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Are ‘communications frameworks’ more successful? Policy learning from the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

David Raffe

Abstract

The ‘celebratory account’ of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) acclaims it as a success story among National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), and attributes its success to its character as a ‘communications framework’ - one which makes the existing qualifications system more transparent in order to facilitate its coherence and coordination, in contrast to reforming and transformational frameworks which aim to change systems more directly. This paper examines the celebratory account and compares it with an alternative, ‘sceptical account’ of the SCQF. It concludes, with reservations, that the SCQF has been successful, but that many of its achievements can be attributed to earlier reforms and sub-frameworks which more closely match the reforming and transformational ideal types. Nevertheless the SCQF which over-arched these sub-frameworks has added further value and supported functions which only a comprehensive framework can provide. The paper concludes that typologies of NQFs are valuable for understanding their different ways of working but no simple conclusions can be drawn about the superiority of any one type.

Keywords: Qualification framework, education policy, educational change, Scotland, credit transfer, policy learning

Introduction and overview

The SCQF was formally launched in 2001. It is a comprehensive credit-based NQF with twelve levels, intended to accommodate all qualifications and assessed learning in Scotland. It aims to support access to learning and to make the education and training system more transparent. It is a voluntary framework, led by a partnership of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), higher education (HE), colleges and the Scottish government. Qualifications in the framework must be credit-rated, which means that each unit must be described in terms of a volume of learning (credit) at a given level of the framework. This in turn requires that units and qualifications are expressed in terms of learning outcomes, but the framework does not impose a specific concept of outcome or competence. The SCQF has a ‘loose’ design, but it embraces sub-frameworks which are more tightly specified.

These features have led the SCQF to be seen as a communications framework: one whose immediate purpose is to describe the existing qualifications system and thereby make it more transparent, as compared with a transformational framework which prescribes a proposed future system and imposes changes to introduce it. A communications framework seeks to bring about change indirectly, by providing tools to support incremental reforms and by making the system transparent and thereby facilitating rationalisation and coherence.

This view in turn is associated with what I shall call the celebratory account of the Scottish framework. The SCQF is widely perceived as a relatively successful NQF. Young’s (2005, p.19) review of NQFs concluded, with reservations, that the SCQF was one of the ‘success stories’ of framework implementation. It is one of the most developed comprehensive frameworks within Europe. And it emerged as the ‘most successful’ of the 14 national frameworks recently studied by the ILO (Allais 2010, p.[2]). As a result the SCQF has assumed an almost moral authority among NQFs and become a source of lessons to others. And these lessons attribute its relative success to its nature as a communications framework. Thus, the SCQF experience is perceived to show that an NQF should have a loose design, that it should start from the existing education and training system, that it should aim at most to stimulate modest and incremental improvements in that system, and that it should do so as part of a broader suite of policies (eg Raffe *et al.* 2007-08, Tuck 2007).

This paper addresses two questions: how successful has the SCQF really been? and can its ‘success’ be attributed to its character as a communications framework? It revisits the celebratory account and compares it with an alternative, ‘sceptical account’ which draws attention to the SCQF’s long pre-history and the role of earlier sub-frameworks in laying its foundations. The paper is thus an exercise in the *science*

of cross-national policy learning, which aims to identify valid policy lessons from other countries' experience. This is distinguished from the *sociology* of policy learning, which examines the learning that actually occurs and the cross-national influences on policy behaviour. Both types of policy learning are, of course, relevant to NQFs.

Types of NQF

NQFs vary in their purposes, in their design and in the way in which they are introduced. Drawing on Allais (2007) and other writers on NQFs (Young 2005, Coles 2006) Raffe (2009a) has distinguished three types of NQF:

- A ***communications framework*** takes the existing education and training system as its starting point and aims to make it more transparent and easier to understand, typically in order to rationalise it, to improve its coherence, to encourage access and to highlight opportunities for transfer and progression between programmes. It has a loose design, with variation across sub-frameworks, and uses learning outcomes to complement but not replace judgements and classifications based on 'inputs'. It is typically voluntary, developed from the 'bottom-up' with the substantial involvement of educational providers, and it aims to provide a tool for change but not itself to drive change. Other 'drivers' - either complementary policies or pressures for change arising from elsewhere - are needed to ensure that the tool is used.
- A ***reforming framework*** takes the existing system as its starting point but aims to improve it in specific ways, for example by enhancing quality, increasing consistency, filling gaps in provision or increasing accountability. Like a communications framework it takes the existing system and its institutions as its starting point. But whereas a communications framework provides a tool to facilitate change driven from elsewhere, a reforming framework has more specific reform objectives of its own - for example, to fill gaps in provision or to make quality standards more consistent. It therefore tends to be statutory, to have a regulatory role, to have tighter requirements for the design and delivery of qualifications and to try to drive change directly as well as to facilitate other change agents.
- A ***transformational framework*** takes a proposed future system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in a transformed system, without explicit reference to existing provision. It has a tight, relatively uniform design, and it uses learning outcomes to drive change because they allow

qualifications to be specified independently of existing standards, institutions and programmes. It is a statutory instrument for regulating qualifications and imposed through relatively top-down processes in which education and training providers are one set of stakeholders among many. It is conceived as the direct driver of transformational change.

