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**The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework:
A case study of a very "early starter"**

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Skills and
Employability
Department

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The Skills and Employability Department's e-versions of country studies on NQFs are designed to disseminate its main findings of research initiatives, which are intended to encourage exchange of ideas and to stimulate debate. The views expressed are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the ILO.

Foreword

According to an ILO survey, some 70 countries are in the process of developing or implementing some kind of a qualifications framework. A framework is intended to improve understanding of qualifications (degrees, certificates, or recognition of experiential-based learning) in terms of the information they convey to an employer about prospective workers' competencies. Frameworks are also intended to explain how qualifications relate to each other and thus can be combined to build pathways within and across occupations and education and training sectors. Many countries are trying to improve the relevance, quality and flexibility of their education and training systems, and many of them are looking to qualification frameworks as a tool for bringing about this reform. Development of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) are also motivated by the emergence of regional frameworks, such as in Europe or in the Caribbean, which aim to help employers and institutions of higher education recognize the equivalency of qualifications earned in different countries. With these goals in mind, the development of NQFs has been widely supported by multilateral and bilateral agencies.

However, very little has been documented about the effectiveness of NQFs in bringing about change in skills development systems or about their actual use by employers, workers, and training providers. In 2009, the ILO's Skills and Employability Department launched its Qualifications Framework Research Project to study the impact and implementation of NQFs in developing countries to help fill this knowledge gap and to be able to provide more evidence-based advice to member States.

The research programme, comprising some 16 country case studies and a review of academic literature on the NQFs, provides an international comparison of the design and purpose of NQFs in developing countries and an empirical analysis of their use and impact based on the experience of those involved in their design and use. The study aims to understand to what extent establishing an NQF is the best strategy for achieving a country's desired policy objectives, what approaches to qualifications frameworks and their implementation are most appropriate in which contexts and for which purposes, what level of resources (human and other) and what complimentary policies might be required to achieve the policy objectives associated with them, and what might be a realistic assessment of the likely outcomes.

This paper is one of five case studies conducted as part of the research and appears as a chapter in Employment Working Paper No. 45 done in 2009, *Learning from the first qualifications frameworks*, which consisted of: Chapter 1 on the National Vocational Qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, written by Professor Michael Young (Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London); Chapter 2 on the NQF in Scotland, written by David Raffe (Professor of Sociology of Education, University of Edinburgh); Chapter 3 on the NQF in New Zealand, written by Dr. Rob Strathdee (Head of School of Education Policy and Implementation at the University of Wellington); Chapter 4, written by Leesa Wheelahan (Senior Lecturer in Adult and Vocational Education, Griffith University); and Chapter 5, written by Stephanie Allais (now postdoctoral fellow at the University of Edinburgh). A companion Working Paper (No. 44) (Allais et al. 2009), *Researching NQFs: Some conceptual issues*, addresses some of the fundamental conceptual issues involved in research on NQFs in order to broaden the debate about their role in skills systems. A full analysis of the new case studies and the policy lessons derived from them was published in 2010 as *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*, which, along with other background reports and publications, can be found on the Skills and Employability Department website's theme of ILO research programme on

implementation and impact of NQFs at: http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/projects/lang-en/WCMS_126588/index.htm.

As a Research Associate in the Skills and Employability Department in 2009, Dr. Stephanie Allais has led the development of the research and overseen the country studies. Professor Michael Young has served as senior research advisor, and Professor David Raffe gave advice and support to the project. The research programme has been carried out in cooperation with the European Training Foundation. I would also like to thank Jo-Ann Bakker for preparing the manuscript for publication.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACDP	Advanced Courses Development Programme
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
COSHEP	Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals
ECVET	European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ET	Education and training
ETF	European Training Foundation
HEIs	higher education institutions
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
ITC	Information and Communication Technology
NC	National Certificate
NQFs	national qualifications frameworks
NVQs	National Vocational Qualifications
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SACCA	Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access
SCOTCAT	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SQVs	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
VET	vocational education and training

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The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: A case study of a very ‘early starter’

1. Introduction and overview

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was formally launched in 2001. It is a comprehensive credit-based framework with 12 levels, intended to accommodate all qualifications and assessed learning in Scotland. It aims to support access to learning and to make the education and training system more transparent. It aspires to become the ‘national language’ of learning in Scotland. It is a voluntary framework, led by a partnership which initially comprised two higher education bodies: the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA: the main awarding body for school and college qualifications), the Scottish Government and two higher education bodies, and later included the colleges (multi-purpose institutions which, along with the universities, are responsible for most public, institution-based, vocational and general post-school education). Qualifications in the framework must be credit-rated, which means that each unit must be described in terms of a volume of learning (credit) at a given level of the framework. This in turn requires that units and qualifications are expressed in terms of learning outcomes, but the framework does not impose a narrow concept of outcome or competence. The SCQF has a ‘loose’ design, although it embraces sub-frameworks which are more tightly specified.

These features differ from many other NQFs. Researchers have contrasted ‘enabling’ or ‘communications’ frameworks, which are voluntary, loosely specified, modest in ambition and implemented through bottom-up procedures, with ‘regulatory’ or ‘transformational’ frameworks which are compulsory, tightly specified and led by governments or central agencies with the aim of reforming or transforming education and training (e.g. Young 2005, Allais 2007). Different analysts have used different terms and criteria to present this contrast. Figure 1 below lists features of different types of NQF which broadly correspond to other researchers’ typologies. It compares two ideal types, a communications framework and a transformational framework; but it also suggests that these two types define the poles of a continuum and that many NQFs fall between these poles and more closely resemble what Figure 1 calls a “reforming framework”. The SCQF, by contrast, appears as a relatively extreme case, and lies at the communications end of the continuum.

This view in turn is associated with what I shall call the celebratory account of the Scottish framework. The SCQF is widely perceived as a relatively successful framework. It is at an advanced stage of implementation, at least as measured by the proportion of learning that it covers; it is associated with positive developments in access, progression and transfer; it has contributed to a more transparent, flexible system; and, above all, it has retained the support of all sectors of education and training. These achievements have enabled the SCQF to assume an almost moral authority among NQFs and to become a source of lessons to others. And these lessons attribute the SCQF’s relative success to its nature as a communications framework. Thus, the SCQF experience is perceived to show that an NQF should not expect to achieve major change in education and training, except as part of a broader suite of policies; that a comprehensive framework needs a loose design; that the engagement and ownership of stakeholders, and especially of education and training providers and awarding bodies, is necessary for success; and that the implementation and impact of an NQF take time.

Figure 1. A typology of NQFs

Type of NQF	Communications	Reforming	Transformational
Starting point	Existing ET* system	Existing ET system	Future ET system
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To increase transparency; ▪ To provide tool for rationalizing system, increasing coherence, facilitating access transfer and progression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To achieve specific reforms, e.g. fill gaps, enhance quality, extend access transfer and progression; ▪ To provide tool for rationalizing system, increasing coherence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To transform ET and lead development of new system
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loose, varies across sub-frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tighter, but varies across sub-frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tight, central specification imposed more uniformly
Leadership and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voluntary ▪ 'Bottom up' ▪ ET institutions share leadership ▪ Substantial decision-making at level of sub-framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compulsory ▪ 'Top-down': led by central agency/govt. ▪ ET institutions as key partners Control may vary across sub-frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compulsory ▪ 'Top down': led by central agency/govt. ▪ ET institutions among partners ▪ Centralized control
Expected role in change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tool for change: requires complementary drivers to ensure tool is used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Drives specific changes; requires complementary drivers for other impacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expected to drive transformation of system

Source: adapted from Raffe (2009a). *ET = Education and Training

Along with other commentators, I have contributed to this celebratory account of the SCQF. I have drawn lessons of the kinds summarized above and argued that they were applicable to NQFs elsewhere (e.g. Raffe 2007; Raffe et al. 2007-08). However, an alternative perspective, which I shall call the “sceptical account” of the SCQF, challenges the celebratory account in three respects.

- First, it points out that much of the SCQF’s achievement can be attributed, not to the framework per se, but to the series of reforms which preceded it. These paved the way for the SCQF by introducing such features as unitization, credit and a reasonably coherent set of levels. They also introduced concepts of learning outcomes across much of education and training, and supported changes in pedagogy and content, for example updating vocational qualifications and aligning them more closely with labour-market needs.
- Second, these reforms did not all correspond to the ideal type of a communications framework. Many more closely resembled reforming, if not transformational, frameworks: they were compulsory, introduced by government or central agencies to reform aspects of the education and training system and to establish more or less tightly-specified sectoral frameworks; some of which survive as sub-frameworks of the SCQF.

- Third, the additional impact of bringing these sub-frameworks together in the comprehensive SCQF has been relatively modest. The SCQF has linked the SQA portfolio and university degrees, the sub-frameworks owned by its main partners, but it has been slow to accommodate other qualifications, and evidence of direct impact on objectives such as increased access and transfer is limited. This sceptical account suggests that the lessons from the celebratory account need to be qualified. The SCQF does not necessarily demonstrate the superiority of a communications framework if many of its achievements were the product, not of the communications SCQF, but of the reforming frameworks which preceded it.

Both accounts, I will argue, provide insights into the SCQF and what other countries may learn from it. Moreover, the sceptical account draws attention to the sequence of reforms that have created the SCQF. The lessons from the Scottish experience are not to be drawn from the SCQF alone; the earlier reforms are a further rich source of policy learning. It also draws attention to the way the process has consisted of a shifting balance between reforms which developed sub-frameworks and reforms which brought two or more sub-frameworks into a more coherent structure.

