

Critical understanding of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework within adult education in the voluntary sector

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by

Learning Link Scotland

A Report to Communities Scotland

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1 Introduction and acknowledgement

Learning Link Scotland would like to thank all the individuals and organisations that kindly gave their time to participate in this exercise.

Learning Link Scotland (LLS) is the national intermediary organisation for the voluntary adult education sector.

Through its members, elective representatives, paid staff and volunteers, LLS seeks to promote, support, represent and develop adult education in the voluntary sector throughout Scotland.

Our member organisations, over 130 throughout Scotland, range in size, provision and the target groups they serve. Members are involved in formal, non-formal and informal learning as defined by the European Union. Their commonality lies in their dedication to the values and principles of lifelong learning and social inclusion. The size and diversity of our growing membership, effectively strengthens LLS position to represent the views of the sector.

Our membership works with over 125,000 adult learners per year. They offer places to over 35,000 volunteers, and employ approximately 2,500 staff. The membership is a significant player in the lifelong learning agenda.

Learning Link Scotland was commissioned by Learning Connections, Communities Scotland to carry out an exercise to engage their members in awareness raising and dialogue on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) within adult education in the voluntary sector.

2 Background to Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework in Community Learning and Development

An evaluation of the impact of the SCQF highlights “The importance of widening the Framework to include qualifications beyond the mainstream of those provided in FE and HE was noted by many respondents ...In particular the need for an effective programme of action, which will lead to the inclusion of community learning and development and vocational and work based qualifications was recognized as a priority.”¹

However, it was stated that “progression towards introducing change had been cited as slow and ‘the impact so far had been limited in many areas, and there was some skepticism about the extent to which expectations for greater flexibility within lifelong learning provision would be achieved.”¹ This programme of work seeks to identify among our adult education voluntary sector members the extent of awareness and knowledge of the framework, as well as identifying views and possible systems to assist progress.

“To begin to apply the framework the learning outcomes must be assessed in an appropriate manner...Those offering learning in this manner should have quality assurance systems in place.”² Learning Link Scotland works continuously to assist its members in improving their services through training and development in particular quality, policy, procedure and systems, communications and continual professional development and the importance of utilizing these and evaluation models in delivering and developing sustainable services. This programme of research and awareness raising with members will enhance the work already on-going and work to provide recommendations for future progress with SCQF implementation across community learning and development amongst the voluntary sector members.

¹ Evaluation Report on the Impact of the SCQF, Scottish Executive November 2005

² Valuing Practice Report, Learning Connections November 2005)

3 Aims and methodology

This exercise aimed to raise awareness, create discussion and gather knowledge and views within and amongst adult education organisations in the voluntary sector regarding the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

The exercise aimed to:

- identify and engage organisations
- prime participating organisations through briefings and outreach
- stimulate thinking and carry out exercises to identify knowledge and understanding prior to events
- hold events to stimulate discussion and understanding across the sector
- inform the process, methodology and systems on a national level
- provide an opportunity for members to articulate their own experiential learning within the context of SCQF
- create a report of findings and suggested recommendations.

The research for this project was undertaken through:

- an on-line survey targeting LLS members' awareness, understanding and use of the SCQF.
- follow-up phone interviews with a selection of survey respondents intended to increase our knowledge of members' views, understanding and use of the SCQF.
- face to face meetings with a selection of survey respondents in order to gain greater understanding of organisations individual use of the SCQF and articulate their own experiential learning within the context of SCQF.
- information mail out (briefing) aimed at informing members of current SCQF activities and events while increasing member understanding and knowledge of the framework.

The original proposal included plans for a series of round table events to test and pilot methods for, and ways of engaging our members in identifying their understanding and knowledge of the SCQF. The strategy for the management of target groups participating in the round table events changed for a number of reasons.

In order for discussion to be of value, target groups needed to share a certain level of understanding of the SCQF. It was identified early in surveying and follow-up calls that there was a wide variance of experience and use of the SCQF amongst members. This presented potential challenges for productive discussion and, it was considered, could lead to confusion about the framework. Scheduling problems also made it difficult to pull together an appropriate group for the discussions. Essentially, the right mix of individual experience of the framework was not achievable at this stage. A change to the strategy was implemented by focusing on gathering individual responses in order to gain further understanding of members' experiences and needs.

Survey

A concise survey was administered on-line via email to 130 member organisations. The succinct design of the survey encouraged a higher number of responses. The survey asked quantitative and qualitative questions on the use of the SCQF and requested feedback on what kind of support is needed in the sector in order to promote the use of the framework. A list of survey questions and responses can be found in Appendix 1.

