

Proposal for paper at the INQAAHE 11 – 13 April 2013

- Conference sub-theme: 4 - National qualifications frameworks and their links to Quality Assurance
- Topic covered in the paper:
 - Approaches to the design of national qualifications
 - National qualifications frameworks as a tool for recognition of qualifications
 - National qualifications frameworks place in quality assurance and as transparency tools.
 - Models of collaboration among partners in higher education involved with national qualification frameworks, including consultation processes.
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- Organization of the author(s): Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education,
- Audio-visual requirements: PowerPoint projector,

Abstract

Higher education (HE) is a devolved responsibility across the four nations of the UK. All nations have significant cross-border mobility in HE and progression between the vocational education and training (VET) and HE sectors.

Two, compatible, HE qualifications frameworks operate across the four nations. They are aligned with each other and have, individually, been verified as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA).

Both HE qualifications frameworks form an essential component of internal and external quality assurance processes operating within UK HE .

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the UK body for safeguarding standards in HE, has developed, reviewed and revised, promoted and negotiated the alignment and compatibility of national qualifications frameworks to ensure that ‘qualifications can cross boundaries’.

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

Outline

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

Two, compatible, national higher education qualifications frameworks operate across the four nations; one for Scotland and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each country has a complementary vocational education and training qualifications framework. In the case of Scotland and Wales the higher education and vocational education and training frameworks are integrated into single national credit and qualifications frameworks but in England and Northern Ireland the frameworks are currently separate. Individually, the higher education qualification frameworks operating in each country reflect the differing political, social and educational contexts. Together, the higher education and vocational education and training frameworks form a complex matrix of information and guidance about UK qualifications.

All frameworks are essential elements of internal and external quality assurance arrangements operating within the UK.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) is the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education which leads to an award of a UK higher education provider. It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other and what the general public can expect of all higher education providers. Part A of the Quality Code specifies the expectations at the national, subject and programme levels which all higher education providers are required to meet when setting and maintaining threshold academic standards for qualifications.

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The national qualifications frameworks for higher education, essential elements of Part A of the Quality Code, were first established in 2001 through a process of extensive consultation. They have subsequently been reviewed and revised in consultation with the sector, and self-certified as compatible with the The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA).

Higher education providers and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the UK body for safeguarding standards in higher education, use the national qualifications frameworks as an essential part of internal and external quality assurance processes. QAA provides a judgement on whether HE providers meet the national expectations set out in the Quality Code .

In order to promote transparency, the QAA has also negotiated the alignment of the higher education qualifications frameworks with other qualifications frameworks operating across the UK and its close neighbour, the Republic of Ireland. These negotiations resulted in a simple guide '*Qualifications can cross boundaries*'; which provides information about the ways qualifications across all sectors are organised in the UK and Republic of Ireland; broad comparisons between qualifications and their levels for each country, and how UK and Irish qualifications frameworks relate to qualifications frameworks in Europe. There is regular liaison about the relationships between the various qualifications frameworks and their alignment. This work has achieved:

- Improved clarity about higher education qualifications and how they relate to each other,
- A clearer understanding of the national qualifications frameworks operating across the four countries of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.
- Clear information and a simple guide about the way learners can potentially move within or between qualifications frameworks
- Confirmation of the compatibility, and hence recognition and acceptability, of higher education awards across national and international boundaries

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

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

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