Structure of the paper

After summarizing relevant features of the Scottish context in section 2, this paper presents brief analyses of earlier developments that preceded the SCQF, in section 3. It then provides a somewhat more detailed account of the development and implementation of the SCQF itself, in section 4. Finally, section 5 draws out some issues from the experience of the whole sequence of reforms.

2. Context

Scotland occupies the northern third of the land mass of Great Britain. A large proportion of its population of 5 million lives in the central belt, which includes the large conurbation centred on Glasgow. However, large areas of the north-west and the south are more sparsely populated, or consist of islands, requiring different models of educational provision. Traditionally an emigrant country, Scotland has recently attracted larger numbers of immigrants, with a net annual influx of more than 20,000 in the mid-2000s, including migrants from new member states of the European Union. This inflow appears to be declining in the current recession.¹

Scotland has been part of Great Britain, and subsequently the United Kingdom, since 1707. Its education system - already more developed than that of England and shaped by the Protestant Reformation led by John Knox - remained separate; from 1872 to 1999 Scottish schools and colleges were administered by a 'territorial' department of the Government of the United Kingdom, eventually known as the Scottish Office. Universities and industrial training came under Scottish Office control in 1992 and 1994 respectively. This 'administrative devolution' permitted a considerable degree of Scottish autonomy, exercised by an administrative and professional elite which included senior professionals (led by the Inspectorate), civil servants in central government and the directors of education in local authorities, which run schools and ran the colleges before 1992 (Paterson 2000).

In 1999, the Scottish Parliament was established with devolved powers including education and training. The Scottish Office was replaced by the Scottish Executive

¹ GRO 2009.

(renamed Scottish Government in 2007) which had similar functions (at least with respect to education and training) but was now accountable to the Scottish Parliament. This has resulted in a modest divergence in education policy between Scotland and England. The Scottish Parliament is elected every four years by a proportional representation system, which makes it unlikely that any party will achieve a majority of seats. The first two administrations, in 1999-2003 and 2003-07, were coalitions of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties; in 2007 the Scottish National Party formed a minority government.

Electoral arrangements may accentuate pre-existing styles of policy-making. The 'received wisdom' is that policy-making in Scottish education is based on 'consensus, partnership and consultation' (Humes 2008, p. 71). It also relies on informality and flexibility: it tends to avoid regulation, compulsion and entitlement. However, informality of control is not the same as absence of control, nor do partnership and consultation mean that all partners have an equal voice. The administrative and professional elite includes provider interests and a degree of 'producer capture'; it aims to be consensual but it is consensus among this elite, rather than among a broader public, which matters most. This policy style results in what might be described as progressive conservatism: it pursues evolutionary, inclusive and progressive reform, but not at the expense of challenging existing hierarchies and power relationships. However, a legacy of past constitutional structures is the relatively weak representation of employer interests. Employer bodies have generally been supportive of education and training developments but they have not, until very recently, been conspicuous among its drivers.

Three other aspects of the context of Scottish educational policy-making are relevant to the development of the SCQF. The first is scale. The Scottish policy community is relatively small. The leading members of this community can meet each other in the same room - and may meet again the next day, wearing different hats. If consensus does not already exist, it is easier to pursue it through face-to-face discussion. It is also easier for two or three individuals who share a vision to drive it forward. The second aspect is institutional uniformity. The number of different types of institutions of Scottish education is relatively small, and organization and standards tend to be consistent among institutions of each type. This reduces the number of interests that have to be consulted, and contributes further to the informal, partnership style of policy-making. It also contributes to its centralized character: for example, school-college collaboration can more easily be discussed at national level than in a diverse system such as England where there are many different types of schools and different types of colleges. The third aspect is the tradition of public provision. There is a strong expectation that education should be provided free, for all citizens and in the public interest. The legitimacy both of local government, which directly administers schools, and of the central government which leads policy-making, is accepted to a greater extent than in many countries influenced by neo-liberal ideas.

Schooling is compulsory from the age of 5 to 16, and there is an entitlement to free part-time pre-school provision for 3- and 4-year-olds. Children attend primary school for seven years followed by four to six years of secondary school. About 5 per cent of pupils (more in Edinburgh) attend private schools. The others attend schools run by elected local authorities, which are free, comprehensive and co-educational. Parents have a choice of school, but children from the designated catchment area have priority. The school curriculum is mainly general and leads to single-subject Standard Grade qualifications taken at the end of fourth year at age 15/16. About two-thirds of pupils stay at school for a fifth year (to age 17), and nearly a half stay for a sixth year (to age 18). Pupils attempt further single-subject National Qualifications, available at a range of levels, in fifth and sixth year; those at Higher and Advanced Higher level provide the main currency for entry to higher education. Most undergraduates in higher education institutions (HEIs) take 4-year Honours degrees, but some take other qualifications including the more traditional 3-year Ordinary degree. Nearly half the age group enters higher education, but nearly a third of these enter a college rather than an HEI, typically to take a short-cycle Higher National Certificate or Diploma (HNC or HND) awarded by the SQA. The origin and development of many of these qualifications are described in section 3 below.

Nearly a quarter of school leavers enter a full-time course at a college; others study part-time at college, possibly as part of a Modern Apprenticeship or training programme. Scotland's 43 colleges are multi-purpose institutions providing vocational and general opportunities to learners aged 16 upwards, and to school pupils aged 14 plus. More than half of students are aged 25 or over. Colleges have a tradition of access and responsiveness to employer and individual needs, and their courses vary in length, in mode of delivery, in content and in level. Nearly a quarter of college activity is at higher education level, consisting mainly of HNCs, HNDs and shorter professional awards. Other courses lead to a variety of qualifications including group awards based on National Qualifications, Scottish Vocational Qualifications and awards of employer and professional organizations or of other awarding bodies such as City and Guilds.

Other learning provision includes workplace training, adult education and community-based learning, including by voluntary organizations and local authorities. A new body, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), was established in 2008 to manage government training programmes, the all-age careers service and labour-market intelligence. As in the rest of the United Kingdom, employer engagement in education, training and skills development has been a continuing challenge. A UK-wide network of Sector Skills Councils is intended to represent employers' interests and skill needs and to determine occupational standards. Some of their functions are specific to England; in Scotland their roles include representing employers in the design of learning and qualifications (Scottish Government 2007). Their effectiveness is variable, as is the support they receive from employers.

The Scottish economy is largely based on service industries, and financial services, tourism, health and education are major sources of employment. Many traditional primary and manufacturing industries such as coal, steel and shipbuilding largely disappeared in the late twentieth century. The labour market is substantially integrated with that of the United Kingdom as a whole. It is flexible, with weak regulation and weak occupational labour markets. National occupational standards, on which vocational qualifications are based, are defined for the whole United Kingdom. Most do not require a qualification as a 'licence to practice'; exceptions include most liberal professions and occupations affected by health and safety issues. The number of regulated occupations has increased, and new qualification requirements have been introduced in areas such as social care and the private security industry.

The rhetoric of the knowledge economy and the need for skills has been influential in Scottish policy discourses. Scottish skill levels are higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom - at least, as crudely measured by qualifications - but productivity growth is lower. The current Scottish Government has therefore focused policy attention on the demand and especially the utilization of skills rather than on the supply, and has seen the SCQF as an instrument for pursuing this (Scottish Government 2007). It has also continued previous governments' concerns with the high proportion of young Scots not in education, employment or training - one of the highest proportions in the OECD (Scottish Executive 2006). This problem reflects low participation in education and training rather than low rates of employment, and it has focused policy attention on engaging young people for as long as they remain in compulsory education and providing a range of opportunities for them when they leave. Unemployment is growing again in the current recession, especially among the less skilled. It is geographically concentrated, like other factors associated with poverty and social deprivation. Glasgow and other former industrial centres in the west are most affected. An index of multiple deprivation applied to data zones in the 2001 Census showed that more than half of Glasgow belonged to the 15 per cent most deprived zones nationally.

3. Previous reforms

In this section, I review the experience of the reforms that preceded the launch of the SCQF. Readers who simply wish to identify the key points are invited to turn to the end of the section where the main themes from this experience are summarized; they are also presented schematically in Figure 2.

Standard Grade: Universal certification at 16

Standard Grades, 2-year process-based school courses for 14-16-year-olds, were phased in from 1984. Each subject is separately certificated and students typically take eight subjects. Most subjects are available at three levels, and students can attempt the qualifications at two adjacent levels in order to have a fall-back if they fail at the higher level. Grades are awarded on a six-point scale - two for each level of award - with a combination of examinations and other assessment modes based on 'grade-related criteria'.

The main purposes of the Standard Grade reform were to update the curriculum, encourage more active learning and introduce 'assessment for all' - the title of one of the two 1977 reports which provided its blueprint. Existing qualifications for 16-year-olds had been designed for the top 30 per cent of the ability range; after the minimum school-leaving age was raised to 16 in 1973 a large minority of pupils languished in 'non-Certificate' classes, outside the 'moral community' of the school (Gray et al. 1983). The development programme for Standard Grade was prolonged: early encouragement for school-based development was reined back in favour of a more streamlined, coherent approach. The complex assessment arrangements and the threatened increase in workloads led to teacher resistance and a compromise in which the original plans were revised by a 'simplification committee' (Simpson 2006).