[Figure 1 about here]

The three types are summarised in Figure 1. Among the longer-established NQFs, the SCQF is an example of a communications framework, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications is an example of a reforming framework and the South African NQF, in its earlier version, an example of a transformational framework. However, the three types are best understood as ideal types, which illustrate the different logics that drive the development and operation of NQFs. They represent points along a continuum which differentiates NQFs according to the strength of their transformational ambitions and the extent to which they are expected to be drivers rather than simply tools for change.

However, even if the typology is understood as a continuum, its application to existing NQFs is complicated by two factors, both of which are reflected in the Scottish experience. First, most comprehensive frameworks embrace more or less distinct sub-frameworks, for example those covering the HE or vocational education and training sectors, or parts of these sectors such as universities or work-based training. Different sub-frameworks may have very different characteristics and processes of development, reflecting differences in types of knowledge, in modes and contexts of learning and in relations among stakeholders. Moreover, the characteristics of frameworks vary with their level in the hierarchy of frameworks. A comprehensive NQF is typically closer to the 'communications' end of the continuum than the sub-frameworks which it over-arches; a meta-framework which embraces different NQFs is even more likely to be a communications framework.

Second, the typology differentiates NQFs according to their role in educational change; it is therefore inherently dynamic. A transformational framework which achieves its transformational ambitions may move closer to the ideal type of a communications framework as it increasingly describes the existing system. Conversely, frameworks may acquire new objectives; many NQFs being introduced in EU countries are closer to the communications end of the continuum (Bjornavold and Pevec Grm 2009), but as they become established (and as they overcome or neutralise political resistance) they may acquire more transformational, or at least reforming, goals

The SCQF

The SCQF was formally launched in 2001, but it continued a series of reforms that began several decades earlier. These included:

- Standard Grades, courses and qualifications at three levels introduced in 1984, which included the whole 14-16 cohort in a single certification framework for the first time;
- the 16-plus Action Plan, also implemented from 1984, which introduced a national modular framework covering most non-advanced 'vocational' provision in colleges (multi-purpose institutions which, along with the universities, are responsible for most public, institution-based, vocational and general post-school education); the modules were also widely used in schools;
- Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), a national framework of competence-based occupational qualifications, similar to National Vocational Qualifications elsewhere in the UK, introduced from 1990; like NVQs, SVQs are based on National Occupational Standards and designed primarily for workplace delivery;
- the unitisation of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, launched in 1988; HNCs and HNDs are short-cycle HE awards, delivered primarily in colleges, and they account for nearly a third of undergraduate entrants to Scottish higher education;
- the Scottish Credit and Accumulation Transfer (SCOTCAT) scheme, launched in 1991, which established a currency of credit at five levels that would be used by all Scottish universities and articulate with the newly unitised HNCs and HNDs;
- Higher Still, which from 1999 brought academic upper-secondary qualifications and the modules introduced by the Action Plan into a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' of new National Qualifications based on units, courses and group awards at seven levels.

The idea of a comprehensive framework emerged in the mid-1990s when those developing the Higher Still and SCOTCAT frameworks discussed the possibility of bringing them together, along with SVQs, in a single national framework (Raffe 2003). In 1997 the Scottish Committee of the UK-wide Dearing Inquiry into Higher Education recommended 'an integrated qualifications framework' based around level of study and SCOTCAT credit points (NCIHE 1997, p.39). In March 1999 the SQA (the main awarding body for school and college qualifications), three HE bodies and the government published a consultation paper which proposed a framework based on the key concepts of the level of outcomes of learning and the volume of outcomes of learning (COSHEP *et al.* 1999). These proposals were broadly supported and were taken forward by the four 'development partners': the SQA, Universities Scotland

(the body representing HE institutions), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the newly-devolved Scottish government. The SCQF was officially launched in December 2001 (SCQF 2001, p.26).

