

EQF Level Visibility on Qualification Certificates



A report for the UK European
Co-ordination Group for VET Initiatives

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Final Report

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1. Introduction to the Report

This report provides data on EQF level visibility on qualifications certificates, based on a survey conducted with UK Awarding Organisations by the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) from June to August 2015.

FAB is the membership organisation for UK vocational awarding organisations with 140 organisations in membership. FAB represents these awarding organisations on the UK European Coordination Group for VET Initiatives, and was commissioned by the UK EQF National Co-ordination Points (NCPs) to undertake this work as part of the 2015 UK EQF NCP work programme, partly funded by the European Commission (EC).

The EQF is a reference framework which compares different countries' qualifications systems and frameworks. It was developed as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable to individuals, employers, organisations and institutions. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales (CQFW) have been referenced to the levels of the EQF since 2010.

The European Parliament recommends that member states adopt measures so that all new qualification certificates, diplomas and "Europass" documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

Since completion of the referencing, the UK EQF NCPs have undertaken projects to promote the use of the EQF across the United Kingdom and this has included work on the recommendation to make the EQF level visible on qualification certificates and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities.

UK EQF NCPs conducted a study several years ago with qualifications regulators and awarding organisations (AOs) to explore the options for displaying EQF level on qualification certificates. It was concluded by the regulators that they would not enforce this but AOs could put EQF level on their qualification certificates if they wished; and the EQF level would be displayed in each of the national qualifications databases relating to the QCF, SCQF and CQFW.

The recent 2012-2013 evaluation of the EQF has called again for the development of a common European approach to indicate EQF levels in qualification certificates, diplomas, Europass supplements and qualifications databases in a bid to help stakeholders to easily identify the EQF level of qualifications across Europe. The EC is now asserting the need for this to be addressed by member states.

Consequently, the UK EQF NCP leads agreed that the 2015 UK EQF work programme should include a piece of work with AOs on EQF visibility on certificates and invited AOs to complete a short questionnaire which included questions on:

- AO awareness of the EQF.
- AOs' current positions regarding EQF level visibility on qualification certificates.
- The plans that AOs have to reference the EQF in the future and if not, what options (other than EQF level on certificates) AOs might consider to increase the visibility of the EQF level for their qualification certificates.

2. Methodology

The survey questionnaire on EQF level visibility was developed by the UK EQF National Contact Points and conducted with UK Awarding Organisations (AOs) between 22nd June and 3rd August 2015.

The UK AOs who received the survey questionnaire electronically included Ofqual regulated AOs (165 in total of which 120 are FAB members and 20 are associate FAB members), plus 71 unregulated awarding organisations, 236 in total.

A total of 60 responses were received either through telephone interview or emailed responses with approximately 85% of the responses from FAB members.

3. Results of the survey

3.1 Overall awareness

Were you aware of the EQF and its purpose before this survey?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	100.0%	60
No	0.0%	0
Any further comment?		5
answered question		60
skipped question		0

While all AOs surveyed were aware of the EQF, two of the comments suggested a lower level of understanding.

“While I know what it is, it is not something our AO uses and I have very little information on it.”

3.2 Awareness of QCF/SCQF/CQFW referencing to the EQF

Before this survey were you aware that the QCF/SCQF/CQFW are officially referenced to the EQF?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	95.0%	57
No	5.0%	3
Any further comment?		2
answered question		60
skipped question		0

There is a high level of awareness among AOs that the various national frameworks are referenced to the EQF. There was also an observation that adding the EQF to the “Qualifications can cross Boundaries” document published by QAA (www.qaa.ac.uk) will assist in raising the visibility of the cross referencing.

3.3 Awareness of Alignment

Are you aware as to how the levels of your Country's Framework (QCF; SCQF; or CQFW) are aligned to the EQF?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	81.7%	49
No	18.3%	11
Any further comment?		4
answered question		60
skipped question		0

Although awareness of level alignment is still high, some comments suggest that AOs are not always aware of what the alignment is:

"I still double check, because I have to refer to a lot of different international frameworks depending on the people I'm negotiating with."

"I'm not sure of exact alignments but I am aware that the alignment exists and I would be able to use the knowledge I have to find information quickly if I needed to."

3.4 Awareness of the Designation of EQF levels

Before this survey, were you aware that all those qualifications within the UK frameworks referenced to the EQF (QCF, SCQF and CQFW) can be designated an EQF level?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	73.3%	44
No	26.7%	16
Any further comment?		3
answered question		60
skipped question		0

While there was a fairly high level of awareness reported on the survey for the designation of EQF levels, comments suggested that there may be some uncertainty when applying this to certificates.

"I am not clear on the process for doing this other than making an informal reference to the EQF levels"

3.5 Awareness of Inclusion on Databases

Are you aware that the Register of Regulated Qualifications and SCQF qualifications databases include EQF level?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	67.8%	40
No	32.2%	19
Any further comment?		3
answered question		59
skipped question		1

A substantial minority of AOs are not aware that the register of regulated qualifications or the SCQF include EQF levels.