Standard Grades did not constitute a qualifications framework in the modern sense but they contributed the principle of comprehensive coverage, as well as concepts of criterion-referenced assessment and levels of learning, to the Scottish qualifications system. They made the system more inclusive and led to a slight narrowing of social inequalities in attainment (Gamoran 1996); they remain well-regarded among many Scottish educationists.

Action Plan/National Certificate: National modular framework for non-advanced 'vocational' education

Published in January 1983 and largely implemented in 1984-85, the Action Plan introduced a modular framework, based on a single national catalogue of some 2000 modules, to replace nearly all non-advanced vocational education in colleges and to provide opportunities for learners in schools and on training schemes (SED 1983). A single national body (the Scottish Vocational Education Council: SCOTVEC) was established to manage the catalogue and award the certificates. Each module was of notional 40-hour length (with some half- and double-modules). A full-time student might take up to 20 modules in a year; to begin with, modules were listed individually on a single National Certificate (NC), although colleges often gave each programme a group title. Modules were not described by levels: this was considered to be inconsistent with the prevailing concept of outcomes. Modules were defined by performance outcomes and associated performance criteria; the module descriptors suggested appropriate learning and teaching approaches and contexts of learning, but module contents were not specified in detail and lecturers and teachers had substantial discretion in how to 'flesh them out' each module. NC modules were internally assessed - that is, by college staff rather than external examiners - with a simple pass/fail outcome. The Action Plan aimed to integrate education and training and preserve broad, general education within vocational programmes; it included generic modules such as personal and social development as well as general subjects such as communication, mathematics, languages and (over time) other more 'academic' subjects. As a result, NC

modules were used extensively in schools, either to complement the academic curriculum or to fill gaps, especially among learners whose earlier attainments made it inadvisable to attempt many Highers. They were also used to certificate young people on youth training schemes, whose numbers had mushroomed due to youth unemployment. Initially intended for 16-18s, they were also used in curricular developments for 14-16 year-olds and they proved popular with adults as they provided national recognition for small units of learning.

'The move to an outcomes-based qualifications system which was at the heart of Action Plan seemed logically ... to rule out distinctions based on the age of the learner or the place of learning - an innovation in policy terms.' (Hart and Tuck 2007, p. 107)

The Action Plan had several purposes. It addressed low levels of post-16 participation by providing more opportunities especially for 'less academic' learners. It responded to high youth unemployment levels by encouraging participation in education and providing opportunities for certification for training schemes. It aimed to update the college curriculum, and to provide a flexible structure that would make it responsive to future changes in labour market needs. It similarly aimed to change pedagogies, and to move away from didactic approaches. It aimed to rationalize provision, by simplifying the array of vocational qualifications and providing a modular structure which could reduce duplication of provision. Underlying all these aims, it sought to increase central control over the system, partly at the expense of institutions. Modules were 'institutionally versatile' and no longer owned by colleges and departments - although institutions could develop their own modules. In addition, at a time when the boundary between (Scottish-controlled) education and (UK-controlled) training was increasingly blurred, it was an attempt by Scottish authorities to assert control over vocational education and training (Raffe 1985).

The Action Plan was education-led, and employers played a secondary role (mainly through representation on SCOTVEC's sector boards). It was a top-down reform, led by the Inspectorate which was then located within the government. Colleges had little choice but to comply. A threatened boycott by college lecturers only delayed the process of making modules available to private training providers (Philip 1992). The reform also exploited the colleges' reputation of responsiveness and flexibility. The speedy introduction of modules - 18 months from policy document to implementation - contrasts with the much longer time-lag associated with Standard Grades.

The reform introduced a more up-to-date curriculum and created a structure which enabled it to respond more flexibly to future changes in labour market demands and policy environments. It encouraged a shift from didactic pedagogies to practical approaches, although this varied across colleges and subject areas. If staff interpreted the modular assessment requirements too narrowly, the learning experience could become fragmented (Scottish Office 1991). In schools, the modules met important curricular needs, but they had lower status than academic courses and they were often offered on an arbitrary basis, depending on staff availability, rather than student need. The contrasting ethos and pedagogies of modules and academic courses further undermined the coherence of the curricular experience. The aspiration that the NC would enhance access, transfer and progression was only realized to a limited extent. Research on the Action Plan coined the terms 'intrinsic logic' and 'institutional logic' to express this finding (Raffe 1988). The 'intrinsic logic' of a qualifications framework may promote 'seamless' access, credit transfer and progression through the modular system; but in practice, participation and progression continued to be determined by 'institutional logics' associated with educational institutions and the wider social context. The NC framework straddled institutional boundaries, but these boundaries seemed as important as ever; the probability of taking modules, the pattern of learning and the progression prospects associated with them, continued to be determined primarily by institutional location. Credit transfer was limited (many young people had to repeat school modules in college) and patterns of inequality remained substantially unchanged. Nor was there much evidence of greater efficiency

achieved through reducing duplication; the number of modules in the catalogue was under constant pressure to increase (Croxford et al. 1991; Howieson 1992).

Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs): A national framework of competence-based occupational qualifications

SVQs will be discussed more briefly, as many of the issues parallel those of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) described in the country study for England. NVQs were introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom in 1986. They were outcomes-based, unitized, occupational qualifications, based on National Occupational Standards and allocated to one of five levels. They were not initially extended to Scotland because their declared purpose of rationalizing vocational qualifications had already been addressed by the Action Plan. They were based on a narrower concept of competence than NC modules and they were more tightly specified; among other requirements assessment had to be carried out under workplace conditions. These differences, together with their apparent rejection of the NC philosophy of integrating education and training, and the fact that their design and their underpinning standards were determined at United Kingdom level led to strong opposition to their introduction in Scotland - especially from SCOTVEC (Raggatt and Williams 1999). However, Scottish protests were overruled and in 1989 it was announced that SVQs would be developed along similar lines to NVQs.

SVQs and NVQs share a common history of successive reviews and revisions. As in England, they were criticized for their narrow specification, over-assessment, cost and bureaucracy, and their implementation was largely driven by the requirement that they be offered on publicly-funded training programmes (Robinson 1998). Despite the rhetoric that they were employer-driven and work-based, the colleges played a large part in their delivery (Canning 1998). However, over time they have found their niche and they have become a more settled and accepted part of the Scottish qualification landscape. Ironically, SVQs are surviving in Scotland even as NVQs in England are being subsumed within the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

The Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP): Unitization of HNCs and HNDs (short-cycle higher education awards)

The ACDP, launched after a consultation in 1987, extended the principles of the Action Plan to SCOTVEC's short-cycle higher education awards, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs), delivered mainly in colleges (SCOTVEC 1988). These were redesigned on the basis of 40-hour unit credits. In contrast to NC, the group award titles (HNC and HND) were retained, although certificates could also be awarded for individual units. HNCs and HNDs had previously been distinct awards for part-time and full-time study respectively, but it now became possible to build on a 12-credit HNC in order to achieve a 30-credit HND. An agreement with the awarding body for non-university Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) permitted similar articulation with degrees (HEQC 1993).

The programme's purposes were similar to those of the Action Plan and were in many respects its natural consequence. When SCOTVEC was created, it took responsibility for HNC and HNDs alongside the Action Plan. These awards were poorly articulated with the NC; their specification differed between the pre-existing awarding bodies; they were traditional in format, assessed largely by examinations; and their content was perceived to be out of date. The programme also aimed to promote innovation at the college level by providing 'significant devolution' of responsibility for curriculum content, programme planning and assessment to the colleges (SCOTVEC 1988, p. 1). It was led by SCOTVEC and combined central and local activities.

The reform was generally welcomed. The evaluation of the development programme found that college staff and other participants particularly valued the opportunity to articulate with degree provision, although views on articulation with the NC were more mixed (Black et al. 1992). However, this increased flexibility created a dilemma which subsequent reports would highlight: the easier it became to progress from an HND to a degree, the harder it became to preserve the HND's character as an exit qualification leading into employment. In the event, different HNDs tended to develop different emphases, on educational or labour market progression respectively. The devolution of control over content promoted innovation in colleges but led to a diversity of HNCs and HNDs which threatened their national currency. The next round of reform, in the early 2000s, would rationalize HNCs and HNDs, reduce the number of titles and establish greater national consistency in content.

The Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SCOTCAT): A national credit and accumulation system for higher education

The SCOTCAT Scheme was launched in 1991 as the credit system for higher education in Scotland. It established a currency of one credit equal to ten hours' study time (later redefined as the notional learning time for the average student to achieve the outcomes). The normal workload of each year of a full-time programme was assumed to comprise 1,200 hours or 120 credit points. Each course unit was given a credit-rating of four to 120 points, and assigned to one of five levels of higher education study: four corresponding to the four-year Honours degree and a fifth for Masters. Minimum volumes and levels of credit points were specified for each type of university award (CNAA 1991).

SCOTCAT was initiated by the Scottish office of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the body which awarded degrees gained in public sector HEIs before they became universities in 1992. Thereafter it was jointly owned by the organization responsible for quality assurance in higher education (now the Quality Assurance Agency) and HEIs (through their representative body, currently Universities Scotland), who agreed to cooperate to develop credit-based learning (McGoldrick 1999). Its initial focus was 'to facilitate inter-institutional student mobility, to promote work with employers and professional bodies, and to offer student guidance and academic staff development' (HEQC 1993, p. 99).