Phone interviews

The members selected for phone interviews were targeted from those members responding to the survey with a self-rating of "a little" to "fair" in their understanding of the framework. The phone conversations were intended to investigate the use of the SCQF and the possible reasons why the framework is or is not being used.

Face-to-face interviews

The members selected for the face-to-face interviews were targeted from those respondents to the survey stating they had a "good" to "very good" understanding of the SCQF. The meetings were intended to be semi-structured interviews based on a set of questions about how they were introduced to the framework and why they chose to use it. Selected members were also asked about future plans regarding the SCQF and tips for other voluntary organisations interested in using the framework. Four organisations agreed to participate in the face-to-face interview.

Information mailing

The briefing was designed to touch on a variety of topics regarding the SCQF in order to appeal to all LLS members. The mail out was laid out in a newsletter design and included two additional pieces of promotional material from the SCQF – the double sided post card “SCQF Ready Reckoner” and the pamphlet “Understanding Qualifications Introducing the New Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: An Initial Guide for Community Learning and Development Practitioners”. The aim of the mailing was to provide information and promote critical thinking about the SCQF.

LLS felt that the perception of sector involvement is a key factor in motivating ownership of the SCQF within adult learning in the voluntary sector. Therefore, we included a description of Learning Link Scotland’s involvement in this project and its aims along with a thank you for the members who completed the survey. The mailing also offers a brief summary of the SCQF Conference held in May. The summary strives to highlight that LLS, as the national intermediary organisation for the voluntary adult education sector, is providing a public presence for our members and is seeking to address the issues relevant to our sector. The mailing also strives to encourage greater participation in the development of the SCQF by member organisations.

Further items covered in the mail out include, “The General Aims of the SCQF”, and a piece titled “Who Currently Provides Credit Rating for Courses?”. This information provided the four broad criteria for applying for credit rating and levelling of learning programmes through the SQA. “Points to Consider” are offered as a prompt to think about how members might apply the SCQF to their organisation. Finally, the mail out offers four general examples of how other members are using the framework. This is followed up by a case study of a member organisation’s use of the SCQF within the context of Recognition of Prior Learning.