The launch document described the framework's general aims as to

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

The main stakeholders had additional motivations for taking part (Raffe 2003). HE wished to protect and expand its sources of recruitment, to reinforce its relative autonomy within the UK and its links with the rest of Scottish education, and to create a position of strength from which to engage with the Bologna process. Moreover, by leading the framework HE could help to shape it. The SQA's purposes reflected its status as the national qualifications body for Scotland, created to develop and administer the unified curriculum and qualifications framework of National Qualifications. A reform which linked that framework to other SQA qualifications such as HNCs, HNDs and SVQs, and to other Scottish qualifications, would continue that unifying drive and confirm the SQA's position as a national body.

The SCQF was not primarily driven by the kind of 'neo-liberal' political agenda that has driven some other NQFs elsewhere (Philips 1998, Allais 2003, Young 2007). Instead, it appealed to a more consensual political viewpoint which favoured a more unified, open and flexible learning system as a means both to respond to economic demands and to promote opportunity, wider access and social inclusion. Far from seeking to shift power from supply to demand and to end the 'provider capture' of learning, the SCQF was led by education providers, or at least the most powerful ones, and it was designed not to challenge existing power relationships. It developed as an enabling framework, as a tool for change but not a driver of change. For example, the SCQF provides a tool whereby credit from HNCs and HNDs may contribute towards university degrees, but universities have discretion over whether or not to recognise this credit.

The SCQF continues to be led by its development partners, joined in 2006 by the organisation representing the colleges. In November 2006 the leadership was re-launched as the SCQF Partnership, a not-for-profit company, owned by the development partners but with stronger executive powers. Wider stakeholder

interests are represented by an SCQF Forum. The SCQF Partnership has a larger staff than before but this is still tiny by the standards of many NQFs: approximately eight at the time of writing. Many functions and decisions remain at the level of the sub-frameworks.

To be included in the framework qualifications and (where applicable) their component units must be placed at a level of the framework, assigned a given number of credit points and assessed in a valid, reliable and quality assured manner (SCQF 2009a). There are twelve SCQF levels: level descriptors, currently under review, specify 'characteristic generic outcomes' for each level above level 1 under five headings: knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeracy skills; autonomy, accountability and working with others. Credit points are awarded on the basis of the number of notional learning hours that an 'average' learner at a specified SCQF level might expect to take to achieve the learning outcomes, including the assessment. Each credit point represents ten hours of notional learning time. The SCQF itself does not specify types of awards, but some of its sub-frameworks do so, typically by stating the number of credit points at each level required for a given award. For example, a Bachelors degree at Honours level requires 480 credit points, of which at least 90 must be at level 9 and at least 90 at level 10.

The development partners are responsible for placing their own qualifications in the framework. Other qualifications are admitted through a process known as 'credit-rating', which involves assigning levels and credit points. This may be carried out by SCQF partners - colleges, universities and SQA - or by other organisations approved by the SCQF Partnership following a procedure in which appropriate quality assurance arrangements are an important criterion. The SCQF Handbook describes credit-rating as 'a process of professional judgement ... exercised by those best qualified through experience and knowledge of the discipline, field of study, profession, trade or area of skill' (SCQF 2009a, p.41). A qualification must be based on learning outcomes in order to be credit-rated, but the SCQF is not an outcomes-led framework of the kind described by Young and Allais (2009), where outcomes are expected to be interpreted and applied independently of their institutional context.

The SCQF thus corresponds fairly closely to the ideal type of a communications framework. It takes the existing education and training system as its starting point and aims to make this more transparent in order to rationalise it, to improve its coherence and to encourage access, transfer and progression. It provides a tool for change but does not try to drive change directly. It is voluntary, loose in structure and flexible in its use of learning outcomes, and it devolves power to sub-frameworks.

How successful is the SCQF?

The success of the SCQF may be judged by the extent to which it:

- has been implemented across the education and training system;
- has been used, once implemented;
- has achieved its aims; and
- has retained the support of stakeholders, without significant changes in aims or strategy.

Implementation

Compared with most NQFs, the SCQF is at an advanced stage of implementation. Most mainstream qualifications are in the framework; there are established procedures for admitting further qualifications and for maintaining the framework; there are agreed guidelines for such issues as quality assurance and the recognition of prior learning (RPL); the language of the framework, and especially the concepts of level and credit, are routinely applied across the qualification system; and the framework has been referenced both to the European Qualifications Framework and to the Bologna framework for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Unlike many frameworks, the SCQF neither has large numbers of ‘legacy’ qualifications that are at best nominally included, nor has large numbers of new compliant qualifications that remain unused. A recent newsletter announced that Scotland was ‘the only country to get top marks’ in a study of progress towards implementing the EHEA (SCQF 2009c, p.10).