By 1992, all HEIs had signed up to SCOTCAT and agreed to modify their provision to fit with it. At that time its use was mainly confined to relatively self-contained CAT schemes in a few HEIs, mainly those formerly involved with the CNAA. There followed a period of rapid development focused especially on modular undergraduate programmes and on professional qualifications and continuing professional development in health, social work and teacher education. Institutions increasingly used the framework to organize and describe their programmes, to support mixed-mode delivery and to provide links and routes to other award frameworks and work-based learning. However, although SCOTCAT - and subsequently the SCQF - moved credit-based learning from a few niches to the mainstream of higher education, the uses of the provision continue to be highly variable across HEIs (McGoldrick 1999). To use the concepts developed in relation to the Action Plan, we may say that despite the common intrinsic logic of the SCOTCAT framework, its application varied according to the diverse institutional logics of Scottish higher education.

Development was faster than elsewhere in the United Kingdom (HEQC 1993). This partly reflected the relatively small scale and cohesiveness of Scottish higher education, especially after funding and governance were devolved to Scotland in 1992. Despite their diversity Scottish HEIs were able to aggregate their interests and act in concert, a factor which later proved critical for the SCQF. An additional factor was the large sector of HNC and HND provision in colleges, which provided newer universities with a potential source of recruitment.

Higher Still: A 'unified curriculum and assessment system' of new National Qualifications for post-16 learning in schools and colleges

Higher Still, implemented from 1999, replaced academic upper-secondary courses and 'vocational' NC modules with a unified framework (Scottish Office 1994). Its design was a hybrid of the previous qualifications, based on units which could be grouped into courses and a combination of internal unit assessment and external course assessment. Units and courses were structured as a 'climbing frame' with seven levels: the top two levels corresponded to existing upper-secondary courses, but new levels were added to make the system more inclusive. The original plans proposed five levels, but the bottom level was split into three, of which the lowest level, for which no level descriptors are provided, includes provision for learners with profound and severe learning difficulties.

Higher Still aimed to provide 'opportunity for all', and especially for less-qualified 16-year-olds who were continuing in education in increasing numbers. It built on NC modules but aimed to address their limitations: their low status, their arbitrary provision and the incoherent mixture of pedagogies and assessment approaches arising from the combination of NC modules and more traditional academic courses in the post-16 school curriculum. It also aimed to promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning and to promote the five 'core skills' of communication, numeracy, Information and Communication Technology (ITC) skills, problem-solving and working with others. It reflected a 'unifying logic' which drove greater coherence and integration in post-compulsory education (Raffe 2003a). Its aims and strategy attracted wide support, partly because it appealed to both left and right of the political spectrum. To the left, it offered wider opportunities, greater equality and an extension of the principles of comprehensive education to post-compulsory learning; to the right, it promised choice and flexibility, responsiveness and the promotion of vocational learning.

Despite this broad support, Higher Still was education-driven, even more than the Action Plan. Employer interests were supportive but their main influence was to maintain the priority for core skills. SVQs and most work-based learning were not included in the new unified framework. To support the development process, the Government undertook the largest consultation exercise in the history of Scottish education. Nevertheless, the more powerful academic interests had most influence over the reform's conception and development, and many college and vocational interests felt disappointed by the outcome (Raffe et al. 2007). Moreover, the need to develop a comprehensive framework to cover all levels, types and locations of post-16 education tended to disenfranchise participants who could represent their own sector's interest but lacked the resources or the frame of reference to consider the system-wide issues (Raffe et al. 2002). The development and implementation processes were widely perceived as 'top-down', and there was resentment that key elements of the proposals - notably the assessment arrangements - were not put out to consultation.

SCOTVEC was merged with the schools examination body to create the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), which assumed responsibility for the new qualifications. The first year of implementation (1999-2000) culminated in an 'exams crisis' which led to delays and inaccuracies in the publication of results. This was caused by a combination of circumstances in which the increased assessment burden and complex assessment model were factors. The resulting political crisis led to recriminations and accusations that schools and colleges had been insufficiently involved in developing the reforms. The outcomes included a re-balancing of policy-making influence, in favour of key stakeholders and especially the main educational providers, measures to reduce the assessment burden, and a growing perception that unified frameworks needed to be loosely specified to accommodate different types of learning.

Research on Higher Still concluded that it did indeed provide ‘opportunity for all’ in the sense of providing learning opportunities that were perceived to have value, status and relevance to a wider range of young people (Raffe et al. 2007). It was also associated with a reduction in social inequalities in participation and attainment at the 16-18 stage (Croxford 2009). However, although new National Qualifications improved access, they had less impact on progression. Designing, constructing and implementing a flexible ‘climbing frame’ through which all learners could progress at their own pace, mode and direction proved harder than the simple metaphor suggested (Raffe et al. 2007). Different dimensions of flexibility - such as flexible delivery and flexible pathways - were in tension with each other (Howieson et al. 2002). Less-qualified young people continued to fail and drop out in large numbers, despite taking courses that were better tailored to their needs. And despite offering formal parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning, the unified system had only a small impact on the numbers and kinds of students who chose vocational options, at least in the short term.

Like earlier reforms, Higher Still appeared to demonstrate that parity of esteem, and patterns of participation and attainment in learning, are shaped more by the institutional logics of education and training (including macro-institutional logics: Young 2002) than by the intrinsic logic of an integrated qualifications framework. The importance of institutional logics was also evident in the different ways that schools and colleges, with their contrasting logics, implemented the reform, and in the different progression patterns in these two sectors (Raffe et al. 2007). And although this resulted in a more differentiated pattern of provision than anticipated, this was not necessarily undesirable. Higher Still encouraged a shift in expectations and perceptions among at least some Scottish policy-makers. Not only did it encourage greater realism about the capacity of a framework to achieve such goals as parity of esteem, it encouraged a shift in the perception of a unified framework from being a means to impose uniformity to a principle for coordinating diversity. It underlined the need for arrangements such as assessment procedures to be ‘fit for purpose’ and therefore more variable across the system.

Previous reforms: An overview

Figure 2 provides a schematic overview of the reforms discussed above. The first column briefly describes each reform. The second column lists structural features introduced by each reform that contributed to the later architecture of the SCQF. As a result, when the SCQF was launched in 2001 much of this architecture was already in place or at an advanced stage of implementation. Most mainstream Scottish qualifications were outcomes-based, albeit with varying and typically loose interpretations of outcomes. Most (except Standard Grades) were unitized. Most were placed at levels, with mainly minor differences across types of qualifications in the boundaries between levels and the ways they were defined. Most (except SVQs) were based on a concept of credit, again with relatively minor variations in definitions and metrics. There were well-established quality assurance systems for higher education and SQA qualifications. Teachers and lecturers had become familiar with the pedagogies and assessment procedures associated with a more learner-centred approach. Less tangibly, there were signs of a cultural change leading to wider recognition of concepts such as credit and to the confidence and trust necessary to underpin a qualifications system.

Moreover, by 2001 most mainstream qualifications belonged to one of three relatively distinct families: SQA’s National Qualifications (including Standard Grades and group awards of varying sizes based on SQA units); higher education qualifications (SCOTCAT, with HNCs and HNDs); and SVQs. These families were to become the main sub-frameworks of the SCQF. There was a varying balance, across the sequence of reforms, between development within a sub-framework and integration across sub-frameworks; towards the end of the sequence the emphasis shifted to integration, especially in Higher Still. The ‘owners’ of the two largest sub-frameworks (the SQA and higher education) had an interest in continuing the drive towards a more unified and coherent qualifications

system; and their staff (in the case of higher education, the staff of its main representative and quality-assurance bodies in Scotland) had acquired the experience, expertise, strategic understanding and commitment to take this process forward.

The third column of Figure 2 summarizes the characteristics of each reform and especially its style of implementation. Most were led by government or central agencies, most aimed to achieve specific changes in their area or sector, and most were compulsory at least for their main target institutions. Some had a reasonably 'tight' design, and there was a frequent tension between the desire to engage educational institutions and other stakeholders in the development process and the essentially top-down nature of these reforms. In other words, except for SCOTCAT, the reforms that preceded SCQF more closely resemble the ideal type of a reforming framework than that of a communications framework.

The final column in Figure 2 summarizes some of the issues or lessons raised by the experience of each reform. Many of these issues recur throughout the sequence, suggesting that they reflect generic aspects of qualifications frameworks and not just specific features of individual initiatives. For example, the importance of institutional logics, the consequent need for policy breadth, the importance of assessment arrangements and the need to keep them simple, the tension between a framework's scope and its tightness, and the tendency for units in a framework to multiply, all recur throughout the sequence. And further issues are raised by the sequence as a whole: the long time scales for reform, the incremental nature of change and the crucial role of sub-frameworks in the development of an NQF as well as in its eventual architecture. Section 4 discusses lessons from the Scottish experience, drawing on the earlier reforms as well as the SCQF itself.