4 Findings

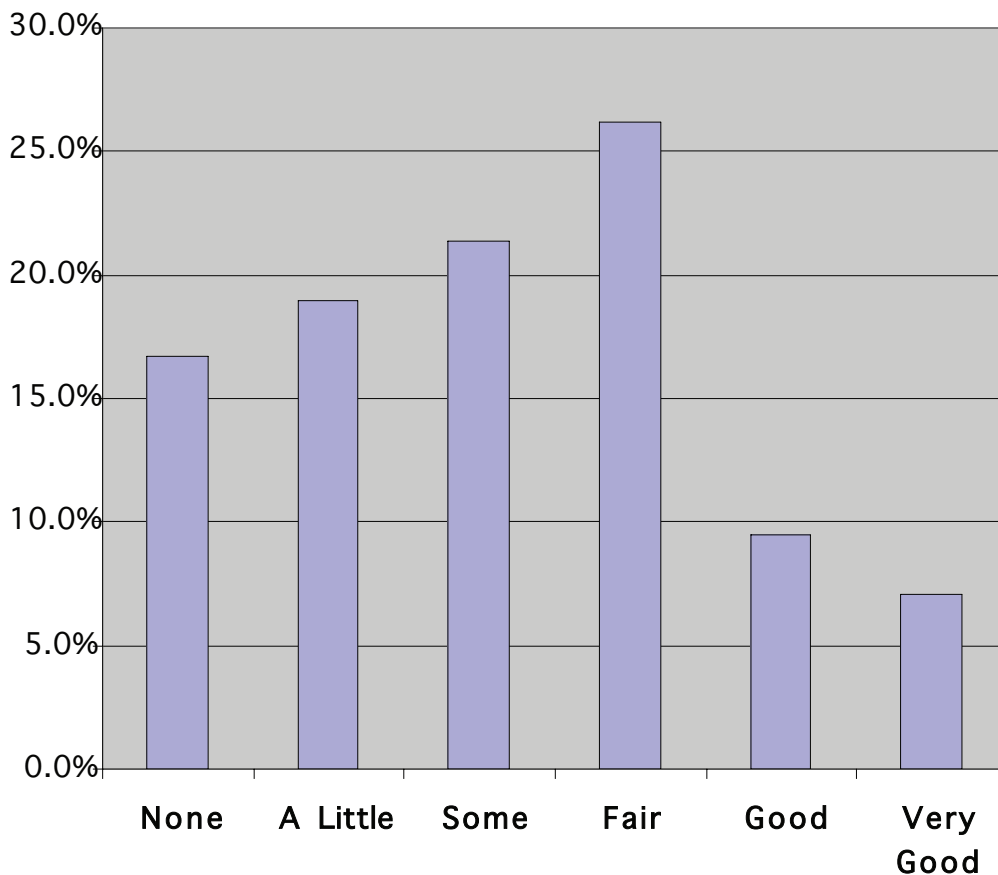
The survey – quantitative findings

Questions One and Two: The first two questions in the survey requested a contact name and organisation name for the respondent. 42 of the 130 members polled (32 per cent) responded to the survey.

Question Three: “Are you aware of the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF)?” 81 per cent of respondents reported that yes they are aware of the SCQF.

Question Four: “How would you rate your understanding of SCQF?” The responses available for selection were: None, A Little, Some, Fair, Good, and Very Good.

The following chart shows member responses for rating understanding of the SCQF:



Question Five: This question simply asks: Are You using it (SCQF)? 45.2 per cent of members reported that they are using the SCQF.

The survey – qualitative findings

Question Six: If Yes, (you are using SCQF) please tell us how you are using it. If no, please specify why not.

The survey yielded diverse responses regarding use of the framework. Of the 31 responses to question number six, 12 respondents indicated they do not use the framework. The reasons ranged from:

- Not understanding the framework
- Courses being certified through other bodies such as LANTRA and REHIS
- Not being a “SQA accredited centre”
- Funding and staff restrictions
- Uncertainty as to the significance of the framework to their clients.

The 19 respondents who indicated they are using the framework are split into two categories. Those that use the SCQF to describe SQA levels, diplomas or levelling of courses and for guidance and assessment of learners.

Those organisations that are working with higher education organisations as a pathway to learning progression clearly have a greater need to use the SCQF as a matter of course. The information provided in the survey responses points to the fact that organisations involved in progression of formal learning have a greater stake in understanding and using the framework.

In summary, of the 31 responses to question number six, 61 per cent of respondents reported using the framework in some way and 38 per cent of respondents indicated they are not using the framework.

Question Seven: What support do you think you would need to make best use of SCQF?

There were 29 responses to question seven. Two responses that dominated the feedback concerned funding and sector specific support. Members stated issues in the following areas:

- Training staff,
- Maintaining systems
- The process of levelling and SQA credit rating.

Further responses to question seven can be found in Appendix 1.

Phone interviews

The members targeted for telephone interviews were those that self rated their understanding of the framework as “a little” to “fair”.

A variety of reasons for using the SCQF emerged during the interview process. Some organisations indicated they used the SCQF for reporting purposes. One of these organisations explained that SCQF provides a way to “benchmark” when presenting information to funders. In addition, the framework is seen as a way to define learners when reporting to funders. Several organisations indicated that they use the framework when developing Adult Literacies Professional Development Awards or when they are involved with an Individual Learning Account. One organisation indicated that they use the SCQF when recruiting paid members of staff.

Most of the individuals contacted felt that the SCQF was superficially straightforward, however, they expressed they did not see its benefits to their organisation. While some members did not register any connection with the framework, there were those that recognise the need to bridge this gap. In one phone interview a manager and senior trainer described their organisation as at a “*ground level of understanding*” of the SCQF. They are not using the SCQF at present but are eager for ways to implement the framework. They provide training, including the European Computer Driving License (ECDL), the City and Guilds Using Information Technology (Level 2) Diploma and they are looking to provide new courses at level 2. This organisation works with unemployed learners in an effort to provide skills and confidence to enter the workplace.

An identifiable theme appearing in discussions about the framework is the idea that the framework is not relevant until the organisation provides accredited coursework. There is confusion about the process of levelling and credit rating courses. For example, one such organisation we spoke with is looking to become a Learndirect branded learning centre. Until this time they feel the SCQF does not apply to the work they do. They currently offer the ECDL, courses on literacies and numeracy, job search and career guidance as well as courses on life skills. In addition they offer license of certificates for LGV, PCV, Forklifts and more.

