

‘SIMPLICITY ITSELF’: THE CREATION OF THE SCOTTISH CREDIT AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK¹

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ABSTRACT

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) aims to become the ‘national language’ which will describe all qualifications in Scotland in terms of levels and credit points. It is the latest in a series of measures to ‘unify’ the Scottish education system. The paper describes key features of the SCQF, outlines the key stages in its development and discusses some of the issues raised in its current implementation phase. These include problems of fitting qualifications into the Framework, issues of compatibility with UK and international frameworks, and the tension between alternative views of what constitutes full implementation of the Framework. The creation of the Framework has been incremental, voluntaristic, partnership-based and pragmatic, but these features of the process will be under strain as implementation proceeds. The paper concludes by discussing the likely impact of the SCQF on Scottish education.

“Describing the past is complex; describing the future is simplicity itself. The credit point will be exactly the same whether someone is at the early stages of school, in a further education college, in a professional statutory body or learning anywhere in Scotland. A common unit of currency will run through absolutely everything. One of our important goals is to try to bring about that simplicity.” Norman Sharp, QAA Scotland (Scottish Parliament 2002b, pp.22-23)

INTRODUCTION

The SCQF as a Unifying Qualifications Framework

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was formally launched in December 2001. It aspires to become the ‘national language’ for describing qualifications and the relationships between them, to reduce barriers to access and progression through different types of learning and to promote a culture of lifelong learning. The SCQF maps certificated learning opportunities in terms of volume and level. Volume is measured by credit points, each point corresponding to a notional ten hours of learning time, and the 12 levels of the Framework range from provision for learners with severe and profound learning difficulties (level 1) to doctoral study (level 12). The SCQF is often depicted by the diagram in Figure 1, but this shows only qualifications awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Higher Education (HE) institutions, and it shows only a sub-set of the qualifications awarded by these bodies. The goal is to include all qualifications within the Framework, including community-based, employment-based and professional qualifications, and to use the Framework as the basis for accrediting prior and experiential learning.

National qualifications frameworks are an example of a trend which colleagues and I have called the ‘unification’ of post-compulsory education and training systems (Raffe, *et al.*, 1998). Unification is a global trend but unifying strategies and policies vary across countries; qualifications frameworks, or more precisely ‘outcome-based’ frameworks such as the SCQF, tend to be characteristic of anglophone countries (Young, 2001a, 2002). Qualifications frameworks themselves vary with respect to their *purpose*, their *scope* and their *prescriptiveness*, and these three dimensions can be used to place the SCQF in international context.

Figure 1: The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

SCQF Level	SQA National Qualifications	Higher Education Qualifications	Scottish Vocational	SCQF Level
12		Doctorates		12
11		Masters	SVQ5	11
10		Honours degree Graduate Diploma/ Certificate		10
9		Ordinary degree Graduate Diploma/ Certificate		9
8		Higher National Diploma Diploma in H. Ed	SVQ 4	8
7	Advanced Higher	Higher National Certificate Certificate in H. Ed		7
6	Higher		SVQ 3	6
5	Intermediate 2 Credit Standard Grade		SVQ 2	5
4	Intermediate 1 General Standard Grade		SVQ 1	4
3	Access 3 Foundation Standard Grade			3
2	Access 2			2
1	Access 1			1

Note: Adapted from Scottish Parliament (2002b, p.24). Only qualifications awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority or Higher Education institutions are shown. HNCs, HNDs and SVQs have not yet been fitted into the Framework, and the correspondence between SVQ levels and SCQF levels is under review (see text).

With respect to purpose, the ‘general aims of the SCQF are 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)

The SCQF's aims are more limited than those of frameworks which set out to develop new qualifications, standards or curricula, or to enhance the quality of education and training. Above all, the SCQF is an enabling or descriptive framework; it 'is *not* a regulatory framework' (*ibid.* p.16). Institutions which deliver qualifications are not compelled to use those which are in the Framework.

The scope of the SCQF is broad. While some frameworks are restricted to particular levels or types of qualifications, such as higher education or vocational qualifications, the SCQF aims to encompass all qualifications delivered in Scotland.

The prescriptiveness of a qualifications framework refers to the stringency of the criteria which qualifications have to satisfy in order to be included. There are, in effect, three criteria for the SCQF: credit, levelling and quality-assurance. Qualifications in the SCQF must be credit-rated, which implies that the 'volume' of learning can be measured. Qualifications and credit-bearing components of qualifications must also be 'levelled' – assigned to one of the 12 levels of the Framework. And assessment for the qualifications must be quality-assured. These three criteria place the SCQF at an intermediate point on a scale of prescriptiveness. They are more stringent than the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which covers the other nations of the UK, which does not (yet) include credit.² But they are less stringent than other qualifications frameworks such as the New Zealand NQF, or the UK's National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (NVQs and SVQs, described below), or the new National Qualifications introduced in Scotland by the Higher Still reforms (also described below, and now included within the SCQF). All these qualifications frameworks are more strongly prescriptive than the SCQF, especially with respect to the way that learning outcomes are specified or assessed. This difference in prescriptiveness is reflected in the language used to describe the two Scottish reforms: the SCQF is a unified framework, while Higher Still is a unified system. Credits at the same SCQF level are 'comparable'; the stronger term 'equivalent' is avoided.