Figure 2. The reforms which preceded the SCQF: An overview

Reform	Contribution to architecture and culture of SCQF	Type of framework/ style of implementation	Issues/lessons
<p>Standard Grade: subject-specific qualifications for certificating 14-16 school courses at three overlapping levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Principle of comprehensive coverage ▪ Levels ▪ Criterion-referenced assessment ▪ <i>(Became part of NQ sub-framework)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by government ▪ Compulsory for schools ▪ Teacher participation in lengthy development programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Showed that integrated framework can cover whole cohort ▪ Need to keep assessment simple
<p>National Certificate (NC) (Action Plan): national modular framework to replace college non-advanced provision, available to schools and private providers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unitization ▪ Learning outcomes ▪ Criterion-referenced assessment ▪ Portability/credit transfer ▪ Integration of vocational and (some) general qualifications ▪ <i>(Merged with academic courses to form Higher Still NQ sub-framework)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by government (Inspectorate) ▪ Education-led (rather than employment-led) ▪ Fast, top-down development and implementation ▪ Compulsory for colleges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Constraints of institutional logics: limits to flexibility and portability ▪ Need for policy breadth ▪ Unified framework makes system more responsive ▪ Power of assessment to shape curriculum and pedagogy ▪ Growth in number of modules
<p>Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs): national framework of occupational qualifications based on national occupational standards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unitization ▪ Learning outcomes ▪ Levels ▪ Criterion-referenced assessment ▪ <i>(Became sub-framework of SCQF)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by government ▪ Rhetoric of industry ownership; developed by government-appointed industry bodies ▪ Compulsory for government-funded training programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tension between coverage and tightness of framework ▪ Need for policy breadth ▪ Concerns with cost, bureaucracy ▪ Assessment requirements restrict access, increase cost
<p>Advanced Courses Development Programme: unitization of HNCs/HNDs (sub-degree qualifications offered in colleges)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unitization ▪ Learning outcomes ▪ Criterion-referenced assessment ▪ Portability/credit transfer (including to university degrees) ▪ <i>(Contributed with SCOTCAT to development of HE sub-framework of SCQF)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by awarding body (SCOTVEC) ▪ College participation in development ▪ Effectively compulsory for colleges, but devolved control over content of programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Similar to Action Plan ▪ Tensions between role as exit qualification and progression ▪ Devolved control to colleges led to growth in number and diversity of programmes/awards
<p>Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (SCOTCAT): national credit system for higher education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Credit (and 10-hour metric) ▪ Levels ▪ Learning outcomes ▪ Unitization/modularization ▪ <i>(Linked with ACDP, became basis for HE sub-framework of SCQF)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initially led by awarding body for non-university degrees, then by HEIs and quality assurance body ▪ Voluntary, but all HEIs signed up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Influence of diverse institutional logics ▪ Institution-led implementation can be slow and variable ▪ Use of framework by institutions even more variable

Reform	Contribution to architecture and culture of SCQF	Type of framework/ style of implementation	Issues/lessons
New National Qualifications (Higher Still): 'unified system' of academic and vocational post-compulsory provision in a 7-level 'climbing frame', delivered in schools and colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Integration of academic and vocational qualifications ▪ Levels ▪ Learning outcomes ▪ Unitization ▪ <i>(Linked NC modules and academic courses to create NQs, which became sub-framework of SCQF)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by government (Inspectorate) ▪ Very wide consultation, but perceived as top-down ▪ 'Disenfranchising' effect of system-wide development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Showed that integrated framework can cover whole cohort ▪ Constraints of institutional logics: limits to 'climbing frame' ▪ NQFs can't impose 'parity of esteem' ▪ Tension between coverage and tightness of framework ▪ Need to keep assessment simple
Sequence of reforms: Progress towards integration across sub-frameworks as well as development within sub-frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning outcomes, levels, unitization, credit, etc., <i>plus</i> changed pedagogies and assessment and wider cultural changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mainly 'reforming' rather than 'communications' frameworks: strong role of central government and 'top-down' change with varying amounts and effectiveness of consultation and participation of educational institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Time needed for change process ▪ Incremental steps towards (more) comprehensive framework ▪ Variation across sub-frameworks essential to NQF development and design ▪ Reforms create organizations with expertise and interest in further change

Earlier in this paper, I described a 'celebratory account' of the SCQF and suggested that this was challenged by a 'sceptical account' in three ways. This section has provided support for the first two challenges. It has shown how the groundwork for the SCQF was prepared by the reforms that preceded it; and it has shown that these earlier initiatives were closer to the model of reforming frameworks than to the SCQF's own model of a communications framework. The third challenge - the claim that the additional impact of the SCQF itself has been minimal - is explored in the next section.

4. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

The origins of the SCQF

The idea of a comprehensive framework emerged in the mid-1990s among those developing the Higher Still and SCOTCAT frameworks, who discussed the possibility of bringing them together, along with SVQs, in a single national framework. In 1997, the Scottish Committee of the UK-wide Dearing Inquiry into Higher Education recommended 'an integrated qualifications framework based around level of study and Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme credit points' (NCIHE 1997, p. 39). Interestingly, this recommendation was addressed not to the Government, but to four other organizations: the SQA; the body (now Universities Scotland) which represented HEIs; the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); and the committee which managed SCOTCAT. However the Government gave its support and in its lifelong learning strategy document it promised to 'join a group to develop the Framework'; optimistically expecting this 'to be in place by August 1999' (Scottish Office 1998, p. 63).

In March 1999, three higher education bodies, the SQA and the Government published a consultation paper with outline proposals for a framework based on the key concepts of the level of outcomes of learning and the volume of outcomes of learning (COSHEP et al. 1999). It proposed that the levels defined by existing frameworks could be brought together in a single 11-level framework. Volume would be measured using the SCOTCAT principle of one credit point representing the outcomes achieved through ten 'notional hours of learning time'.

The response to the consultation was positive and in 2000 a development and implementation plan was agreed by the four 'development partners' as they were now known: the SQA; Universities Scotland (as the body representing HEIs was now known); the QAA; and the newly-devolved Scottish Government. Activities covered by the plan included developing the framework, placing the main qualifications within it (by 2003) and establishing the SCQF as the main language of learning. The SCQF was officially launched as a 12-level framework in December 2001, on the basis of a document which outlined its principles and structure, including level descriptors which were 'offered as a first working guide and will be revised in the light of feedback on their use' (SCQF 2001, p. 26).

Governance

At the time of its formal launch, and its first implementation plan for 2002-06, the framework was led by the four development partners advised by a Joint Advisory Committee which represented the main stakeholders including employers, professional bodies, community organizations and other education and training interests. The development partners took forward much of the work of the framework, often in their roles as 'owners' of the main qualifications. Much of the early work of the framework consisted of bringing the existing sub-frameworks together, as well as drawing up procedures and principles for expanding the framework and for using it for different purposes including the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer. The SCQF had very little capacity in its own right; in the year of its launch it had a single full-time employee; a development officer.

This structure has changed in two main ways. In 2006, the colleges' representative body became the fifth development partner, after a long period of seeking admission. And in November 2006, the SCQF Partnership was re-launched as a not-for-profit company, owned by the development partners (who nominate the Board of Directors) but with stronger executive powers and a larger staff (eight at the time of writing). A new SCQF Quality Committee is responsible for maintaining the SCQF guidelines, ensuring consistency in the process and criteria for admitting qualifications and learning to the framework (credit-rating - see below) and aligning the SCQF with other national and international frameworks. The Joint Advisory Committee is replaced by an SCQF Forum, which represents the main stakeholder interests and promotes the use of the framework as well as providing feedback on its design and implementation.

Role of stakeholders

The SCQF has been initiated, owned and substantially driven by the 'owners' of the two main sub-frameworks: by the SQA and by higher education. The Government has played a supportive and often key role, facilitating and stimulating movement, but it has been careful not to assume sole or even principal ownership. Key stakeholders and participants in the early development of the SCQF argued that the framework would be undermined if the Government were seen to take it over, and this seemed to have been accepted by the Government itself (Raffe 2003b).

Other education and training institutions have had less direct influence. In the early years the colleges were not included among the development partners; a fact they resented. More than any other sector, the colleges have an interest in a strong and successful

framework, and they have sometimes felt frustrated by their inability to shape it as they would wish. For example, one of the main areas where the framework aims to promote credit transfer and flexibility is in the college/university transition. The SCQF provides a basis for transferring credit from college sub-degree to university degree qualifications, but whereas college interests tend to feel that transfer should occur as a matter of course, university interests wish to retain their discretion over whether or not to recognize credit. The pretext for excluding colleges from the development partners was that the framework was led by the bodies which awarded qualifications: the universities awarded degrees, whereas most college qualifications were awarded by the SQA. The pretext for later including the colleges was that they did award some qualifications in their own right. In both cases, the pretext masked underlying issues of control. The Joint Advisory Committee was set up to preserve a balance between the desire of the development partners to control the framework and the need to engage stakeholders, and it managed this task effectively.

Other stakeholders have had a more marginal and advisory role. There have been recurrent concerns that the framework has not sufficiently engaged employers and professional bodies, and similar concerns have been expressed in relation to community organizations. However, employers and other stakeholders are represented in the arrangements for shaping the 'sub-frameworks' of the SCQF, notably for SQA's vocational qualifications and for SVQs; their motivations for engaging with the SCQF, other than through its component qualifications, tend to be somewhat different. The issues in engaging stakeholders with the SCQF *per se* are similar to those of other education-led reforms - for example, it is easier to engage representative employer bodies, which have been supportive and often actively engaged, than individual employers whose engagement has been patchy.

Aims and purposes

The SCQF's launch document described its 'general aims' as to:

- "help people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential;
- enable employers, learners and the public in general to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how the qualifications relate to each other, and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce." (SCQF 2001, p. vii)

Seen in isolation from its component sub-frameworks, the SCQF is thus a classic case of a communications framework, which takes the existing education and training system as its starting point and aims to make it more transparent and easier to understand, in order to rationalize it, to improve its coherence, to encourage access and to highlight opportunities for transfer and progression between programmes.