However, implementation has been uneven. After the SCQF’s launch in 2001 early efforts focused on incorporating ‘mainstream’ qualifications from the sub-frameworks owned by the development partners. By 2005 most of these were in the framework. However, in the same year the evaluation of the SCQF reported slow progress in the inclusion of other qualifications, including vocational and work-based qualifications, professional qualifications and community-based learning (Gallacher *et al.* 2005). This slow progress was attributed both to features of these areas of learning and to the SCQF’s informal partnership model, which was effective for getting the main sub-frameworks to link to each other but less suited to an implementation process which engaged a wider range of qualifications and stakeholders (Gallacher *et al.* 2005, 2006). These concerns led to the restructuring of the SCQF Partnership, described above, in November 2006. In September 2007 the new Scottish Government’s Skills Strategy asked the Partnership to ‘move quickly to ensure that the SCQF embraces more learning opportunities by increasing the number of credit rating bodies, facilitating the inclusion of work based learning programmes and encouraging the recognition of informal learning’ (Scottish Government 2007, p.49). The colleges

became credit-rating bodies in 2006 and the new Partnership established criteria and procedures for other organisations to become credit-rating bodies; in 2009 this status was granted to City and Guilds (a UK awarding body), the Scottish Police College and professional bodies representing banking and management. The process of incorporating non-mainstream learning into the framework has accelerated. Nevertheless, the SCQF is still in the process of expanding from a merger of three sub-frameworks to a fully comprehensive framework covering all learning.

Use

Some of the uses of the SCQF are described below.

It provides a language and tool to support transfer and progression. One of the most important interfaces for transfer and progression is that between HNC/HNDs and university degrees: in the five years after the SCQF's launch the number of HNC/HND-qualified students transferring credit across this interface rose from 2,329 to 3,377 (SFC 2010). In the following two years it fell back to 2,644, suggesting that while the SCQF provides tools for credit transfer the use of these tools depends on other factors (Raffe *et al.* 2010). Current measures to promote use of the framework include funding for regional 'hubs' which plan articulation arrangements among neighbouring HE institutions and colleges. There is growing interest in a wider range of types of transfer and progression, including articulation from degrees to HNDs as well as from HNDs to degrees (Knox and Whitaker 2009). And as more non-mainstream qualifications and types of learning enter the framework, there will be more opportunities to use it to support transfer and progression. However, the extent to which it is actually used is, and will probably remain, difficult to quantify. The SCQF has no central database of learners; data and monitoring functions remain with the sub-frameworks.

The SCQF has been used for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), but this has been patchy. RPL based on the SCQF has been used extensively in some occupational and professional areas such as the health service, banking and social services, which used it to comply with new qualifications requirements for staff. However, this example once again shows that the existence of the SCQF alone is not sufficient; other conditions, in this case new regulations, are needed to stimulate its use. A recent review of RPL in Scotland identified examples of good practice but found that it was not consistently accessible or delivered across areas, industry sectors or sectors of education and training. Capacity and infrastructure were limited on the supply side and a concerted marketing effort was required to stimulate demand (Inspire Scotland 2008). Current areas of development include apprenticeship, where RPL is seen to contribute to efficient delivery, careers work, community learning and the voluntary sector.

Careers Scotland, the national all-age agency for careers information, advice and guidance, has used the SCQF to support its work. A survey of its staff in 2008 found that staff were aware of the framework and used it but needed ‘further guidance on how to use it effectively to assist with clients’ career planning and development goals’ (SCQF 2008, p.6). A follow-up survey showed some evidence of improvement but reported a need for materials to communicate the SCQF to less ‘academically’ able young people, parents and employers (SCQF 2009b).

Institutions have used the framework for curriculum development, to support quality enhancement and to guide structural reforms, for example for planning modularisation and semesterisation of HE programmes. Once again, the SCQF has provided a tool but has not been the driver of change. However, it is seen to have had a positive impact on assessment practices and quality procedures, especially within universities (Gallacher and Crossan 2008).

Employers and professional bodies have used the framework for recruitment, to plan and organise their own training provision, to give recognition to their own qualifications (including short courses designed to meet industry needs) and for RPL. So far the total activity has been small; engagement with the SCQF, as distinct from particular sub-frameworks, tends to arise out of specific interests or needs (Gallacher *et al.* 2005, Gallacher and Crossan 2008, SCQF 2008). Similar uses have been identified in less formal areas of learning, notably in youth and adult provision by voluntary organisations, community groups and local authorities (SCQF 2008). A current study is reviewing the mechanisms which support the recognition of the learning and skills of migrant workers.