There is a trade-off between the scope of a qualifications framework and its prescriptiveness. The more prescriptive a framework, the harder it is to cover a wide range of levels, modes and content of learning. This has been the experience of Higher Still, whose prescriptive assessment rules have been a focus of conflict, and whose scope appears to have narrowed from its earlier aspiration to cover all institution-based education below HE: its implementation has been more thorough in initial, general and full-time education than in other sectors (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001; Raffe, *et al.*, 2002). The New Zealand NQF has similarly demonstrated the difficulty of making a single prescriptive framework cover a whole education system (Smithers, 1997; Mikuta, 2002).

In addition to their purpose, scope and prescriptiveness, there are two further ways in which national qualifications frameworks may vary, especially if we look beyond their formal design to the policy process which creates them. I refer to these as *policy breadth* and *incrementalism*. Policy breadth describes the extent to which the establishment of the framework is directly and explicitly linked with other measures to influence how the framework is used. In studying an earlier reform of Scottish qualifications (the modular Action Plan, described below), we concluded that the effects on participation and progression were limited because the 'intrinsic logic' of the modular system, with its flexible pathways and incentives to participate, were less powerful than the 'institutional logic' in which it was embedded (Raffe, 1988; Raffe, *et al.*, 1994). The institutional logic comprised the opportunities, incentives and constraints arising from such factors as the policies of educational institutions (in their roles as providers and selectors), funding and regulatory requirements, timetabling and resource constraints, the relative status of different fields of study and the influence of the labour market and the social structure. A qualifications

framework may be ineffective if it is not complemented by measures to reform the surrounding institutional logic, for example, local institutional agreements to promote credit transfer, or encouragement to employers to reflect credit values in their selection processes. Drawing on the concepts of intrinsic and institutional logics, Michael Young has distinguished outcomes-based and institution-based approaches to qualifications reforms, and suggested that outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are likely to be ineffective if they are not ‘based in the shared values and practices of... “communities of trust”’ (Young, 2002, p.60). At the time of writing (January 2003) the future policy breadth of the SCQF is a contested issue,³ as we see in the discussion of implementation issues later in this paper.

With respect to incrementalism, the SCQF is the latest in a series of unifying reforms of qualifications, described in the following section. It started as a federal framework which aimed to bring together smaller sub-frameworks that already existed or were being constructed. It is now expanding to include qualifications that are not already part of smaller frameworks. Compared with most national qualifications frameworks, the starting point for the SCQF is a qualifications system that is already much more unified than in most other countries. The creation of the SCQF does not involve the large-scale development of new qualifications, or the related standards-setting processes, which have been fundamental to the development of the NVQ framework or the NQFs in New Zealand and South Africa (Davies & Burke 2002, South Africa DoE/DoL 2002). At most the SCQF requires some adaptation of existing qualifications, and it provides the context for developing or reviewing existing frameworks. Some other countries developing qualifications frameworks are, in effect, attempting to cover in a single stage the ground which Scotland is covering through a whole series of reforms over more than twenty years. If these countries are to learn from the Scottish experience, they need to take account of the full sequence and not only its latest stage.

This paper reviews the development of the SCQF and discusses some of the issues that it raises. It draws on an analysis of documents in the public domain, on participation in conferences, workshops and meetings relating to the Framework, and on interviews with nine key informants who had played important roles in the development of the SCQF and/or who represented principal stakeholders. The interviews were conducted during 2002-03 under Chatham House rules: that is, comments or information are not attributed to the individuals who supplied them.

The next two sections of the paper summarise the previous unifying reforms of qualifications in Scotland, and describe the development of the SCQF up to its formal launch at the end of 2001. Since then the SCQF has moved into its implementation phase, and Section 4 discusses some of the main issues that are being addressed. Section 5 analyses the policy process of creating the SCQF, and asks whether the current strategy for managing change can survive as implementation proceeds. Finally, Section 6 speculates on the impact of the SCQF on Scottish education.

PREVIOUS UNIFYING REFORMS

The SCQF builds on a series of unifying reforms of Scottish qualifications.