In addition to this more or less consensual purpose, the main stakeholders have had specific motivations for taking part. A study of the introduction of the SCQF, based on interviews with leading participants, observed:

The role of HE [higher education] was critical. When asked why HE had taken the lead, given that it was already developing SCOTCAT and had less to gain than other sectors from a wider framework, one interviewee replied 'altruism'. Another said that HE was looking to the future, and to changing patterns of recruitment especially from [colleges]. A third view referred to the recent (1992) devolution of responsibility for the Scottish universities to the Scottish Office, and the creation of a separate Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. The SCQF provided an opportunity for the 'repatriated' Scottish HE system to determine its own path and to strengthen its links with the rest of Scottish education. The Scottish Office of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), one of the main protagonists of the SCQF, also wished to embed itself within the Scottish system and to increase its autonomy from its UK parent body. Moreover, by leading the framework HE could help to shape it, and thereby avoid the experience of other countries such as South Africa and New Zealand where HE has

felt excluded from the development of national qualifications frameworks (Young 2001, Mikuta 2002). I suspect there is some truth in all these explanations, and in a further one: like many Scottish initiatives, the SCQF owed its birth to the enthusiasm and commitment of a few key individuals. (Raffe 2003b, pp. 245-246)

The SQA's purposes reflected its status as the national qualifications body for Scotland, and its origins as the body created to develop and administer the unified curriculum and qualifications framework of National Qualifications. A reform which linked that framework to other SQA qualifications such as Higher Nationals and SVQs, and to other Scottish qualifications, would both continue that unifying drive and confirm the SQA's position as a national body (and its semi-monopoly). Many SQA staff, especially those who had joined from SCOTVEC, had long experience of innovation in credit and flexibility on which the SCQF could build.

With respect to the SCQF's wider political appeal, there is little evidence that the support for the SCQF was driven by the kind of 'neo-liberal' political agenda that is claimed to have driven NQFs elsewhere (Philips 1998, Allais 2003, Young 2007). Instead, it appealed to a more consensual political viewpoint which advocated a more unified, open and flexible learning system as a means both to respond to economic demands and to promote opportunity, wider access and social inclusion. For example, in the Scottish Parliament's first session, an influential Committee report proposed a lifelong learning strategy based on the principles of economy, social justice, citizenship and quality. It welcomed the SCQF as a means both to 'build bridges ... between the worlds of work and learning' and to create an 'open and accessible learning environment' (Scottish Parliament 2002, p. 23).

The motivations and perspectives of most other stakeholder groups were influenced by similar values and perceptions. Employers, professional organizations and trades unions were broadly supportive, even if awareness and use of the framework took time to spread beyond their national leaderships and representative bodies. The colleges were the closest of all sectors of education and training to the SCQF philosophy which combined skill acquisition, responsiveness to economic need, wider access and social inclusion. They had a strong interest in any development which facilitated and reinforced their role as flexible, responsive providers of learning opportunities, and as the sector which interfaced with all other sectors of learning (schools, universities, workplaces, and so on).

Structure

The SCQF Partnership's current diagram is shown in Figure 3. The SCQF was created by bringing together sub-frameworks, although it also accommodates qualifications that do not belong to a sub-framework. This explains its 'loose' specification: the SCQF was designed to overarch existing sub-frameworks in a coherent way; it was intended neither to establish new qualifications nor to overhaul existing ones. It also explains how elements of the structure came to be established.

Levels 1-11 of the SCQF were based on the seven levels of National Qualifications and the five levels of SCOTCAT (these two sub-frameworks overlap at SCQF level 7). An additional level 12 was added to cover doctoral study. The five SVQ levels were slotted in to this framework, with some SVQ levels allowed to straddle two or more SCQF levels. Level descriptors specify 'characteristic generic outcomes' for each level (except level 1) under five headings: knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeracy skills; autonomy, accountability and working with others. These drew on pre-existing descriptors including those for the SCOTCAT framework and the subsequent QAA benchmarks for degrees, National Qualifications (including Standard Grade and Higher Still grade descriptors and SQA's core skills framework) and SVQs. The current (2009) descriptors are the same as those published in 2001, despite the stated intention to revise them in the

light of experience. Credit was based on the SCOTCAT definition, with one credit point representing the outcomes achieved through ten notional hours of learning time.

Figure 3. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

SCQF Levels	SQA Qualifications	Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
12		Doctoral degree	
11		Integrated Masters degree / Masters Degree Post Graduate Diploma Post Graduate Certificate	SVQ 5
10		Honours degree Graduate Diploma Graduate Certificate	
9		Bachelors/Ordinary degree Graduate Diploma Graduate Certificate	
8	Higher National Diploma	Diploma of Higher Education	SVQ 4
7	Advanced Higher Higher National Certificate	Certificate of Higher Education	SVQ 3 (levels 6 and 7)
6	Higher		
5	Intermediate 2 Credit Standard Grade		SVQ 2
4	Intermediate 1 General Standard Grade	National Progression Award (levels 2-6)	SVQ 1
3	Access 3 Foundation Standard Grade		
2	Access 2		
1	Access 1		

*National Certificates (NCs): group awards based on National Units (not NC modules introduced by Action Plan).

Source: SCQF 2009: adapted from diagram in <http://www.scqf.org.uk> [1 Nov. 2009].

The SCQF itself does not specify types of awards, but some of its sub-frameworks do so, typically by stating the number of credit points at each level required for a given award. Most SQA awards require at least half the credit volume to be at the level of the award, but this is not true for all awards in the SCQF. For example, a Bachelors degree at Honours

level requires 480 credit points, but only 90 of these have to be at level 10, the level of the award.

To be placed in the framework, qualifications and (where applicable) their component units must be placed at a level of the framework, assigned a given number of credit points and assessed in a valid, reliable and quality-assured manner. The development partners are responsible for placing their own qualifications in the framework; credit-rating is the name given to the process for admitting other bodies' qualifications. According to the SCQF Handbook, it is 'a process of professional judgement ... exercised by those best qualified through experience and knowledge of the discipline, field of study, profession, trade or area of skill' (SCQF 2007, p. 13). The level descriptors, key instruments in the credit-rating process, 'give broad, general, but meaningful indicators of the characteristics of learning at each level. They are not intended to give precise or comprehensive statements of required learning at each level.' (ibid., p. 7) The SCQF is outcomes-based, but it is not an 'outcomes-led' framework of the kind described by Young and Allais (2009), where outcomes are expected to be interpreted and applied independently of their institutional context.

And for the same reason the SCQF does not correspond to the ideal type of a framework which seeks to remove control over education and training from professional educators and trainers. If anything, the reverse may be true: the reference to professional judgement could be understood as reinforcing the 'producer capture' and professional leadership which has long been a theme within Scottish educational governance. And the same may be said of arrangements for credit-rating. Initially, only the SQA and HEIs were able to credit-rate for the SCQF. This function was exercised primarily with respect to their own qualifications, but the SQA and one or two universities established facilities which offered their credit-rating services to other awarding bodies. However, the slow pace at which other qualifications were included led to pressures to expand the number of credit-rating bodies. After a pilot in 2005-06, the colleges were allowed to become credit-rating bodies and a further pilot and consultation in 2007-08 led to new criteria and procedures being established under which other organizations could gain credit-rating powers. In 2009, it was announced that this status would be given to two professional bodies (representing banking and management respectively), City and Guilds (a UK awarding body) and the Scottish Police College. Credit-rating bodies will typically use this capacity to place their own qualifications in the SCQF, so appropriate quality assurance arrangements are an important condition of being granted credit-rating powers. The first activity in the SCQF's 2009-11 operational plan commits the Quality Committee to 'develop and implement quality processes that are robust and transparent in order to support credit rating for the SCQF' (SCQF 2009, p. 2). New guidelines and procedures will be published in the revised SCQF Handbook later in 2009.

Implementation

The SQA and HEIs have been responsible for modifications needed to adapt their own qualifications to the SCQF. Further changes were needed to the design of some SQA qualifications. For example, the units comprising HNCs and HNDs had to be allocated to the two levels (7 and 8) covered by these awards, and the number of units comprising an HNC was increased from 12 to 15. The credit values of National Qualifications were recalibrated, changing the relative credit values of courses at different levels. Several courses, especially in higher education, had to be newly assigned to levels or to sub-levels as well as given credit values. To some extent, this process was coordinated nationally, primarily to ensure compliance with the Bologna requirements (the compatibility of the higher education part of the SCQF with the European Higher Education Area framework was formally verified in 2006). However, much of the adaptation in higher education programmes and qualifications took place as part of routine processes of programme review and development and quality enhancement, or were arranged to coincide with processes (such as modularization and semesterization) which institutions embarked on for their own

purposes. The SCQF provided a context and, as described below, a 'useful tool' for these institutional processes. It also provided tools for the revision and renewal of SQA awards since 2001, including a re-design of NQ group awards and current proposals for replacing Standard Grades.

SVQs proved harder to include for a number of reasons: the levels had to be aligned with the SCQF; their more extreme 'outcomes-based' philosophy made it harder to apply a concept of credit based on notional learning time; their ownership was more dispersed, and many were owned by UK-based industry bodies; and it was inadvisable to make major changes before it was clear what kind of model would emerge from the reform of NVQs in the rest of the United Kingdom.

