uses two sets of descriptors – those of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NICATS) scheme, which date from the late 1990s and those of the Qualifications and Credit Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which were finalised in 2008. Both the NICATS and QCF descriptors, like the EQF, use three domains and at first sight these seem to offer a good basis for a comparison.

However, the conceptualisation and specification of the domains are so different in the four sets of descriptors that they do not serve the purpose, as is shown below.

Box 2. Domain comparisons

EQF	NICATS	QCF	SCQF
Knowledge		Knowledge and understanding	Knowledge and understanding
Cognitive and Practical Skills	Intellectual skills and attributes	Application and action	Generic Cognitive Skills
	Processes		Practice: Applied knowledge and understanding
			Communication ICT and numeracy skills
Competence - responsibility and autonomy	Accountability	Autonomy and accountability	Autonomy, accountability and working with others

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Knowledge, understanding/comprehension, etc:
- EQF: *knowledge* quite clearly and explicitly characterised at each level, but *understanding/comprehension* not dealt with at most levels.
- NICATS: *knowledge* not explicitly characterised at all and *comprehension* only detailed at the lower levels.
- QCF: *knowledge* as content not dealt with at all, but the content of *understanding* explicitly characterised at each level.
- SCQF: *knowledge* as content features at all levels – distinguished by type, extent and depth; *critical understanding*, often of knowledge about knowledge, important in the upper levels.

Skills:
- EQF: *skills* dealt with as content, not process; clearly and explicitly characterised at each level, but at most levels defined partly by a link to *problem solving*.
- NICATS: *skills* dealt with as process in two domains; extrapolation from descriptions of specific, usually intellectual, skills required; no clear link to *problem solving*.
- QCF: *skills* dealt with as process in two domains; extrapolation from descriptions of specific, usually intellectual, skills required; *problem solving* characterised either as a context for the application of *knowledge* or as a skill.
- SCQF: *skills* found in three domains and very varied in nature – from the use of simple tools, through the skills of communication, numeracy and use of IT, to complex research skills.

Responsibility, accountability and autonomy:
- EQF: a range of differentiating ideas and terms used, but most appear at only one or two levels.
- NICATS: emphasis on the nature, quantity and/or quality of process-based outputs, or outcomes achieved by self and/or others.

- QCF: descriptors give a full account of these elements, combining the approaches of EQF and NICATS.
- SCQF: these elements found in a single domain, which deals with processes; the outcomes of this domain go well beyond the EQF in their range of detail.

Cross-referencing level descriptors

Where descriptors are set out in bullet points, these may concentrate either on content (using noun phrases) or on process (using verb phrases) and many frameworks, like the EQF, use both approaches. If two frameworks differ in their approaches to similar domains, this can create difficulties in making comparisons. For example one framework might differentiate the type and complexity of knowledge at different levels (as with the EQF and SCQF descriptors), while another focuses on the type and complexity of processes in which knowledge is used (as with the NICATS and QCF descriptors).

In addition, all four sets of descriptors differentiate levels to a greater or lesser extent by the way that *tasks*, *activities* and *contexts* are characterised in the various domains, but again the detail is very varied.

Box 3. The SCQF and the CQFW

The SCQF was formally launched in 2001 with the intention of consolidating the reforms of the previous twenty years and making the Scottish system of qualifications easier to understand and use. The SCQF is a single unified structure of twelve levels based on three existing frameworks - for general and vocational qualifications, for qualifications in higher education institutions and for accredited workplace qualifications.

The CQFW dates from 2003 in its current form. Its aim is to support individual, businesses and communities to develop new skills. It has eight levels and three entry levels and is made up of three 'pillars' - regulated academic and vocational qualifications, higher education qualifications and quality-assured lifelong learning - the first two pillars are shared with England and Northern Ireland.

Much discussion of framework comparison concentrates on the idea of 'best fit', which is often cited, but seldom defined. In the SCQF and CQFW referencing exercises, 'best fit' was taken to mean: (i) that each level in a UK framework should only be matched to **one** level on the EQF, and (ii) that indirect evidence of a match was acceptable – for example evidence that the demands of a UK framework level were greater than EQF level 3 and less than EQF level 5 could be taken as evidence of a match to EQF level 4 even if there was little or no direct evidence.

In these ways, the principle of 'best fit' is useful. However, to be credible, framework referencing will have to be carried out through well-founded analysis and for this a basis for the interpretation of level descriptors is required.

