

# The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales: A qualitative review of its impact

Research Summary

Social research

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The main aims of the review were to understand the impact the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales has had in Wales; determine if the structure and purpose of the CQFW should be reviewed; and to set out the key functions that a future credit and qualifications framework could fulfil. The research took place between October 2013 and May 2014.

## Headline Findings

- For many stakeholders the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) has a valuable role as an information tool which provides a common understanding of the value of qualifications and effectively illustrates the structure of the qualifications system in Wales. It is also considered as an enabling tool for skills development, recognition of prior learning and learner progression and to contribute to lifelong learning and mobility opportunities through clear articulation with other frameworks.
- The CQFW is strongly embedded in certain sectors, notably higher education (HE) and adult and community learning (ACL). It is not being used in practice as much as had been envisaged however due to perceived complexities and bureaucracy.
- There is strong support for the continuation of the CQFW and its embedding at the heart of the ongoing design, delivery and use of qualifications in Wales. This process should be led by the Welsh Government with the support of key stakeholders from the education and employment sectors in Wales.

## **Background**

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) was formally adopted by the Welsh Government in 2002 and launched in 2003. Its implementation phase has run from 2003-2014. It is an over-arching structure designed to provide greater clarity on the qualifications system and includes higher education, regulated qualifications and quality assured lifelong learning (QALL). The CQFW brings all recognised learning into a single unifying structure. It is designed to be an inclusive model in that it looks to incorporate all kinds of learning, whether formal, regulated learning, work-based learning or informal and non-formal learning.

The CQFW is underpinned by five key goals, to:

- enable everyone to develop and maintain essential skills;
- encourage people to become lifelong learners;
- exploit the knowledge in businesses and educational institutions;
- encourage business and workers to gain new skills;

- help people within their communities to develop new skills.

## **Methods**

The methods for the research were guided by the development of a review framework. Two literature reviews were conducted. The first involved secondary analysis of current literature relating to the implementation of the CQFW in Wales. This was in order to source examples of the potential and actual impact of engaging with the CQFW on organisations and learners across the education and employment sectors. The second focused on national qualification framework (NQF) policy and practice elsewhere in the world to identify good practice and potential lessons for Wales. Telephone interviews were conducted with a range of key stakeholders in the education and employment sectors in Wales and at a wider UK and EU level. An interview proforma was developed to ensure consistency for this stage of the review. The process was also guided by a sampling framework to ensure a broad range of views from across all stakeholder groups.

## **Key Findings**

### **Awareness of the CQFW and its goals**

Stakeholders generally have good levels of awareness of the CQFW and its goals. For many stakeholders across the education and employment sectors the CQFW has a practical role as an information tool which provides a common, coherent understanding of the value of qualifications and effectively illustrates the structure of the qualifications system in Wales. It is also considered to articulate clearly with other UK, sector-specific and wider international frameworks, thereby enabling potential progression and mobility for learners and encouraging lifelong learning.

Evidence from the review of international examples of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) illustrates similar strategic goals and roles to the CQFW. These roles include NQFs being used as tools to provide information, widen participation, ensure flexibility and portability of qualifications as well as linking to wider aims of national education and training systems that

promote inclusivity and lifelong learning. Like the CQFW, these frameworks have also supported a common credit currency based on notional learning time and qualifications levels, representing different levels of complexity of the learning and skills content of the qualification.

### **Engagement with the CQFW**

The CQFW is strongly embedded in certain sectors, notably higher education (HE) and adult and community learning (ACL) where it is closely aligned with qualifications outcomes and organisational standards. For other sectors, however, there was less engagement with the CQFW and this was more dependent on organisational needs, levels of awareness and sector specific projects funded by the Welsh Government. Strategic stakeholders perceived engagement with the CQFW to be low among employers and most learners. These stakeholders also considered that the CQFW is currently not a driver for policy in Wales and that there is thus a need to increase awareness of, and buy-

in to, the CQFW across the education and employment sectors.

### **Strengths of the CQFW**

Stakeholders from all sectors considered one of the main impacts of the CQFW to have been its role in allowing for greater recognition of prior and informal learning through the Quality Assured Lifelong Learning (QALL) pillar. This was thought to have a particularly important impact on disadvantaged learner groups and links closely to wider Welsh Government lifelong learning and anti-poverty strategies. The CQFW was considered to have contributed to providing and mapping this recognition, raising learner aspirations and promoting progression opportunities.

Linked to this impact was the CQFW's role in facilitating the recognition of non-mainstream provision, enabling providers to develop innovative curriculum offers for learners at the margins of formal education and training. Stakeholders also considered that the CQFW, and associated Welsh Government and EU funding of specific projects, has encouraged a

broader range of organisations to develop more consistency and opportunities through the lifelong learning route. These specific projects have delivered benefits for learners including skills development, gaining qualifications and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

The CQFW was often referred to by stakeholders as supporting a “common currency” of credit that has made it easier to articulate and communicate achievement across sectors, levels and geographical areas. The level descriptors were considered to have had a beneficial impact in terms of developing consistency and therefore trust between stakeholders in the education sector. This consistency has contributed to allowing learners to clearly understand what their qualifications were worth and to map the various learning and progression pathways, allowing additional flexibility and choice for learning journeys.

Some stakeholders pointed to the learning and economic benefits of using the CQFW as a tool to avoid duplication of learning and address

learner drop out. It was noted that this was particularly useful in sectors with a very mobile workforce such as the health sector, creative and cultural industries and prison services. The CQFW was also reported to deliver benefits through promoting sufficient commonality through compatibility with other UK and European Frameworks, thereby enhancing mobility of learners, clarity of information, progression opportunities and quality assurance.