By 2005, the SCQF could claim that most 'mainstream' qualifications were in the framework. However, in the same year, the Government-sponsored evaluation of the SCQF reported slow progress in the inclusion of vocational and work-based qualifications, professional qualifications and community-based learning, although it noted strong potential in these areas. It attributed this slow progress, in part, to the partnership model (Gallacher et al. 2005). The SCQF did not have adequate central resources; much of the work was contributed by officers of the development partners 'trying to do it in [their] lunchtimes once a week' (Raffe 2003b, p. 247). Disagreements were not quickly resolved and further delayed progress. And while the partnership model might have been effective in developing the SCQF and getting the main sub-frameworks to link to each other, it was less suited to an implementation process which needed to engage a wider range of qualifications and of stakeholders. These concerns led to the creation of the new SCQF Partnership in November 2006. In the following September, the new Scottish Government's Skills Strategy asked the Partnership to 'move quickly to ensure that the SCQF embraces more learning opportunities by increasing the number of credit rating bodies, facilitating the inclusion of work-based learning programmes and encouraging the recognition of informal learning' (SG 2007, p. 49).

The SCQF published guidelines on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as Volume 2 of its Handbook (SCQF 2007). Following the lead given by the Government's skills strategy (above), the SCQF Partnership commissioned a report on the state of play of RPL in Scotland. This concluded that capacity and infrastructure were limited on the supply side and a concerted marketing effort was required to stimulate demand (Inspire Scotland 2008). The Partnership has established an RPL Network and is working on tools to support its use.

The evaluation found that the process of becoming the national language of Scottish education was proceeding slowly (Gallacher et al. 2005). Knowledge of the framework varied considerably within and among the educational institutions and other organizations studied by the evaluation. Awareness and understanding tended to be greater among those who were directly involved with the framework and its implementation and had a practical 'need to know' about it. Awareness and understanding of the SCQF were more limited among learners, employers and the general public; there was also limited awareness of the framework in the school sector, where most qualifications provided were NQs awarded by the SQA and learners and teachers had less need to know about the wider SCQF.

Awareness and understanding have almost certainly increased since the 2005 evaluation. The SCQF is increasingly entering the language, mentioned in policy documents, used as the basis for collecting data and used as the currency for planning and reviewing provision. An important step in this process was the revision of the Scottish Qualifications Certificate, a cumulative record of each learner's SQA qualifications, to include SCQF levels and credit points.

Use and impact

The earlier study of the SCQF's introduction drew attention to two contrasting views of what constitutes its full implementation:

In the narrower view, implementation is complete when (i) all qualifications are in place and (ii) the language of SCQF level and credit is used to describe all provision and all qualifications. Thereafter the role of the framework is an enabling one: it is expected to change behaviour but it is up to those who use it to determine how. This view of implementation is reflected in most official language about the Framework. In the broader view, it is the task of implementation to ensure that the Framework is used in particular ways, and in particular that SCQF credits are actually recognised for credit transfer. (Raffe 2003b, p. 250)

The evaluation made a similar distinction when it challenged the SCQF leadership to be clear about whether the framework was expected to be an agent of change, directly driving changes to the system, or an instrument of change for other 'drivers' to use (Gallacher et al. 2005). In practice, it concluded, the SCQF provided only an instrument of change. Several respondents felt it was a 'useful tool'; none felt that it had transformed Scottish education, although some still hoped that it would do so.

In this paper, therefore, I distinguish between the implementation and use of the framework. Some of its uses are described below.

- Possibly most importantly, it provides a language and tool to support access, transfer and progression. However, in 2005 the evaluation found that this language and tool largely underpinned 'arrangements that would usually have been introduced in the absence of the SCQF' (Gallacher et al. 2005, p. 4) - although this partly reflects the fact that SCOTCAT was already providing a similar language on a less comprehensive basis before it was subsumed within the SCQF. Without some such language, the task of planning and implementing more flexible access transfer and progression arrangements would have been much harder. There has been further progress in the four years since the evaluation, reflected in numerous local initiatives and stimulated by complementary policy measures such as funding for 'regional hubs' to plan articulation arrangements among neighbouring HEIs and colleges. There is also growing interest in a wider range of types of transfer and progression, including transfer associated with the recognition of prior learning (RPL: see below) and articulation from degrees to HNDs as well as from HNDs to degrees (Knox and Whitaker 2009).
- The SCQF has been used in RPL. It has been used extensively in some occupational and professional areas such as the health service and banking, for example, to give exemption from qualification requirements. The recent review of RPL found some examples of good practice but it was not consistently accessible or delivered across areas, industry sectors or sectors of education and training (Inspire Scotland 2008). Areas of development include apprenticeship, where RPL is seen to contribute to efficient delivery, community learning, the voluntary sector and careers work in schools (see below).
- Careers Scotland, the national all-age agency for careers information, advice and guidance, has used the SCQF to support its work. However, a survey of its staff in 2008 found that staff were aware of the framework and used it, but needed 'further guidance on how to use it effectively to assist with clients' career planning and development goals' (SCQF 2008, p. 6). A current pilot is exploring the use of RPL based on the SCQF to support guidance in schools.
- Institutions have used the framework for curriculum development, to support quality enhancement and to guide structural reforms, for example, as a tool for planning modularization and semesterization of HEI programmes. Such changes have rarely, if ever, been driven by the SCQF, although they have responded to the new demands created by the Bologna framework (which included the creation of a qualifications framework for higher education across Europe).

- Employers and professional bodies have used the framework for recruitment, to plan and organize their own training provision, to give recognition to their own qualifications and for RPL. So far, the total activity has been small; engagement with the SCQF, as distinct from particular sub-frameworks, tends to arise out of specific interests or needs. For example, the Scottish Police College uses the SCQF to organize and give recognition to its own provision; the Army is similarly interested in providing national recognition for its own training; the social services sector has used the framework to respond to increased qualification requirements for staff.
- Similar uses have been identified in less formal areas of learning, notably in youth and adult provision by voluntary organizations, community groups and local authorities. For example, the SCQF's newsletter recently described the use of the SCQF to design, and give recognition to, a programme for community activists (SCQF 2008).
- Finally, the SCQF provides a context in which further policy developments are taken forward. Since its introduction, the SQA has engaged in a review of its own portfolio of qualifications which led it to devise new group awards. In 2008, the Government consulted over plans for a new qualification to replace Standard Grade, to support a reform of the school and college curriculum for 3-18-year-olds (SG 2008). And the SCQF creates new opportunities for policy development. For example, the OECD's (2007) review of Scottish schooling proposed a flexible, unified graduation certificate that could be attempted by all post-16 learners, whether at school, college or in the workplace. The Government has rejected this proposal, but a carefully-designed group award based on the SCQF could potentially address many of the issues facing 16-18 education in Scotland.

It is relatively easy to list the uses of the SCQF, but much harder to quantify them. There are no system-wide data for this purpose. Reflecting its character as a communications framework, the SCQF has no central database of learners and data and monitoring functions remain with the sub-frameworks. The available data provide considerable scope for analyzing participation, achievement and progression within the SQA's portfolio of qualifications, and there are central data on higher education students (but with less information on progression). However, there are no national data sources that cover transfer and progression between the SQA and higher education sub-frameworks or between these and other qualifications in the SCQF.

Assessing the SCQF's impact is similarly difficult, because it requires judgements of the counterfactual: how different would things have been in the absence of the SCQF? In the case of access, transfer and progression, the evaluation concluded that the SCQF had made little additional impact over and above the effects of the pre-existing sub-frameworks, although its impact has almost certainly increased since then. And as a comprehensive framework, the SCQF has considerably wider potential as a tool to support access, transfer and progression than a single sub-framework like the former SCOTCAT. Most of the uses of the SCQF listed above, such as career guidance, RPL and its uses in relation to employment and less formal learning, would be harder, if not impossible, to achieve without a comprehensive framework.

The SCQF is, as the evaluation concluded, a useful tool, and awareness and understanding of its potential applications are increasing. However, the actual use made of this tool has depended on other factors, including other government policy, institutional funding, and local and institutional initiatives, as well as the range of factors captured by the term 'institutional logics'.

United Kingdom and international aspects

All interviewees in the study described earlier 'agreed that there had been no international model for the SCQF; Scotland is out in front ...' (Raffe 2003b, p. 250). However, this does not mean that there has been no influence from elsewhere.

In the development of the SCQF, there were exchanges with other countries including South Africa and New Zealand (whose own framework had been influenced by the Action Plan), Northern Ireland and Wales. And although the SCQF level descriptors were based mainly in existing Scottish models, developed in the earlier reforms or other development work, they took account of recent experience in Namibia, New Zealand, Northern Ireland and South Africa (Hart 2008). International developments have influenced the pace and, at times, direction of change. The Bologna process was important both in maintaining momentum and in preserving the higher education part of the SCQF as a distinct sub-framework. International and UK developments sometimes slowed progress in Scotland: work on placing SVQs in the SCQF has been affected by the need to remain compatible with slower developments in NVQs in England. To some extent, uncertainty about the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) have had a similar effect.

Ireland and Scotland were the first countries to self-certify for the Bologna framework, and they are leading the process of referencing to the EQF. Scottish expertise has contributed to the development of these frameworks, as well as to other NQFs in Europe and beyond. Scotland has participated in other international activities such as the current OECD review of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Exchanges among the Irish and UK frameworks have resulted in a popular leaflet comparing these frameworks, and they have generated valuable experience in cross-referencing between frameworks (Hart 2009).

The current agenda

Notwithstanding its origins in an education-led partnership, the SCQF has a central role in the Scottish Government's strategy to achieve increased sustainable economic growth, and its skills strategy which aims to create cohesive and coherent structures for skills development and delivery, as well as to promote individual development and a stronger 'pull' from the economy. This strategy asked the SCQF Partnership to press ahead with implementing the framework by increasing the number of credit-rating bodies, including more work-based learning and encouraging RPL.