Action Plan. The 16-plus Action Plan, implemented in 1984, replaced existing non-advanced vocational education with a national system of portable modules of notionally 40 hours length. The modules also covered large areas of the general curriculum. They were defined in terms of learning outcomes, with internal criterion-referenced assessment leading to certificates awarded by the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). The Action Plan’s main goal was to reform the curriculum in Further Education (FE) colleges, multi-purpose institutions which provide general and vocational programmes, of varying length, level and mode, for post-school students of all ages. SCOTVEC modules soon accounted for a large

proportion of FE's provision below HE level; their early impact is analysed by Black, *et al.* (1991), Croxford, *et al.* (1991a), SOED (1991) and Howieson (1992). The modules also had a significant take-up in secondary schools, either to complement academic courses such as Highers (the main qualifications for HE entry) or as an alternative for lower-attaining students. Modules filled important gaps in the school curriculum but they had lower status than Highers, aggravated by differences in pedagogy and assessment and by obstacles to progression between modules and Highers; they were criticised for providing a fragmented and incoherent curriculum (Croxford *et al.* 1991b, SOED 1992). These problems were addressed in 1999 when the modules were incorporated as National Units into the National Qualifications introduced by Higher Still (see below).

SVQs. With SCOTVEC modules in place, Scotland did not at first join the rest of the UK in introducing NVQs, unitised outcome-based qualifications to recognise occupational competence, in the late 1980s. However political pressure forced Scotland to join in, and SVQs were introduced from 1990. They were accredited and mostly awarded by SCOTVEC (since 1997 by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)). Their design is virtually identical to NVQs, and many of the issues and criticisms of NVQs apply equally to SVQs (eg. Eraut 2001). Many Scottish educationists saw the introduction of SVQs as a retrograde step, because they were based on a narrower notion of competence than SCOTVEC modules. Unlike the other reforms in this sequence, SVQs were not a unifying measure; they were designed primarily for the workplace so instead of unifying the qualifications system they exacerbated the separation of work-based and institution-based learning which remains one of the main divisions within Scottish education and training.

Unitisation of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs). Following the Action Plan's modularisation of non-advanced vocational provision, from 1989 SCOTVEC's main advanced courses, HNCs and HNDs, were reformed to create a single, unit-based national framework. HNCs and HNDs are the main HE qualifications below degree level, and delivered mainly in FE. They are important parts of the Scottish system; in 2000–01 sub-degree qualifications accounted for two-thirds (66%) of undergraduate entrants to HE (Scottish Executive 2002, Table 5). They account for about a third of the 50% of young people who now enter full-time HE, and for a majority of adult and part-time entrants. One consequence of unitisation was that HNCs and HNDs were based on the same bank of units, and it became possible to progress from an HNC (12 units) to an HND (30 units) by adding further units. The process also provided an opportunity to articulate many HN awards with University degree programmes, allowing further opportunities for progression. More than half of students completing sub-degree qualifications currently progress to degrees or other study.

Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SCOTCAT) Scheme. In 1991 the SCOTCAT framework was formally established as the national credit framework for HE in Scotland, based on credits and levels (Menmuir 1999). SCOTCAT was recognised by all Scottish HE institutions by 1992, and in 1993 the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA) was set up to oversee its development. The progress of SCOTCAT was affected by the close links of Scottish HE with other parts of the UK. The 1990s saw an upsurge of interest in credit arrangements in the UK, stimulated by the 1993 Robertson Report (HEQC 1993), but progress at UK level remained slower than in Scotland, although here too the development and implementation of SCOTCAT has been uneven across the sector. The recent development and implementation of SCOTCAT has been, in effect, subsumed within the SCQF.

Higher Still. From 1999 the Higher Still reform has introduced a 'unified system of courses and assessment' leading to National Qualifications (NQs) (Scottish Office, 1994, p.12). NQs are awarded by the SQA, which was created in 1997 from a merger

of SCOTVEC with its academic counterpart the Scottish Examination Board. The new unified system incorporates most post-16 school- and college-based provision, including Highers and SCOTVEC modules and both academic and vocational subjects, below HE level. Higher Still's unified system is more prescriptive than the SCQF. The curriculum is designed according to a common architecture of 40-hour units, commonly grouped into 160-hour courses and with the possibility of larger Scottish Group Awards. There are common criteria for curriculum and assessment. NQs are available at seven levels (corresponding to SCQF levels 1 to 7) and their main rationale was to provide the unified 'climbing frame' that would enable all potential students, including lower-attaining 16 year-olds, to access provision at a suitable level and to have flexible opportunities to progress within the mainstream education system. The new assessment arrangements precipitated the 'exams crisis' of 2000, when many SQA candidates received late or incorrect results, but Higher Still retains the broad support of Scottish educationists. Nevertheless its prescriptive design rules, and especially those concerning assessment, have been a source of tension; implementation has been slower than expected in the FE sector whose concerns include the constraints on flexible delivery and the acceptability of the new provision to employers (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001; Howieson, *et al.*, 2001; Raffe, *et al.*, 2002).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCQF

The origin of the SCQF was described by one of my interviewees as 'a few people rolling out an idea until we had critical mass'. It started in the mid 1990s as an idea to build a wider framework around the two national frameworks that were then taking shape: Higher Still (NQs) and SCOTCAT, the first two columns in Figure 1. Most of the key individuals driving it forward were associated with one or other of these developments.