Key elements for comparison

Because of these differences both referencing exercises started with analyses to find common factors which could structure the comparisons.

For the SCQF-EQF referencing an initial comparison was undertaken to identify common elements. For the CQFW-EQF referencing, which was more complex since it involved two sets of descriptors, the starting point was a thorough analysis of the EQF descriptors to identify key elements would give further insight into the meaning of the EQF levels and provide a basis for referencing and this is probably the best approach.

Initially eleven key elements were identified but these were reduced to five to ensure that there would be sufficient evidence to make a judgement on each:
- 'Knowledge' – including the content of understanding and awareness
- 'Skills' – mainly intellectual, such as the handling of information and, at the higher levels, research skills
- 'Problems' – including the use of judgement to choose courses of action, methods, materials, etc
- 'Complexity' (of work/study) – mainly related to the descriptions of *tasks*, *activities* and *contexts*
- 'Responsibility' – including accountability, autonomy, supervision and management

For almost all of these elements, the evidence for matching came from more than one domain. The exception was 'Responsibility', which came from a single domain in each set of descriptors. This confirmed the view that an unmediated comparison of domains was not the best approach, but also went against the internal integrity of the domains.

Issues arising from the comparisons

The comparisons were affected by a number of general issues which make direct and unsupported comparisons of NQF and EQF levels difficult. These were common to both the SCQF-EQF and CQFW-EQF referencing and include the following:
- The domains of the NQF descriptors may be significantly different in form and conceptualisation from the domains of the EQF.
- The evidence for matching of specific elements are likely to combine content and process and so require significant interpretation.
- Gradation in the domains of the descriptors is not always continuous and not always clear: there may be gaps (a key element appears at levels 2 and 4, but not at 3), or overlaps (the key element is described in exactly the same terms at two or more levels), or the characterisations of a key element at adjacent levels may be very subtle - for

example, skill outcomes in the EQF include *solving routine problems* (level 2), *solving problems* (level 3), and *solving specific problems* (level 4).

- A key element, or some aspect of a key element, which is shared between the NQF and EQF descriptors (eg supervisory responsibilities or research skills) may be introduced or phased out at quite different levels in the different frameworks.
- NQF descriptors use the same descriptive word or phrase as the EQF, but apply it at different levels, to different aspects of a key element and/or to different key elements.

In these and other ways, the referencing process is left looking for some external reference which can explain the meaning or intention of the levels and give a basis for interpreting the descriptors.

The importance of external references

Although each referencing exercise was carried out mainly by examining the level descriptors, part of the work also involved looking at ways in which the *meaning* or intent of the levels in the different frameworks could be compared.

For both the SCQF and the CQFW, the meaning can be found in the qualifications and pathways they contain. These provide external references which can make sense of the descriptors to both experts and non-experts.

One well-founded external reference is that which comes through the links established between the upper levels of the EQF and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, established through the so-called Dublin Descriptors. This shows where qualifications linked to the various Bologna cycles sit within the EQF, allowing these to be used as references. However, this is the only clear link to specific qualifications or types of qualification associated with the EQF, apart from an ambiguous reference to basic qualifications, 'for example school leaving certificates' – presumably elementary school – associated with level 1.

Conclusion

Frameworks can be compared using level descriptors and this can be done in a number of different ways. Whatever the approach taken, however, the process of comparison will require interpretation, and this will leave the findings open to challenge. Lack of external references makes interpreting the EQF descriptors open to variation and the development of such references, for example using well understood types of qualification, is needed to improve the reliability of the process.

Further Reading

Coles, M, and Oates, T (2005): *European reference levels for education and training, promoting credit transfer and mutual trust* (CEDEFOP, Luxembourg)

References

European Commission (2008): *The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)* (EC, Brussels)

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Hart, J (2008) *Report on the Compatibility of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework* (SCQF Partnership, Glasgow)

SCQF Partnership (2007): *Handbook for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF Partnership, Glasgow)

Welsh Assembly Government (2006): *CQFW Handbook* (WAG, Funding Council for Wales, Cardiff)

About this study

This *Briefing* is based on work undertaken to reference the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to the EQF. It also draws indirectly on work to compare the CQFW with the SCQF and to develop National Qualifications Frameworks based on the EQF in a number of countries.