The SCQF Partnership's strategy has three broad objectives: to maintain the quality and integrity of the SCQF; to promote and develop the framework as a tool to support lifelong learning; and to develop and maintain relationships with other frameworks in Europe, the United Kingdom, and internationally. It published a new Operational Plan earlier in 2009 (SCQF 2009). Current priorities include extending the framework by increasing the number of credit-rating bodies; updating the guidelines for a new Handbook, to be published later in 2009; employer engagement, through various targeted communications strategies; and engaging with current UK and international developments. These priorities will continue to depend on external circumstances. The recession has reduced the pace of employer engagement, because recruitment has fallen; and a reduction in migrant numbers may have implications in the future; a current scoping study is exploring support mechanisms for migrant workers and refugees.

5. Issues

At the beginning of this paper, I distinguished between a celebratory account of the SCQF and a sceptical account. The celebratory account sees the SCQF as a successful framework, whose success reflects its character as a communications framework. The evidence in this paper gives qualified support for this view. The SCQF has been reasonably successful. Its implementation is well advanced in the sense that it embraces nearly all mainstream qualifications and it is becoming established as part of the national language of education and training. It has some way to go before it covers all qualifications and assessed learning, although it is making faster progress than three years ago. It has been used for a variety of purposes, although much of its potential has still to be exploited and, consistent with its status as a communications framework, the full exploitation of this potential will depend on other policy and funding measures and on wider institutional and social factors beyond its immediate control. The SCQF is making slow progress, but it is making progress. And among other indicators of 'success', it retains the support of all sectors and interests in education and training as well as external stakeholders; it is widely seen as an achievement of the Scottish system and a strength to build on; and its potential uses and applications are increasingly recognized and understood.

And these achievements can be linked to its character as a communications framework: its loose design, its capacity to accommodate diversity, its incremental process of development and its voluntary character, reinforced by the leading role of educational providers and awarding bodies. These features have had negative, as well as positive, consequences: there have been tensions between different educational interests, the partnership model delayed progress and required action to strengthen its central leadership, and the uses and impacts of the framework have been variable and often dependent on random initiatives from elsewhere.

However, if the evidence provides qualified support for the celebratory account, it has also provided support for at least the first two propositions of the sceptical account. These are, respectively, that the SCQF built very substantially on the series of reforms that preceded it, and that the model introduced by most of these reforms resembled a reforming framework more closely than a communications framework. Both propositions are supported by the evidence of section 3. The third proposition - that the SCQF *per se* added little to the impact of earlier reforms - is more doubtful. Although some uses of the SCQF (such as to support transfer and progression between colleges and universities) continue the functions of the pre-existing sub-frameworks, the character of the SCQF as a comprehensive framework has added a new dimension. The previous reforms greatly facilitated the *implementation* of the SCQF, but only when they were brought together within a single comprehensive framework did the current range of *uses* of the SCQF, whether potential or realized, become available. Indeed, this is what we would expect from the descriptions of types of frameworks and their purposes (see Figure 1). Many of the earlier reforms created sub-frameworks with specific objectives such as to fill gaps in provision; to update the content of learning; to rationalize provision; to promote new approaches to pedagogy and assessment; to enhance quality or to regulate occupational qualifications, in addition to promoting access transfer and progression. The SCQF's purposes were different: to create transparency and to provide a language that would make the system easier to understand, and thereby to promote access transfer and progression. In some respects, these were narrower purposes than those of the earlier frameworks. In other respects, they were more ambitious, as they relate to the whole education and training system. Such purposes could only have been achieved by bringing the sub-frameworks together into a comprehensive SCQF.

We cannot, therefore, accept the sceptical account in its entirety: the SCQF builds on the earlier frameworks, but it has different goals and it therefore adds to their achievements. However, we also have to recognize that the celebratory account, or that version which attributed success to the SCQF's character as a communications framework, is too simple.

Indeed, the analysis points to the weakness of any cross-sectional comparative study which compares different types of NQF in order to compare their relative success, or the typical problems faced by each type. This is not because typologies are not valid (the discussion above suggests that the distinction between communications and reforming frameworks is valid and analytically helpful). Rather, it is because a country may belong to more than one type. The SCQF is a different type of framework from most of the frameworks which preceded it, and it is different from the sub-frameworks which sit within it. And we can only understand the way it works, its strengths and its weaknesses, in terms of the relationship between the (communications) SCQF and its (reforming) sub-frameworks, and the differences among these sub-frameworks.

These relationships have also to be understood in historical perspective. The SCQF may be a voluntary, partnership-based loosely-specified framework, but it came into existence as a result of compulsory, top-down and more tightly-specified reforms which laid the basis for it. A cross-sectional typology of NQFs needs, therefore, to be complemented by dynamic model(s) of the ways that NQFs develop and change over time. Drawing on the experience of the SCQF and other frameworks, I have suggested that elements of such models might include:

- long time scales for development, implementation and impact;
- the participation and involvement of stakeholders;
- an incremental process of developing and implementing the framework;
- an iterative process of bringing the framework and practice into line with each other; and
- a shifting balance between the sub-framework development and framework-wide development. (Raffe 2009a, b)

It would be surprising if the characteristics of a framework - for example, its location on the continuum from communications to transformational - did not change over this process. For example, the SCQF suggests that as the 'shifting balance' moves from sub-frameworks to framework-wide development, the emphasis might shift from a reforming or transformational approach to a communications framework.

It would therefore be misleading to draw simple conclusions from the SCQF about the relative effectiveness of different types of frameworks. The more useful lessons from Scottish frameworks focus on the processes and issues that underlie such typologies, and they need to take account of variation within each country and changes over time. They draw on the earlier reforms as well as the SCQF itself.

One set of lessons concerns the design of an NQF. The Scottish experience points to a tension between the 'tightness' with which a framework is specified and its coverage or scope. SVQs and Higher Still had difficulty in covering their target range of provision, partly because of their relatively tight designs. A unifying or comprehensive framework needs to be loose. This lesson has been learnt by Scottish policy-makers; recent reforms have placed more emphasis on 'fitness for purpose' in the design of qualifications; the aim of an integrated framework is now perceived as to coordinate diversity rather than establish uniformity. But the Scottish experience shows that provided a framework is appropriately specified, it can accommodate diverse types of learning; the epistemological and other barriers to a unified framework can be overcome. And the Scottish experience suggests ways in which this can be achieved: by nesting tighter sub-frameworks within a loose comprehensive framework; by avoiding '... a "pure" outcomes model [which] assume[s] that outcomes can be wholly separate from institutional "inputs"' (Young and Allais 2009, p. 15); and by recognizing the critical importance of assessment arrangements for pedagogy, curriculum and the smooth administration of the system, and avoiding the over-complicated assessment models which are so easily generated during development.

A second set of lessons concerns implementation. The Scottish reforms illustrate the political character, in the broad sense, of qualifications frameworks. They potentially redistribute power and control between different central authorities (such as Scottish and UK authorities in the Action Plan), between central authorities and educational institutions (as in most government-led reforms), between different sectors of education such as schools and colleges (Higher Still) or colleges and universities (SCQF) and between mainstream education and more peripheral forms of learning. All NQFs face a tension between the need for central coordination and direction and the need to engage stakeholders, especially educational providers and professionals. Some of the earlier Scottish reforms were perceived to err on the side of central direction, losing support among educators and producing unworkable proposals that were out of touch with practice. The SCQF erred on the side of stakeholder engagement; its partnership model slowed progress before it was re-launched with a stronger executive in 2006.

However, the issue is more than a simple choice between greater or lesser engagement of stakeholders. The implementation process is also shaped by the relative power of external stakeholders and education/training interests (which consistently dominated the Scottish reforms) and of different education/training interests ('academic' interests have been most powerful in Scotland). The Scottish experience illustrates a particular dynamic of comprehensive NQFs, in whose development sector-specific interests may be disenfranchised if they lack the perspective or capacity to engage with sector-wide issues. And it demonstrates how bodies set up to develop and administer a qualifications framework become stakeholders in their own right and typically have both the interest and the expertise to maintain the direction of movement. SCOTVEC and the SQA were examples; the SCQF Partnership with its small executive forms an interesting contrast.

Finally, the Scottish experience raises issues about the use and impact of NQFs, and about the limited capacity of qualifications on their own to achieve systemic change in education and training. As research on Higher Still concluded, "[a] reform of curriculum and qualifications cannot, on its own, radically transform the rules of positional competition, nor can it achieve full 'parity of esteem'" (Raffe et al. 2007, p. 505). The concept of 'institutional logic' - and the notion that it could be more powerful than the 'intrinsic logic' of a qualifications framework - was developed in research on the Action Plan and it has proved applicable to all subsequent reforms. Time and again research has shown how access to learning, progression and transfer, the relative standing of different tracks and programmes, the marketability of qualifications and so on all depend more on the logics of their surrounding institutions (broadly defined) than the structure of the qualifications framework. At least two important implications follow. The first is the importance of 'policy breadth'. An effective NQF needs to be accompanied by complementary measures to promote its use. This is particularly true of a communications framework, but it was also true of the reforming frameworks which preceded the SCQF. Second, expectations need to be realistic. Expectations about the SCQF have differed, and especially in its early years there was a danger that too much realism could undermine the enthusiasm and commitment of stakeholders. Throughout its existence, the management of expectations has been one of the main challenges for the SCQF.

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