3.6 Inclusion of EQF Levels

Do you currently include details of EFQ level on the following?				
Answer Options	Yes	No	N/A	Response Count
Course material	11%	85%	4%	52
Promotional material	20%	74%	6%	51
Qualification Certificates?	11%	89%	0%	54
Transcripts	4%	85%	11%	51
Europass Certificate and Diploma Supplements	7%	67%	26%	52
Other	7%	48%	44%	34
answered question				59
skipped question				1

The survey reveals a low level of inclusion and comments suggest that this can vary from qualification to qualification within an AO. Some of the “inclusion” is limited to a link to other third party documents that reference the EQF level, for example “Qualifications can cross Boundaries”.

3.7 Plans for Inclusion

Do you currently include details of EFQ level on the following?				
Answer Options	Yes	No	N/A	Response Count
Course material	30%	57%	13%	52
Promotional material	37%	52%	11%	51
Qualification Certificates?	41%	56%	4%	54
Transcripts	17%	57%	26%	51
Europass Certificate and Diploma Supplements	11%	52%	37%	52
Other	4%	35%	61%	34
answered question				549
skipped question				6

While there are substantially more AOs considering the inclusion of EQF details in a range of key documents, particularly certificates, the majority are still not planning to even consider referencing the EQF.

3.8 Options for Increasing Visibility

AOs were asked, “What options would your AO consider to increase the visibility of EQF level for UK qualifications (i.e. those within the UK frameworks referenced to the EQF) awarded to learners?”

The free text comments suggest that they are willing to consider ways to increase visibility. In particular adding EQF information to their website, promotional material, certificates and other associated documentation. However, there were some reservations about the value of the EQF to the learner.

“No demand from their customers (learners) and not a requirement to do it, therefore wouldn’t do it. I think training providers/centres should be the ones advertising it.”

There is some resistance from AOs without a significant EU market, and a concern that the addition of another level and logo on a certificate might confuse learners.

“We would consider including details of EQF on course materials, promotional materials and certificates if we felt it was relevant to do so. We do not market to European countries so we have not felt the need to do this, and we do not want to include information which might confuse the majority of participants.”

The low level of market demand for EQF information and cost is cited by some AOs as a reason for their reluctance to promote the EQF when it is not a requirement.

“We would consider referencing if this was agreed across all AOs. Cost considerations prevent us from taking this step voluntarily.”

There is some resistance to adding the EQF levels to certificates due to space and meeting the regulatory requirements for the inclusion of other information.

“One of the issues is space on certificates, transcripts and marketing material given the regulatory requirements for levels and logos set by other regulators and frameworks.”

Awareness and adoption of the EQF from outside Europe would increase the attractiveness for some AOs.

“If the EQF was recognised by/ linked to other overseas frameworks (US/ Gulf/ Australasia, etc) it might motivate awarding bodies to raise the profile of the EQF. To my knowledge, we receive very few queries regarding the EQF.”

3.9 Communication of EQF

When asked, “Does your AO communicate anything about the EQF to its centres, learners, employers (or any other stakeholders)?” the majority (75%) answered no.

The reason for this lack of communication is a perceived lack of demand and a low level of awareness among learners and employers.

“It is not commonly used and therefore our centres do not promote this information.”

“Whilst we are asked about QCF levels, we are not asked about EQF levels.”

“We used to (communicate the EQF) but it was found that it was not widely accepted in Europe.”

“If anyone did it would have been a rare occurrence. I haven’t even heard EQF discussed at accreditation meetings.”

The exception being when related to European projects.

“In general no. The exception is that we have been involved in a couple of European Transfer of Innovation projects funded by Leonardo or Erasmus +”

3.10 Nature of communication

AOs were asked, “With whom, how and what is the nature of the information communicated?” The information is most commonly communicated using equivalence tables or references to more detailed documentation via newsletters and the website. Some AOs include it in their centre approval documentation.

“Our Academic Regulations include information on the frameworks which our Qualifications sit in, and key equivalencies including the EQF. This document is sent to Centres on first approval, and reissued periodically. It is also available in the public domain on our website since it may be of note to other stakeholders.”

“Communicated in conversations with new and existing centres, it is of particular interest to organisations that have employees in other European countries”

Involvement in EU funded projects is also mentioned.

“We are occasionally involved in EU funded projects that require a reference.”

3.11 Importance to Business

AOs were asked, “How important is the EQF to your business?”

Currently, the EQF is not considered important to AO businesses:

Answer Options	Response Percent
Important	11.0%
Some importance	20.0%
Not important	69.0%

However, comments suggest that AOs remain open-minded and are considering the potential of the EQF, especially when planning international expansion.

“Currently, insignificant but as we have plans to expand internationally within the next two years EQF could give us an advantage.”

“We are a very small AO and we think it unlikely that any of our current qualification users would be impacted by EQF considerations. However, we are quite willing to change where we can see some benefit for qualification users.”

