This article outlines the qualifications system that applies in England, which shares many features with those in Wales [1] and Northern Ireland [2]. These similarities reflect many years of close working between the three systems in what was a de-facto single market. However, qualifications policy has diverged to some extent over recent years.

A large number of separate qualifications are available for use in both general and vocational learning outside of higher education [3]. These qualifications are designed to give a reliable indication of an individual’s knowledge, skills or understanding and are only awarded to those who have demonstrated a specified level of attainment. They are used to certify the achievements of individual learners in schools, further education colleges [4] and work-based learning. They also form a major component of accountability systems.

The article describes the role of the statutory examinations regulator for England (Ofqual) and of awarding organisations and centres. It also provides information on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), which replaced the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) in October 2015. The final sections of the article briefly address the alignment of the RQF with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and the regulation of professional qualifications.

**Qualifications regulation**

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) [5] is the independent regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England. It was established as a non-ministerial government department in April 2010.

Ofqual ensures that the qualifications market in England is fit for purpose by:

- recognising awarding organisations to offer regulated qualifications and checking that the organisations meet Ofqual's Criteria for Recognition [6]
- holding awarding organisations to account on an ongoing basis, by requiring them to have in place appropriate systems, processes and resources as explained in the Ofqual Handbook: General Conditions of Recognition [7]
- in some circumstances, establishing and upholding criteria which specified qualifications must meet
- maintaining a register of all regulated qualifications - the Register of Regulated Qualifications [8] - and reporting publicly on these qualifications and on the organisations that offer them
- considering and monitoring risks to qualifications standards
- researching, gathering evidence and investigating issues and taking enforcement action where appropriate and proportionate.

Regulated qualifications intended for learners under the age of 19 must also be approved by
the Secretary of State [9] for Education, under Section 96 [10] of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 [11], in order to be eligible to receive public funding.

Regulated qualifications intended for learners aged 19 and over must also be approved by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) [12] in order to be eligible receive public funding.

**Awarding organisations**

Qualifications are provided by awarding organisations (AOs), which are external to the education or training provider. AOs are private companies, with either commercial or charitable status, funded mainly by examination fees. They develop and deliver qualifications to meet government policy requirements and changing skills requirements and to respond to market demand. Awarding organisations must gain recognised status from the qualifications regulator Ofqual (see the subheading ‘Qualifications regulation’ above) before they can propose qualifications for accreditation.

The principal roles of awarding organisations are:

- designing and developing qualifications
- approving and monitoring centres to offer qualifications to the standards required
- ensuring assessment is carried out in a way that is fair, valid and reliable and conforms to the rules that all awarding organisations and their qualifications must meet
- ensuring equality of access to qualifications
- awarding qualifications to learners who have met the qualification requirements.

The Annual Qualifications Market Report [13] (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) provides statistics on the number of recognised awarding organisations offering qualifications, the qualifications available and the numbers awarded.

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCoQ) [14] is a central body for the seven largest awarding organisations in the UK. It provides common regulations [15] setting out the key administrative requirements and referencing the national agreements on the conduct of general qualification exams and assessments, and outlines special arrangements for individuals with particular requirements.

The majority of the 158 awarding organisations across the UK which deliver regulated qualifications provide vocational qualifications.

Four awarding organisations—AQA [16], Eduqas [17] (WJEC [18]), OCR [19] and Pearson [20]—offer GCSEs [21] and A Levels [22] (general qualifications offered in schools and colleges) to meet Ofqual’s requirements. Also known as exam boards, these awarding organisations were originally established as consortia of universities providing common entrance examinations on a regional basis. This system has since given way to a more open market, in which schools’ and colleges’ choice of awarding organisation is strongly influenced by accountability measures and funding considerations.

**Centres**

Centres, sometimes known as examination centres, conduct the examinations and assessments set by awarding organisations. In most instances, centres are schools and colleges, although they may also be training providers, adult education centres, offender learning units or employers.

Centres choose which awarding organisation(s) to work with and must be recognised by these to deliver their qualifications. They must have sufficient resources, expertise, and organisational and administrative processes to support and assess learners to the standards required. Centres are
responsible for internal quality assurance and must make their systems, processes and practices available for inspection and review by the awarding organisation.

**Reform of GCSEs and A Levels**

Until September 2015, England, Wales and Northern Ireland shared qualifications frameworks, and the five principal exam boards offering general qualifications across all three jurisdictions were AQA, Pearson, OCR, WJEC and CCEA. Centres in England were free to choose which qualifications to offer from these exam boards.