Finally, the SCQF provides a context in which further policy developments are taken forward. The SQA has reviewed its own portfolio of qualifications and devised new group awards based on the SCQF. New qualifications being developed to replace Standard Grade, as part of a reform of the school and college curriculum for 3-18 year olds, will similarly be based on the SCQF. A recent OECD review of Scottish schooling proposed a new Baccalaureate-type certificate to mark the completion of upper-secondary education (OECD 2007). This recommendation was not accepted but it would have been considerably easier to develop such a qualification, and to modify existing provision to fit it, on the basis of the SCQF.

In summary, the SCQF has been used for a variety of purposes although much of its potential has still to be exploited and, consistent with its status as a communications framework, the full exploitation of this potential depends on other policy and funding measures and on institutional and social factors beyond its immediate control.

Achievement of aims

The aims of the SCQF, as described above, are to support access to learning and to make the education and training system more transparent. Some of the reforms that preceded the SCQF, notably the Action Plan and Higher Still, had a clear impact on access to learning. It is harder to identify ways in which the SCQF itself has directly stimulated access, although it has done so indirectly through several of the uses described above, such as in RPL, guidance and the development of employers' training provision and informal learning. However, the main impact on access has probably been through the second aim, of making the system more transparent. Here the success of the SCQF has probably been more complete, although it is not easy to document. The SCQF has succeeded in becoming part of the language of Scottish education. Reforms of the system, whether at national or institutional level, routinely use the framework as a planning tool, and thereby ensure that changes reinforce rather than interrupt the coherence of the system. The SCQF has provided at least a partial response to the lack of transparency of a qualifications system that has tended to place flexibility above the clarity of pathways. In summary, the SCQF has made progress towards achieving its aims, although this progress may be incomplete and it needs to be weighed against the modesty of its aims compared with other types of NQF.

Stakeholder support

Finally, the SCQF has retained the backing of stakeholders in the Scottish education and training system. Its voluntary character and partnership approach has helped it to retain their support; key stakeholders such as HE, which have resisted NQF developments in some other countries, have shared the leadership of the SCQF. Successive evaluations have confirmed the broad consensus behind the framework, and stakeholders have been willing to engage in its participatory fora (Gallacher *et al.*, 2005, 2006). Perhaps more importantly, this support has been sustained without significant changes of strategy or direction. There have been conflicts among stakeholders, and expressions of dissatisfaction with progress, but these have concerned the speed of change more than its direction (Gallacher *et al.* 2005).

Summary

The SCQF emerges as a modestly successful framework subject to reservations concerning its relatively unambitious aims, the slow or variable pace of implementation and impact, and the fact that much of its apparent potential has yet to be realised. Nevertheless, even with these reservations, it is clearly more successful than most other NQFs that are old enough for similar judgements to be made.

The sceptical account of the SCQF

The celebratory account described above attributes this relative success to the SCQF's character as a communications framework. An alternative perspective, which I shall call the sceptical account, challenges this account in three respects. First, it points out that much of the SCQF's achievement can be attributed, not to the framework *per se*, but to the series of reforms which preceded it, which paved the way for the SCQF by introducing such features as unitisation, credit and a reasonably coherent set of levels. Second, it suggests that these reforms did not all correspond to the ideal type of a communications framework. Third, it argues that the additional impact of bringing these sub-frameworks together in the comprehensive SCQF has been relatively modest. The SCQF does not, therefore, demonstrate the superiority of a communications framework if many of its achievements were the product not of the communications SCQF but of other types of frameworks which preceded it.

This section explores these challenges. Space does not allow a detailed account of the reforms which led to the SCQF; for this, the reader is referred to Raffé (2007, 2009b). Figure 2, taken from Raffé (2009b), summarises the main arguments.

(Figure 2 about here)

Contributions to the SCQF

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

Moreover, by 2001 most mainstream qualifications belonged to one of three relatively distinct families: SQA's National Qualifications (the qualifications introduced by Higher Still, together with Standard Grades and group awards of varying sizes based on SQA units), HE qualifications (SCOTCAT, with HNCs and HNDs) and SVQs.

These families were to become the main sub-frameworks of the SCQF, although was intended also to accommodate qualifications that did not belong to a sub-framework.

And the SCQF was largely based on the architecture of these earlier reforms. Levels 1-11 of the SCQF were based on the seven levels of National Qualifications and the five levels of SCOTCAT, with an overlap at SCQF level 7. An additional level 12 was added to cover doctoral study. The five SVQ levels were slotted in to this framework, with some SVQ levels allowed to straddle two or more SCQF levels. Level descriptors drew on existing descriptors for the SCOTCAT framework and the subsequent QAA benchmarks for degrees, National Qualifications (including Standard Grade and Higher Still grade descriptors and SQA's core skills framework) and SVQs (Hart 2008). Credit was based on the SCOTCAT definition, with one credit point representing the outcomes achieved through ten hours of notional learning time.