The role of HE 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 FE. 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, 2001b; 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.

The process was given momentum in 1997 by the Garrick Report of the Scottish Committee of the Dearing Inquiry into HE. This recommended that HE providers, the QAA, SQA and SACCA 'should together consider and adopt an integrated qualifications framework based around level of study and Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme credit points' (NCIHE, 1997b, p.39). Both Garrick and the UK-wide Dearing Report recognised the benefits of a qualifications framework for HE, but they acknowledged that Scotland would require a different framework from the rest of the UK. This was to be the subject of tension between QAA Scotland and QAA at UK level over the following years.

The government had not played a leading role in the development so far, although the support of one or two key officials was critical. In 1998 it endorsed the SCQF in *Opportunity Scotland: a paper on lifelong learning*. It announced a ten-point Action Plan; point nine promised that by 2002 ‘we will have introduced Higher Still and developed a comprehensive Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework building on the success of the SCOTCAT system’ (Scottish Office, 1998, p.5). ‘We will join a group to develop the Framework and expect it to be in place by August 1999’ (p.63). Like other time scales for the SCQF, this proved too ambitious.

In April 1999 three HE bodies—the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (soon to be re-named Universities Scotland), the QAA and SACCA—together with the SQA and the Scottish Office published a consultative document *Adding Value to Learning: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF, 1999). This contained proposals for an 11-level framework, with the upper levels based on SCOTCAT, and suggested that the Framework be introduced in 2000 when the first SQA National (Higher Still) Qualifications would be awarded. Responses to the consultation expressed general support for a framework with broad scope and based on levels and SCOTCAT credit points.

Early in 2000 the SCQF formally entered its development phase. A development and implementation plan was agreed by the four ‘development partners’: QAA, SQA, Universities Scotland and the Scottish Executive (as the Scottish Office had become, under the Scottish Parliament established in 1999). The plan covered the three years to spring 2003, by when the SCQF would apply to all the main HE and mainstream national qualifications, and to a significant proportion of other major qualifications, and it would be the main language for describing provision and recording qualifications (SCQF, 2000). The plan was to be taken forward by the four development partners advised by a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) representing main stakeholders. The plan listed seven strands of development: establishing and servicing the JAC; developing and enhancing the national structure and language (including positioning the main qualifications within the structure); operationalising the SCQF (much of this to be carried out by development partners in their own spheres as awarders of qualifications); raising awareness; relating to and informing UK and European developments; monitoring and reviewing; and ‘enhancing the SCQF and responding to national education and training developments as appropriate’ (SCQF, 2000, p.7). However it was not until March 2001 that a development officer—the SCQF’s first full-time employee—was appointed. This represented a tiny commitment compared with the large bureaucracies supporting other qualifications frameworks (Young, 2001b), but it was a step change from the previous situation when the ‘joint secretariat’, comprising officers of the four development partners, were ‘trying to do it in our lunchtimes once a week’. The SCQF’s main stakeholders have consistently opposed the creation of a central bureaucracy on the grounds that it would undermine the partnership approach. However this at times slowed down the process.

The prolonged search for a chair of the JAC who would be acceptable to all parties caused further delay. David Miller, chair of the SQA, was eventually appointed and the JAC met for the first time in June 2000, but two months later the SQA ‘exams crisis’ (when many SQA candidates received late or incorrect results) precipitated Miller’s resignation. Eventually Andrew Cubie accepted the chair after receiving guarantees of ministerial commitment to the Framework. Dr Cubie is a prominent lawyer and a former chair of CBI Scotland as well as of the Court of Napier University; he is best known in Scottish education as chair of the inquiry which led to the abolition of ‘up-front’ student fees. The exams crisis caused additional delay by diverting the attention of SQA away from the Framework in order to focus on immediate operational issues.

The SCQF was formally launched at a conference in December 2001 on the basis of a document published three months earlier (SCQF, 2001). This outlined a framework based on 12 levels and SCOTCAT credit points, and provided descriptors setting out the ‘characteristic generic outcomes’ at each level. The HE end of the framework had already been introduced in a document published by the QAA in the previous January (QAA, 2001). The levels and labels were the same as elsewhere in the UK at Honours degree and postgraduate levels, but different at the lower levels. This was the outcome of a heated debate within the QAA over whether there should be a single UK framework for HE or whether Scotland should have a separate framework.