The lack of demand from learners, employers and colleges is a recurring theme.

“Very unimportant, very low on the scale of things. I think that it’s a great idea and like the concept, but the reality is that there is no demand for it in the marketplace.”

“It is important but it has been found that it is not widely recognised in Europe. It seems that more work needs to be done at the Government and institution level in Europe to recognise the value of the EQF.”

“If it was commonly used and understood it would have more weight. At the moment people are struggling to understand the QCF changes without us further complicating things.”

The confusion among employers and colleges caused by the misalignment of levels is an issue for some AOs.

“Very limited importance, but we can see potential. The biggest problem for us is that Levels 4 and 5 of the QCF both map to EQF Level 4. This is frustrating - whenever we attempt to engage in dialogue with Centres over the EQF it always deteriorates into a complex debate about this levelling anomaly, and indeed can on occasion undermine confidence in our QCF Diplomas at these levels.”

There is a suggestion that providing detailed information to employers might help promote the use of EQF.

“Our sector employs a huge number of EU citizens as skilled workers. It should therefore be very useful to have a common language for level of qualification. As a membership organisation it would also be useful for determining candidate’s qualification levels. I do, however, have access to databases which employers, especially SMEs just do not even know exist. They are

trying to determine if someone is competent with almost no information to work from.”

3.12 Supporting Greater EQF Understanding

AOs were asked, “How can UK EQF NCPs support greater understanding?”

A number of suggestions were made:

- Raise awareness of the EQF with employers and learners through marketing and public relations.

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“I would suggest that first of all you raise the profile of the EQF with employers - in each European country. Employers would welcome the opportunity to speak in a common language with qualification levels - even just within the UK itself!!”

“Is it possible to promote it at graduate fairs and to employers? We market our courses to employers first and their staff second, because employers usually pay the course fees. They would have to see it as a selling point.”

- Allowing AOs to promote the EQF by using the EQF logo.

“Allowing us to use the Logo would greatly increase the visibility.”

- Gain the full engagement of the government.

“It could help by lobbying government institutions in the UK and Europe to be more aware of the benefits of the EQF to enable learners’ qualifications to be transferable when they wish to work in another country in Europe.”

- Correct flaws in the EQF framework.

“Because levels 5-8 of the EQF have been pegged to the Bologna cycles, it contains a fundamental flaw as a meta-framework: that is, it is specified to a lesser degree of granularity than the national frameworks it describes. This is not just a UK problem - the QCF contains 9 levels (Entry plus 1-8) but so does the NFQ in Ireland, and wherever a national framework includes more than the 8 EQF levels there will always be an anomaly.

In the case of the QCF this is really quite a stumbling block to selling our L4/5 qualifications in parts of Europe. It would be helpful therefore if the NCPs could provide literature, information sheets etc. explaining in brief and clear terms how the whole thing works in different countries. Raising public and stakeholder awareness of what the EQF is, how it works, and what it means in different countries can potentially make it a useful tool for UK awarding bodies to work with.”

- Consider the potential for confusion caused by the proliferation of framework levels that are not perfectly aligned.

“The complexity of different levels within the UK (with Scotland being different to England, Wales and Northern Ireland) let alone the levels in Europe is one that is very difficult to

overcome. For example how many people know that an A level is a Level 3 qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland let alone that means it is Level 4 qualification on the EQF?"

- Make the use of the EQF a regulatory requirement.

"The transferability of qualifications is personally I think important and perhaps insisting that all qualifications that are regulated should have the EQF level on it may help. However, that does not stop a huge number of unregulated qualifications which may or may not have a level on them existing and it would be very difficult to insist that these also have the EQF level on them."

"Encourage AOs to use it and promote the EQF. I can only see there being greater understanding if Ofqual made it mandatory to include this information unless AOs decide there is a tangible benefit of making the effort to be better informed."

- Increase awareness among AOs.

"Possible provide more information to us. I'm not aware of any updates or general information being sent to us since I joined in 2012. All of my information on the EQF comes from previous job roles."

- Provide information that AOs can use to explain and promote the EQF.

"By providing a range to explanatory notes that AOs can easily turn into webpages, leaflets for learners, employers and FE Colleges. I think many AOs are cautious about investing too much time and money into developing promotional materials to explain the EQF, considering the amount of change we are already facing from the regulatory bodies!"

- Promote the benefits of the EQF.

"Perhaps by providing feedback/statistics on the learners that have benefited from the approach."

"Case studies or examples to show how UK learners have used UK qualifications in Europe."



4. Conclusion

There appears to be a high level of awareness of the EQF among AOs, however few (11%) are actively including it on qualification certificates or other key documents. The main factor holding them back is the lack of demand for the EQF from employers or learners.

There is an awareness of the potential benefits of the EQF amongst some AOs and a substantial minority are actively considering the inclusion of the EQF on qualification certificates. However, to significantly increase AO engagement with the EQF would require either a regulatory obligation or a successful promotional/information campaign which increases the level of awareness and understanding among employers and learners.

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