The earlier reforms had thus established much of the architecture which the SCQF was to inherit. Some further changes were needed but these were relatively minor. For example, the credit values of National Qualifications were recalibrated to include non-timetabled study within the notional learning time; the units comprising HNCs and HNDs had to be allocated to the two levels (7 and 8) covered by these awards, and new credit values determined. In HE some qualifications and many component courses or units had to be assigned to levels and given credit values: this was usually achieved in the course of institutions' own processes of programme review and development or initiatives such as modularisation and semesterisation. SVQs proved harder to include for several reasons: the levels had to be aligned with the SCQF; their more extreme 'outcomes-based' philosophy made it harder to apply a concept of credit based on notional learning time; their ownership was more dispersed, and many were owned by UK-based industry bodies; and it was inadvisable to make major changes before it was clear what kind of model would emerge from the reform of NVQs in the rest of the UK (Gallacher *et al.* 2006).

Earlier reforms and types of NQF

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

that of a communications framework, and SVQs (like NVQs in England) arguably had some of the features of a transformational framework.

The main exceptions are the two HE reforms. SCOTCAT and (to a lesser extent) the unitisation of HNCs and HNDs more closely matched the ‘communications’ ideal type. These exceptions are significant; the involvement of HE helps to explain why the over-arching SCQF retained a loose design and voluntary status.

The value added by the SCQF

Many of the achievements associated with the SCQF can be attributed to the preceding reforms, or to the sub-frameworks that these created. The SCQF was designed as a loose framework to overarch existing sub-frameworks. It was not designed to establish new qualifications or radically to change existing ones; that had been the task of the earlier reforms. The 2005 evaluation of the SCQF noted that with respect to the development of credit transfer and articulation arrangements between colleges and universities the SCQF had provided a language and tools to support ‘arrangements that would usually have been introduced in the absence of the SCQF’ (Gallacher *et al.* 2005, p.4). SCOTCAT had already paved the way for such arrangements. Similarly, the SCQF’s use for curriculum planning by colleges and schools was founded on the rationalisation of the SQA portfolio already achieved by reforms such as Higher Still.

However, the introduction of the SCQF as a comprehensive framework added a new dimension. The previous reforms greatly facilitated the *implementation* of the SCQF, but only when they were brought together within a single comprehensive framework did the current range of *uses* of the SCQF, whether potential or realised, become available. Many uses of the SCQF described above, such as careers guidance, RPL and its uses in relation to employment and less formal learning, depend on the SCQF being a comprehensive framework. The fact that these uses were slow to materialise partly reflects the SCQF’s uneven pace of implementation and its slowness to embrace non-mainstream learning. The value added by the comprehensive SCQF may grow as its implementation becomes more complete and it includes a wider range of learning; such evidence as is available suggests that it is slowly doing so.

The sub-frameworks created by the earlier reforms had specific objectives such as to fill gaps in provision, to update the content of learning, to rationalise provision, to promote new approaches to pedagogy and assessment, to enhance quality or to regulate occupational qualifications, in addition to promoting access transfer and progression. The SCQF’s aims were different: to create transparency and to provide a language that would make the system easier to understand, improve communication between sectors of education and training and between the learning system and its

stakeholders, and thereby facilitate coherence and promote access, transfer and progression. In some respects these were narrower aims than those of the earlier frameworks. In other respects they were more ambitious, as they relate to the whole education and training system.

Discussion: the SCQF as an opportunity for policy learning

At the beginning of the paper I described a ‘celebratory account’ of the SCQF which attributed its success to its character as a communications framework. Up to a point the celebratory account is supported by this analysis. The SCQF has been successful, subject to significant reservations noted earlier. Even if some of its achievements can be attributed to the sub-frameworks that preceded it, the comprehensive SCQF that over-arched them has added further value. In particular, the transparency contributed by a communications framework has facilitated greater coherence and coordination and underpinned other reforming measures. The SCQF’s loose design, its capacity to accommodate diversity, its incremental process of development, its voluntary character and partnership approach – in other words its character as a communications framework – have contributed to its relative success. But these same features have had negative as well as positive consequences: there have been tensions between different educational interests, the partnership model delayed progress and required action to strengthen its central leadership, and the uses and impacts of the framework have been variable and often dependent on random initiatives from elsewhere. The success of a communications framework must be set against its relatively modest ambition and the fact that it only facilitates changes which do not challenge the existing distribution of power. A communications framework requires ‘policy breadth’ and complementary measures to ensure that its potential uses are realised. Above all, a communications framework can only be effective when there is already a reasonably coherent qualifications system and strong and effective institutions of education and training. ‘Communication’ as a strategy only makes sense if there is already a clear and valid message to communicate. The success of the SCQF is built, not only upon two or three decades of earlier qualifications reforms, but also on more than four centuries of educational development.