### **Weaknesses of the CQFW**

However, there was widespread opinion among stakeholders that, despite the aims and ambitions of the CQFW, it was not being used in practice as much as had been hoped across the education and employment sectors. Stakeholders outlined a range of reasons for the lack of uptake and embedding across the sectors. These included a lack of senior level strategic support from the Welsh Government, perceived complexities relating to the language and guidance used during the implementation phase, levels of bureaucracy and

paperwork surrounding recognition, and time and resource issues to assess experiential learning, particularly for employers.

At a wider level stakeholders noted that the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) (which is an integral part of the CQFW) is the dominant framework in terms of UK-based employers, awarding organisations and Sector Skills Councils. It was also felt that learners and employers are currently more focused on full qualifications, thereby negating potential engagement with the CQFW.

Some stakeholders considered that CQFW implied a parity of all qualifications and seamless progression routes that did not exist in reality. These stakeholders thus considered that the articulation between the three pillars hasn't therefore necessarily worked as well as it should as a result of this lack of clarity.

These issues are reflected in some of the evaluations of other international NQFs and it is clear that there are common issues

affecting their design and implementation. These include a lack of user-friendliness and poor overall levels of stakeholder understanding and engagement with NQFs; lack of relevance to some employers and industry; lack of embedding in the design and development of learning programmes and qualifications offered; and weaknesses in articulation across sectors.

### **Future role of the CQFW**

The large majority of stakeholders from across all sectors support the continuation of the CQFW and its embedding at the heart of the ongoing design, delivery and use of qualifications in Wales. For these stakeholders, the CQFW provides currency, inclusivity and links to wider goals to promote lifelong learning and progression. The current, and potential ongoing, divergence between the Welsh and English education systems was mentioned by cross-sector stakeholders as an opportunity to use the CQFW to articulate effectively the qualifications landscape in Wales as its identity and education system becomes more distinct.

While support for the continuation of the CQFW was strong, stakeholders from across sectors considered that its current low profile and lack of strategic investment was limiting its potential for impact and use across all sectors in Wales. It was considered by some stakeholders that the Welsh Government should treat the CQFW as a flagship policy and invest in it. There were also suggestions that better alignment with other Welsh Government policy areas would lead to greater embedding and mainstreaming of the CQFW. Furthermore, there was some support for more clear alignment and articulation of the links to the EQF and with frameworks used across the rest of the UK.

### **Design and governance**

For the large majority of stakeholders the design and content of the CQFW was largely satisfactory. Its flexibility and adaptability was seen as a key current strength and something to build on. Suggestions for improvement included that the CQFW be used as a tool to avoid

duplication of learning and support the design and building of new qualifications, again, particularly relating to any Wales-only designed qualifications.

The majority view of stakeholders was that the CQFW continue to be managed by the Welsh Government. These stakeholders, representing views from all sectors, considered that governance arrangements should be broadened, however, with the continued involvement of HEFCW as well as Careers Wales, Qualifications Wales and other stakeholders such as employers' representatives. The formation of a strategic and operation group along the lines of the Credit Common Accord Forum was considered essential to support promotion and implementation of the CQFW in the future.

For some, the Scottish model of governance with the establishment of a charitable educational trust with a partnership board consisting of the Association of Scottish Colleges, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, Scottish Qualification Authority (Regulator)

and Universities Scotland provides an effective example of a dedicated, broad-based partnership approach.

From these stakeholder views it appears that the preferred future direction for the CQFW links to the goals of a 'functional' NQF. Its main goals are to provide a language and route map to make it easier for learners, parents, education professionals and employers to understand progression routes between qualifications and the relative demands of qualifications. A functional NQF can also provide a common currency which can be used to increase the consistency and accountability of credit transfer and as a tool for the accreditation of prior and informal learning.

### **Recommendations**

1. The Welsh Government should respond to strong levels of stakeholder support for the continuation of the CQFW when developing future strategies relating to qualifications and learning.
2. Future development of the CQFW should focus on realistic, achievable and

- measurable goals for its design and implementation. These should link to the aims and objectives of a 'functional' NQF, supporting a common currency for learner achievement and progression.
3. The Welsh Government should use the CQFW to articulate the changing qualifications landscape in Wales and support the design and use of new Wales-only qualifications.
  4. The future role and functions of the CQFW should be a prominent part of discussions among the key stakeholders concerned with management of qualifications and the Qualifications Wales Advisory Board in taking forward the outcomes of the Review of Qualifications.
  5. The Welsh Government should ensure greater senior, strategic level support for the CQFW in order to increase its profile and use across government and the wider education and training sector. This process should be linked to the four recommendations above.
  6. This process should be also supported by an effective and ongoing communications and marketing strategy for the CQFW.
  7. The Welsh Government should explore the potential benefits and challenges of closer alignment of the CQFW with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and other EU educational tools such as European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF), European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) and recognition of informal and non-formal Learning.
  8. This process should be supported by a commitment to continuing to work with other UK countries to ensure maintenance of common standards, compatibility and cooperation.
  9. A strategic and operational group along the lines of the Credit Common Accord



Forum should be established to ensure more effective strategic development, promotion and implementation of the CQFW in line with the findings of this review and future policy requirements. This should include the Welsh Government and HEFCW as well as Qualifications Wales, Careers Wales, Colegau Cymru, Awarding Organisations and other stakeholders such as employers' representatives.

10. Future development of the CQFW requires an increased focus on evaluation to illustrate how CQFW is meeting its objectives.

For further information, please contact:

Sara James  
Knowledge and Analytical Services  
Welsh Government  
Cathays Park  
Cardiff  
CF10 3NQ  
Tel: 029 2082 6812  
[sara.james@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sara.james@wales.gsi.gov.uk)

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