However, qualifications policy has since diverged. In England, both the qualifications framework and general qualifications (GCSEs and A Levels) have been reformed. Alongside this, a 2012 Welsh Government review of the qualifications system for 14- to 19-year-olds concluded that a single system was no longer appropriate.

Reformed GCSEs and A Levels began to be introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in September 2015. These reformed qualifications are designed to comply with the specific regulatory regime which applies in their target market, as set by Ofqual in England, Qualifications Wales in Wales, and CCEA in Northern Ireland.

In England, the first new qualifications were awarded to students in 2017. This summer (2019) represents a major milestone in the reform process because the qualifications awarded to students in all but a few subjects will be new.

**Regulated Qualifications Framework**

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) is the regulatory qualifications framework for England. Qualifications accepted for use by Ofqual are placed on the Register of Regulated Qualifications, with information on their level and size to indicate their position on the RQF. The Register also includes qualifications regulated by the qualifications regulator in Northern Ireland.

Within the RQF, the level and size of each qualification is determined as follows:

The level of a qualification is based on the generic knowledge and skills a learner will be able to demonstrate once they have achieved that particular qualification. Qualifications may be assigned one of a range of levels, from Entry Level 1 (which is the most basic in terms of the outcomes required) through to Level 8 (the most advanced). The level descriptors associated with each level within the RQF can be found in the Section E of the Ofqual Handbook, Design and development of qualifications.

The size of a qualification is expressed in hours. This is known as the ‘total qualification time’ (TQT). TQT is the estimated number of hours that learners would typically be expected to take in order to achieve the level of attainment necessary for the award of a particular qualification. TQT includes ‘guided learning hours’ (GLH), which is time spent by a learner being directly taught or instructed by a lecturer, supervisor or tutor, and the number of hours a learner might be likely to spend in preparation or study not undertaken under the immediate supervision of a lecturer or tutor. Should an awarding organisation wish to assign credit to a qualification or units of a qualification, this is calculated by dividing TQT by 10. Further information about the criteria awarding organisations must apply when describing the size of a qualification is given in the Ofqual Handbook.
Historical note on qualifications frameworks

The first nationwide qualifications framework to be used in the UK, known as the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework, was introduced in 1987. The NVQ framework classified vocational qualifications outside of higher education according to their occupational sector and level of difficulty (of which there were five). It aimed to make the vocational qualifications system easier to understand and to validate new work-based training programmes for young people. In 2003, the NVQ framework was expanded to nine levels and opened up to cover a wider range of qualifications, including general qualifications. At that time, it was renamed the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and used across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was introduced alongside the NQF in 2008. This aimed to recognise smaller units of learning, each of which carried a certain number of credits.

Concerns about the QCF emerged during a consultation in 2015, which highlighted that QCF rules imposed a one-size-fits-all approach to the design of qualifications and that this was not always consistent with the development of high-quality vocational qualifications that met employers’ needs. As a result, the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) was developed, replacing the NQF and QCF in October 2015. The RQF is similar to the NQF and QCF, in that qualifications are still assigned ‘levels’ according to their difficulty. However, unlike the QCF, the RQF does not require qualifications to be combined of units which are assigned credit. Awarding organisations can now choose whether or not it is necessary to break their qualifications up into units, and whether these units should bear credit.

Mapping the RQF to the CQFW, SCQF, EQF, and FHEQ

The table below outlines how the levels of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), that operates in England and Northern Ireland, relate to the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW); the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF); and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which helps comparison between different qualifications systems in Europe.

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Adapted from UK ReferNet (Vocational Education and Training in Europe – United Kingdom, 2016, p. 12).
The *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ)* [38] (2014), is a five-level framework for higher education qualifications. The levels, designated 4–8, are comparable to Levels 4–8 of the RQF. The FHEQ is described in further detail in the ‘Introduction’ [39] to the higher education chapter.

### Professional qualifications

Qualifying for many higher-level occupations in the UK involves gaining qualified status through professional membership of regulatory bodies. This qualified status normally takes the form of a membership designation or a chartered or accredited title rather than a certificate or diploma. As such, it is outside the scope of the qualifications frameworks described in this article. However, many professions use qualifications within the national frameworks as part of their routes towards qualified status.

Further information is available from the graduate careers website, *Prospects* [40].

Article last reviewed February 2019.

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**Source URL:** https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-qualifications-framework-93_en

**Links**

[8] https://register.ofqual.gov.uk
[9] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/glossary-74_en#SecretaryOfState
[15]