However, the analysis also provides support for the ‘sceptical account’ – and in particular for the argument that many of the SCQF’s achievements may be attributed to earlier reforms some of which more closely resembled the reforming or transformational ideal types than a communications framework. The analysis suggests, therefore, that different types of NQF may be effective in different circumstances. The SCQF was introduced in a small country with a relatively close-knit policy community and a broadly incremental, consensual policy style, with

homogeneous, well-developed and reasonably coherent institutions, and with a qualifications system that enjoyed public trust. This was a favourable context for any NQF, and it was particularly favourable for a partnership-based communications framework focused on consensual and incremental change. The Scottish experience suggests that a further factor in the success of different types of framework or sub-framework is their scope. A reforming or (especially) a transformational framework may have more chances of success when it covers a relatively small and homogeneous sector of learning; this appears to be the lesson from SVQs and from transformational sub-frameworks elsewhere. Conversely, many of the benefits of a communications framework may only be achievable when this has comprehensive coverage; again, this appears to be the lesson from the SCQF's added value. And, as in the case of the SCQF, a framework which achieves these benefits may over-arch different types of sub-framework.

In the last analysis the 'success' of the communications framework in Scotland does not yield simple conclusions about the superiority of any type of NQF. Its success reflected a specific national context and was the product of several types of framework. Moreover, its progress has to be understood as a dynamic process over several decades; a cross-sectional typology of NQFs needs to be complemented by dynamic model(s) of the ways that NQFs develop and change over time.

This does not mean that the typology of NQFs lacks validity; as we have seen, it provides useful analytical tools - ideal types - for exploring the ways in which NQFs may operate. And they point towards the more useful lessons that can be drawn from the Scottish experience: lessons about the forces driving NQF development, the processes of implementation and the evolution of NQFs and the mechanisms by which they may (or may not) achieve their objectives. Such lessons should draw, not only on the SCQF itself but also on the preceding sequence of reforms. Issues and lessons from these reforms are listed in the last column of Figure 2, which summarises the more detailed analysis of Raffe (2009b).

The most general lesson from the Scottish reform is that qualifications and qualifications frameworks are social constructs and the social and political factors which shape their development and impact are ultimately more important than 'technical' issues such as learning outcomes, level descriptors and quality assurance systems. NQFs potentially redistribute power and control between different central authorities, between central authorities and educational institutions, between different sectors of education and training and between providers and 'users'. The NQFs which are implemented most smoothly typically meet least resistance because they pose least challenge to the *status quo*. The SCQF has succeeded because it has retained the support of powerful stakeholders. Unlike some other comprehensive

frameworks it is supported by HE institutions, which are powerful in most countries but particularly powerful in countries like Scotland where devolved admissions arrangements lead institutions to determine the currency of entry qualifications. However, the corollary of the SCQF's pragmatism is that it does not challenge the existing distribution of power as a transformational framework might try to do.

A second and related lesson is the limited capacity of NQFs or qualifications *on their own* to achieve systemic change in education and training. As research on Higher Still concluded, “[a] reform of curriculum and qualifications cannot, on its own, radically transform the rules of positional competition, nor can it achieve full ‘parity of esteem’” (Raffe *et al.* 2007, p.505). The concept of ‘institutional logic’ was developed in research on the Scottish Action Plan and it has proved applicable to all subsequent reforms (Croxford *et al.* 1991). Time and again research has shown how access to learning, progression and transfer, the relative standing of different tracks and programmes, the marketability of qualifications and so on all depend more on the ‘institutional logics’ of their educational, labour-market and social contexts more than on the ‘intrinsic logic’ of a qualifications framework.

Third, the SCQF provides lessons for the design on NQFs. On the one hand, it demonstrates that an integrated framework can cover a diverse range of qualifications; on the other hand it shows that a loose design is needed to do so. The earlier reforms also reveal the importance of assessment, in particular the need to keep assessment arrangements simple and practical and to prevent assessments from multiplying.

A fourth set of issues concern the processes of change associated with NQFs. Comparisons of the SCQF with other frameworks suggest that as social and political constructs all NQFs, not only communications frameworks, need to be introduced through processes which may involve

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

However, the Scottish experience cannot provide an answer to the most pressing issue concerning qualifications frameworks: whether or not the current stampede of countries to acquire NQFs can be justified by their likely contribution to national

policy goals, especially in countries which cannot replicate the favourable circumstances in which the SCQF was introduced.