The SCQF launch conference was addressed by Wendy Alexander, the Scottish Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, who said that the SCQF was ‘crucial in achieving a lifelong learning culture’ in Scotland (SCQF, 2002a, p.1). The Framework received a further boost in March 2002, when it figured prominently in the Interim Report of the Inquiry into Lifelong Learning by the Scottish Parliament’s Committee on Enterprise and Lifelong Learning. The Committee advocated a national strategy to unify the four main sectors of lifelong learning—HE, FE, vocational training and community/voluntary education—and saw the SCQF as an important instrument to promote this. The Framework was the basis for one of the Committee’s main recommendations, for a general entitlement to lifelong learning, although this recommendation was expressed more tentatively in the final report, published in November 2002, than in the interim report (Scottish Parliament, 2002a; 2002b). The Committee’s reports, according to one interviewee, ‘woke up’ some members of the JAC and made them realise that this was ‘not a side development but the national framework for Scotland’. It also raised the profile of the SCQF in the wider community. From now on a key problem for the SCQF was to be the management of expectations: expectations about the speed with which the Framework could be developed, expectations about its potential impact on such issues as parity of esteem, and expectations about policy breadth, that is, the range of other measures which it would accompany.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCQF

Following its official launch at the December 2001 conference, the SCQF moved into its implementation phase. An Implementation Group was established early in 2002. It was chaired initially by Andrew Cubie, and then by Heather Jones, a senior Scottish Executive official. The Implementation Group represents the main participants in the implementation of the SCQF, and its membership overlaps substantially with the JAC. In principle, at least, the initiative is progressively moving from the four development partners to a larger group of ‘implementation partners’. The JAC, which also includes partners not directly involved in the implementation, retains the main role in maintaining the partnership and coordinating partners’ activities; its chair, Andrew Cubie, is the public face of the SCQF. The process still relies on a very small staff, but additional resources were announced by Iain Gray, Alexander’s successor as minister, in December 2002.

The *National Plan for the Implementation of the Framework*, published in December 2002, identified the next tasks (SCQF, 2000b). Several of these concern information and communication. The SCQF aspires to become the ‘national language’ to describe qualifications in Scotland; the implementation plan spells out measures to make sure that this language is used in public descriptions of educational provision, in guidance, in individual records of achievement, and as the basis for developing and publicising credit transfer and progression routes.

However, the biggest implementation task is to fit the full range of Scottish qualifications into the SCQF. The implementation plan announced that ‘[b]y 2004-

05 most Scottish qualifications will be in accordance with the Framework' (SCQF, 2002b). This involves a considerable extension beyond the two frameworks around which the SCQF was first constructed, National Qualifications and SCOTCAT, and these two frameworks are themselves not fully implemented. The qualifications to be fitted into the SCQF include HNCs and HNDs (currently under review), SVQs, other qualifications awarded by the SQA, professional qualifications and those awarded for continuous professional development, and qualifications awarded by employers. There is considerable interest in using the SCQF to gain recognition for community learning, and to accredit prior and experiential learning. Both of these pose real challenges for the framework, but they are under consideration by the Implementation Group. According to one interviewee in summer 2002: 'So far the approach is like doing a jigsaw puzzle. You start with the pieces that are easier to fit in and hope that they will make it easier to fit the other pieces later on.'

Some of the difficulties in fitting the pieces into the jigsaw puzzle are exemplified by SVQs. In order to be included in the Framework qualifications and their constituent units must be credit-rated (their volume measured in terms of SCOTCAT credit points) and levelled (assigned to one of the 12 SCQF levels), and their assessment must be quality-assured. Measuring the volume of SVQs is not only a technical problem but a challenge to their whole philosophy. NVQs and SVQs have resisted the notion that learning could be quantified, especially in terms of hours as this implies 'time-serving' (Howieson 1999). Levelling raises further problems. The SCQF level descriptors do not easily accommodate the kinds of learning outcomes which define SVQs, and they may need to be revised. Whole SVQs are already levelled but their constituent units are not, and the five SVQ levels are broader than the 12 levels of the SCQF. SVQs may be allowed to 'straddle' adjacent SCQF levels, with (for example) SVQ level 3 placed at levels 5 to 7 of the SCQF. Despite these problems, SVQs may prove to be one of the easier pieces of the jigsaw; other qualifications will present additional challenges. A particular issue is how the Framework can be used for learning that does not lead to formal qualifications. This may involve providing an intermediate status, half in and half out of the Framework, in which learning is described in terms of the SCQF levels but not in terms of credit.

The Framework needs to establish a body or a procedure to manage the process and to approve new qualifications. In the case of qualifications awarded by the development partners—SQA and HE institutions—the awarding bodies' own judgements about credit, level and quality assurance are accepted. However, as one interviewee noted, this may lead other awarding bodies to feel that they 'just need to knock on the door and step through', even if their judgements of level and credit, or their quality assurance, may be suspect. This is a sensitive process; another interviewee felt that the SCQF had been 'stuck on this problem for about three years'.

These problems are further complicated by the wider UK dimension. Many professional qualifications are awarded across the UK. SVQs cannot be permitted to diverge too much from the UK model for NVQs. Many qualifications awarded in Scotland, including NVQs themselves and City & Guilds, are regulated in England, and there are international qualifications such as the European Computer Driving Licence in widespread use. Qualifications must have value in a UK-wide (if not wider) labour market; for example, the Army is keen for its own exit qualifications to be placed in the SCQF, but they must also be recognised across the UK. However, the SCQF does not map precisely onto other UK frameworks (it has more levels, especially at the school-HE interface) and the SCQF tends to be at a more advanced stage, especially compared with England where most UK-wide qualifications are owned or regulated. If Scotland were to place other countries' qualifications into its own framework, this could cause anomalies later on if those frameworks placed them

according to different principles. These anomalies would be particularly sensitive if the frameworks concerned were used for regulation or funding. The preferred approach is to develop principles for reading across from one framework to another, but this is only possible if the other frameworks have been implemented.

Similar issues apply on a European and international level. All my interviewees agreed that there had been no international model for the SCQF; Scotland is out in front and this could pose problems if the rest of the world—or at least the rest of Europe—decides to go in a different direction. Scotland is a small country, and it is not represented as a separate member state in European decision-making fora. Current European developments such as the Bologna and Copenhagen processes (to promote European cooperation and convergence in HE and in vocational education and training respectively) are being watched carefully. For example, there is a concern that Europe might move towards a credit model based on contact hours. This would conflict with the philosophy of the SCQF which is based on quality-assured learning outcomes, even if these are quantified in terms of notional learning hours.

A further set of issues concerns the definition of full implementation of the SCQF. We can observe two contrasting views, which correspond to narrower and broader positions on what I have called the ‘policy breadth’ of a qualifications framework. 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. The area which has received greatest attention is the interface between FE and HE, and the willingness of universities to give credit to entrants with HNCs or HNDs obtained in FE colleges (Musselbrook, *et al.*, 2000). The strongest exponents of the broader view described above tend to be in the FE sector (Kelly, 2002). Many of the FE submissions to the Parliament’s Committee inquiry had this broader notion of implementation in mind when they called for the Framework to be implemented more fully or more quickly. The Association of Scottish Colleges argued:

‘If learners are to be able to access qualifications how, where, and when their learning needs and schedule requires, then key elements of SCQF have to be accepted. These are:

- Modularisation of provision
- Continuous assessment of attainment based on coursework
- External verification of provision to ensure national standards and requirements are met
- Underpinning systems of quality assurance
- Assignment of units, courses (groups of units) and group awards (groups of courses) to one of the 12 levels of SCQF
- Cumulative certification recording what has been achieved in the past not just the current year
- Development of a core skills profile to demonstrate the skills particularly valued by employers (communication, numeracy, IT, working with others etc)
- Parity of esteem for academic (‘capability’) and vocational (‘competence’) awards.’ (ASC, 2001, para 5.9)

This is a stronger interpretation of the ‘key elements’ of the SCQF than many other stakeholders would accept. A similar diversity of perceptions of what would constitute full implementation of the framework has been observed in the South African NQF (South Africa DoE/DoL, 2002).

THE POLICY PROCESS OF THE SCQF

As with other educational initiatives, the distinction between developing and implementing the Framework is blurred. The principles which define the Framework—such as its definitions of levels and credit—have to be clarified, interpreted and revised in the process of fitting qualifications into the Framework; in other words, development continues during implementation. However, the distinction between development and implementation may still be important if the model for managing the development is put under pressure by the new demands of implementation.

The process of developing the SCQF has been characterised by incrementalism, voluntarism, partnership and pragmatism. It has been incremental because it builds on earlier unifying reforms and brings together existing sub-frameworks. It has been voluntaristic, because the Framework has no regulatory function and no stakeholder who owns, awards or uses a qualification has been compelled to join in. It has been based on a partnership approach which has been consciously and deliberately fostered since the earliest days of the Framework. As one interviewee noted, this approach ‘makes things happen slowly, but it makes things happen more securely’. Partnership has been sustained by the relatively low profile of the Scottish Executive, although my informants have different views on whether this has reflected a deliberate strategy to keep the partnership intact or a failure, until relatively recently, to give the Framework a high priority. Partnership is also sustained by the absence of a large bureaucracy.

The process is not ‘bottom-up’; the Framework has been built around two existing centralised developments, National Qualifications (Higher Still) and SCOTCAT, and it has been led by the organisations who own these developments. Functions which are carried out by central bureaucracies in other countries’ NQFs are in Scotland carried out by the development partners, especially the SQA, in respect of the sub-frameworks which they own. The partnership approach is thus made possible by the incremental and federal nature of the SCQF. The partnership arrangements resemble the layers of an onion, with the four development partners (described to me as ‘*primus inter pares*’) at the centre, other main stakeholders such as FE in the next layer and more marginal stakeholders in the outer layer. There are frictions within the partnership. FE, probably the sector most directly affected by the Framework, has resented its secondary status. The JAC was established primarily in order to keep the partners on board without undermining the primacy of the four development partners.