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Figure 1. A typology of NQFs

<i>Type of NQF:</i>	Communications	Reforming	Transformational
<i>Starting point</i>	Existing ET system	Existing ET system	Future ET system
<i>Purpose:</i>	To increase transparency; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence, facilitating access transfer and progression	To achieve specific reforms eg fill gaps, enhance quality, extend access transfer and progression; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence	To transform ET and lead development of new system
<i>Design</i>	Loose, varies across sub-frameworks; outcomes used as common reference point	Tighter, but varies across sub-frameworks; outcomes used as common reference point	Tight, central specification imposed more uniformly; outcomes used to drive change
<i>Leadership and control</i>	Voluntary ‘Bottom up’ ET institutions share leadership Substantial decision-making at level of sub-framework	Compulsory ‘Top-down’: led by central agency/govt ET institutions as key partners Control may vary across sub-frameworks	Compulsory ‘Top down’: led by central agency/govt ET institutions among partners Centralised control
<i>Expected role in change</i>	Tool for change: requires complementary drivers to ensure tool is used	Drives specific changes; requires complementary drivers for other impacts	Expected to drive transformation of system

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

Reform	Contribution to architecture and culture of SCQF	Style of implementation	Issues/lessons
Standard Grade: subject-specific qualifications for certificating 14-16 school courses at three overlapping levels	Principle of comprehensive coverage Levels Criterion-referenced assessment <i>(Became part of NQ sub-framework)</i>	Led by government Compulsory for schools Teacher participation in lengthy development programme	Showed that integrated framework can cover whole cohort Need to keep assessment simple
National Certificate (Action Plan): national modular framework to replace college non-advanced provision, available to schools and private providers	Unitisation Learning outcomes Criterion-referenced assessment Portability/credit transfer Integration of vocational and (some) general qualifications <i>(Merged with academic courses to form Higher Still NQ sub-framework)</i>	Led by government (Inspectorate) Education-led (rather than employment-led) Fast, top-down development and implementation Compulsory for colleges	Constraints of institutional logics: limits to flexibility and portability Need for policy breadth Unified framework makes system more responsive Power of assessment to shape curriculum and pedagogy Growth in number of modules
Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs): national framework of occupational qualifications based on national occupational standards	Unitisation Learning outcomes Levels Criterion-referenced assessment <i>(Became sub-framework of SCQF)</i>	Led by government Rhetoric of industry ownership; developed by government-appointed industry bodies Compulsory for government-funded training programmes	Tension between coverage and tightness of framework Need for policy breadth Concerns with cost, bureaucracy Assessment requirements restrict access, increase cost
Unitisation of HNCs/HNDs (sub-degree qualifications offered in colleges)	Unitisation Learning outcomes Criterion-referenced assessment Portability/credit transfer	Led by awarding body (SCOTVEC) College participation in development	Similar to Action Plan Tensions between role as exit qualification and progression Devolved control to colleges led to

	(including to university degrees) <i>(Contributed with SCOTCAT to development of HE sub-framework of SCQF)</i>	Effectively compulsory for colleges, but devolved control over content of programmes	growth in number and diversity of programmes/awards
Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (SCOTCAT): national credit system for higher education	Credit (and 10-hour metric) Levels Learning outcomes Unitisation/modularisation <i>(Linked with unitised HNCs and HNDs, became basis for HE sub-framework of SCQF)</i>	Initially led by awarding body for non-university degrees, then by HE institutions and quality assurance body Voluntary but all institutions signed up	Influence of diverse institutional logics Institution-led implementation can be slow and variable Use of framework by institutions even more variable
New National Qualifications (Higher Still): ‘unified system’ of academic and vocational post-compulsory provision in a 7-level ‘climbing frame’, delivered in schools and colleges	Integration of academic and vocational qualifications Levels Learning outcomes Unitisation <i>(Linked NC modules and academic courses to create NQs, which became sub-framework of SCQF)</i>	Led by government (Inspectorate) Very wide consultation, but perceived as top-down ‘Disenfranchising’ effect of system-wide development	Showed that integrated framework can cover whole cohort Constraints of institutional logics: limits to ‘climbing frame’ NQFs can’t impose ‘parity of esteem’ Tension between coverage and tightness of framework Need to keep assessment simple
Sequence of reforms Progress towards integration across sub-frameworks as well as development within sub-frameworks	Learning outcomes, levels, unitisation, credit, etc <i>plus</i> changed pedagogies and assessment and wider cultural changes	Mainly ‘reforming’ rather than ‘communications’ frameworks: strong role of central government and ‘top-down’ change with varying amounts and effectiveness of consultation and participation of educational institutions	Time needed for change process Incremental steps towards (more) comprehensive framework Variation across sub-frameworks essential to NQF development and design Reforms create organisations with expertise and interest in further change