The pragmatism with which the partnership has been sustained is reflected in the underlying approach to qualifications. The South African Qualifications Authority describes its NQF as a ‘social construct’ (Cosser, 2001, p.156). The SCQF similarly reflects a social rather than a technicist view of qualifications. In the social view, the role and value of qualifications is not merely a function of their technical properties such as the reliability and validity of assessment and the knowledge or competences which they certify. The value of qualifications is also based on social factors such as trust and confidence, and on the power and influence of the bodies which award them and of the groups and organisations which use them (Young, 2002, p.57). A pragmatic approach to a qualifications framework avoids stringent criteria for admitting qualifications, and it interprets its criteria flexibly. It does not rely purely on technical judgements of level, volume and quality when taking decisions about fitting qualifications into the framework. Instead it takes care, at least tacitly, not to undermine the trust that underpins qualifications, and not to offend powerful groups

whose support may be needed to make the Framework effective. The SCQF, hitherto, has followed a largely pragmatic approach. In contrast with other Frameworks – such as NVQs in the rest of the UK, or the NQFs in New Zealand and South Africa – it has not aimed to challenge existing educational or social hierarchies.

These four features of the SCQF policy process – incrementalism, voluntarism, partnership and pragmatism – may come under pressure as the implementation gathers paces and especially as the SCQF is extended to include additional qualifications. In the first place, the process may become less incremental. Unlike the qualifications already in the SCQF, many of the qualifications to be admitted are not part of existing sub-frameworks; the Framework aims to absorb them in a single step, without passing through the intermediate stage of a smaller (but perhaps more prescriptive) framework. Second, the voluntarism of the Framework may become increasingly meaningless as it expands. If all other qualifications are in the SCQF it will become more difficult to refuse to join in. And as the Framework expands it may become increasingly difficult to keep it separate from regulation and funding, especially if, as proposed by the Parliament's Committee, it is used to define an entitlement. The FE and HE Funding Councils are expected to move towards credit-based funding, but not based on the SCQF. However, a joint working group of the Councils and the bodies which fund public training has recommended that they should 'ensure that all the lifelong learning provision they fund is clearly embedded in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework' (HIE/SEn/SFEFC/SHEFC, 2000, p.31). My interviewees agreed that the Framework should not be linked to funding and regulation, because raising the stakes in this way would make it harder to implement, but they recognised that such a link might be inevitable in the long term.

Expanding the Framework will increase the number of partners and this may threaten the carefully constructed balance between the different categories of partners, the layers of the onion described above. Speakers at the SCQF's second annual conference in December 2002 felt that 'professional bodies and employers in particular feel they are not fully engaged'. To include learners as full partners will present an even bigger challenge. Hitherto partnership has been sustained by the absence of a substantial bureaucracy. Much of the additional funding for implementation announced in December 2002 will be spent on consultancies rather than permanent staff, but the SCQF may still need a larger organisation to manage its expansion. The partnership would also be threatened if the Scottish Executive became—or was perceived to be—the main driver of the SCQF. And as implementation proceeds the partners' different views of what would constitute full implementation, and different expectations of policy breadth, will become more salient. This may divide the partners, with (for example) FE wanting a broader view of implementation and other education providers wanting to preserve their freedom to decide whether and how to use the Framework.

The pragmatism of the SCQF approach will be tested in the process of defining detailed criteria and establishing procedures for admitting qualifications to the Framework. These criteria and procedures will need to be technically rigorous if confidence is to be maintained: one or two maverick qualifications could undermine the whole Framework. But the process will need more than technical rigour; it will need to be sensitive to the wider politics of the situation in order to maintain its legitimacy. If the qualifications of the development partners (SQA and universities) are assumed to meet the quality criteria, will other influential awarding bodies accept that their own qualifications need further scrutiny, especially if this scrutiny is administered or overseen by rival awarding bodies? Technical rigour may conflict with pragmatism. The first main test of the process may come when a high-status qualification owned or used by a powerful organisation is refused admission to the SCQF on the grounds of quality.

THE SCQF AND THE FUTURE OF SCOTTISH EDUCATION

The SCQF is part of a wider process towards the ‘unification’ of education and training systems, and it continues a series of unifying measures in Scottish education. In a recent review of cross-national evidence on unification I suggested that this term embraced three inter-related trends: the integration of general and vocational curricula; the reduction or elimination of differences between educational tracks; and the development of ‘seamless’ opportunities for access and progression in lifelong learning (Raffe, 2002). The SCQF belongs with the third of these. It aims to help people to access appropriate learning opportunities throughout their lives, and to receive credit for learning already undertaken. This is how the framework is perceived by most stakeholders. A majority of the submissions to the Parliament Committee’s Lifelong Learning Inquiry which mentioned the SCQF linked it with access, progression or pathways. The submissions also reveal how the SCQF has displaced Higher Still, nominally a lifelong learning measure, in the public rhetoric and debates about unification: 47 of the 130 submissions mentioned the SCQF (this was before the Committee’s own report raised the Framework’s public profile); only 12 referred to Higher Still or the changes it had introduced.⁴

However, aspirations for the SCQF extend beyond promoting access and progression. Expectations are high. The official launch document linked the SCQF with the government’s desire to engender a ‘culture of lifelong learning’ (SCQF, 2001, p.1). Many people expect the SCQF to promote the other two aspects of unification described above: the integration of general and vocational curricula and the reduction of differences between tracks. For example, some people expect that the SCQF, by placing different types of learning in a common metric of levels and credits, will promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications (others feel that it *should* promote parity, even if they are sceptical in practice). The Framework is seen by some as an instrument, not only for reforming the way that learning is assessed and recorded, but also for reforming the learning process itself. And there is anecdotal evidence, especially from the FE and HE sectors, of the Framework’s catalytic potential. It can be a catalyst for institutional collaboration, for reviews of the curriculum and the means of delivering it, for enhancing support services for students, for improving guidance and for upgrading institutions’ information systems. It is too early to judge whether such changes will remain isolated examples or whether they will pervade the system and eventually transform it.

There are fears as well as aspirations for the Framework. Its impact might not all be positive, and at least three dangers have been identified. First, the SCQF might promote a ‘certificated society’ rather than a learning society (Ainley, 1997). Learning that does not lead to qualifications, including much community-based learning, might be devalued or distorted in order to fit in to an outcomes-based framework. Second, the SCQF might accelerate the process of academic drift. It might encourage only vertical progression, and devalue learning opportunities which do not lead to HE. By creating a more unified system and reducing internal divisions it might make it harder for particular sectors - such as vocational training or community learning - to insulate themselves from the dominant academic ethos. The third danger is that the SCQF might be appropriated for purposes for which it was not designed, and used as an instrument of regulation, funding and control. The SCQF’s central position in the strategic thinking of both the Parliament Committee and the Scottish Executive may carry a threat as well as a promise.

Or might both the aspirations and the fears for the SCQF be unrealised? If its main role is simply to be the ‘national language’ for Scottish qualifications, some of the aspirations attached to it reflect a strong faith in linguistic determinism. The SCQF is not a sufficient condition for a new culture of lifelong learning. Its impact will depend on whether (and how) it induces changes in what I have called the

institutional logic, as well as in its own intrinsic logic. All the main stakeholders agree that wider changes (to the institutional logic) are needed. The difference between the strong and weak views of implementation described above is simply over whether these changes need to be part of the implementation policy or whether they will emerge more or less spontaneously with the Framework as a catalyst. Perhaps the best approach lies between these two positions: the wider changes required for the Framework to be effective may need to be coordinated even if they are not directed or controlled from the centre. This will be a task for the partnership. In analysing Higher Still we have questioned the assumption that once its unified system was in place its effectiveness would be maximised by a *laissez-faire* policy which allowed each individual or institution to use it in the way that best suited their own needs (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001). Such a policy could result in fragmentation rather than unification if these uses were not coordinated. We presented alternative metaphors for the future development of Higher Still: a chartered bus, whose passengers have agreed on where they want to go, or private taxis in which every one goes off in their own direction. The SCQF may face the same choice. Its impact may depend on whether its partnership arrangements can withstand the challenges of the implementation phase and coordinate, but not direct, such further change as will be needed to make it effective.

NOTES

- 1 This article was first published in the *Journal of Education and Work* (2003) volume 16 (3). Permission to reprint has been given by Taylor and Francis Publishers, www.tandf.co.uk.
- 2 The NQF should not be confused with the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme, both of which are closer to the SCQF.
- 3 Here I treat 'policy breadth' as a dimension of qualifications frameworks. However some analysts, notably Young, tend to use the term 'qualifications framework' to describe only 'outcome-based' approaches which 'use qualifications as a relatively autonomous instrument of policy' (Young, 2001a, p.15). In other words an approach characterised by very high policy breadth would not be described as a qualifications framework because it would not be primarily about qualifications. Different definitions of qualifications framework can lead to radically different conclusions, especially in cross-national comparisons. For example Young sees qualifications frameworks as characteristic of the UK and other anglophone countries. By contrast Wright, *et al.* (1997), reviewing the experience of European Union countries, use a broader concept of framework. They conclude that 'national qualification frameworks are a fundamental feature of higher education in continental Europe... The absence of a national qualifications framework in the UK marks it out from all other European countries...' (p.64).
- 4 Based on the first-round submissions which were accessible on the Parliament's web site in summer 2002.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paper is a product of the ESRC-funded project on *The Introduction of a Unified System of Post-Compulsory Education in Scotland* (R000238420). It was presented to the seminar on Qualifications Frameworks at the University of Edinburgh, January 2003, and to the Commonwealth/NZQA seminar on *Problems and Promises for Commonwealth Qualifications Frameworks* in Wellington, February 2003. I am grateful to all those who agreed to be interviewed about the SCQF, or who gave advice and help in other ways, and to Cathy Howieson and Michael Young for comments on earlier drafts.

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