Face-to-face interviews

The target group for face-to-face interviews was selected from organisations that stated in the survey they have a “good” to “very good” understanding of the SCQF. A key question asked during the interview process was how established the framework is within each organisation. Three of the organisations interviewed stated that the SCQF was part of the structure of the organisation before they took up their post. One member indicated that she learned of the SCQF at her induction seven years ago. They were replacing SCOTCAT with the SCQF at that time. Most organisations embraced the framework as a result of following the lead of colleges and universities with whom they work. Another member at a different organisation indicated that the framework was in place when they took the post four years ago. It was originally set into place for Quality Assurance reasons. This individual sees the framework as essential to the organisation’s growth as well as certification to a larger programme they are involved with. She expands her vision to include the European framework. A member at another organisation learned of the framework from her prior employer, in the voluntary sector.

None of the member organisations participating in face-to-face interviews directly share the framework with their clients/learners. Some of the thoughts on this are that *“the average inquirer has no awareness of the framework”* and that it is confusing to the client/learner. In addition one member felt that the framework may foster *“unrealistic expectations”* and that the idea of equivalencies is misguided. This member also felt unsure about credits and in her view feels that it is best not to consider them if they are not relevant. Another member shared that they do not sit down with the diagram of the framework and discuss it with their learners. They feel there is confusion in the sector about the framework. A member pointed out that the individuals they work with are from foreign non-European countries and therefore they do not fit into the framework.

Future plans for the members interviewed include: levelling new courses in settings outside their training centre, accreditation and continued work at understanding the SCQF. All of the members interviewed have direct ties with higher education institutions.

5 Conclusions

Most organisations viewed the framework in narrow terms, even those who use it regularly. Members who are using the framework understand it in relation to their specific goals. For example, using the framework to assess and place learners on a pathway to a particular programme or degree. The research suggests that groups that have some understanding of the framework view it as either an assessment tool for the learner's progression or as a means to accredit coursework and provide qualifications. Many organisations conveyed the idea that the framework was not for them because the courses they provide are not accredited. Some of our members feared that using the SCQF could alienate vulnerable people because it quantifies their skills or knowledge on a scale. This may block organisations from considering creative ways to use the framework internally as well as an assessment tool for learners.

The evidence gathered suggests a varied level of experience and need amongst our members. The three methods of gathering knowledge and intelligence on views and use of the SCQF indicated that there are possibly four general levels of SCQF engagement within adult education in the voluntary sector.

- **Have little or no knowledge of the framework** – these members may be involved with informal learning and non formal learning. For example, an organisation that offers recreational programmes.
- **Have heard of the framework and show some interest but not actively using SCQF** – members at this level of engagement may be involved in confidence building, skills attainment and “first steps” learning. Assessment may be an issue with some of their learners.
- **Use framework as guidance and/or an assessment tool** – members at this level of engagement may use the framework in a variety of ways, such as, advising staff and volunteers interested in further study or levelling and accreditation of courses.
- **Understand Framework and use it as a pathway to a specific academic progression** – members at this level of engagement usually operate in formal learning environments

and have direct ties with universities or colleges. For example, an organisation that offers training programmes that directly feed into a specific college or university degree programme.

The information collected in this project has many strands and reveals a variety of issues concerning the voluntary adult learning sector, the SCQF and the relationship between the two. Some critical insight has been gained into members' use and views of the framework; however it is clear that there is work to be done to expand the use of the framework and promote its versatility within the sector.

6 Issues for action or investigation

Funding

Programme funding and securing future provision is vitally important to our members. There is potential for the framework to be used as a tool for quantifying success, which could prove critically important when our members seek funding. Promoting ways to define outcomes through the SCQF could result in more organisations securing future provision. It may also be a means to provide a more accurate picture of the invaluable contribution the sector is making.

There is a perception amongst members that the process of levelling and credit rating of courses is cost prohibitive. Responses to the survey indicated, for example, that *“funding restraints on the project”* and *“financial resources”* are reasons some members are not using the SCQF. A member responding to the survey stated: *“I believe once the voluntary sector can establish and secure core funding for qualified learning and development the SCQF will be invaluable...”* while another member identified *“mainstream funding”* as required support for expanding the use of the framework. It is important to note here that there is much confusion over what levelling and credit rating entail. The survey provided insight to this as evidenced by statements such as: *“We don’t do accredited courses”* and *“...we are not an SQA accredited centre”* as reasons for not using the SCQF. Members often refer to “accreditation” and credit rating as the same process. This confusion amongst members highlights the need for further training and support within the sector.

Improved knowledge, understanding and training

One of the critical issues for action and investigation centres on those organisations in the sector that provide informal and non-formal learning. This group while diverse, share the need for training on how to implement the SCQF. Further consideration into the varying dynamics of these organisations could lead to widening the access of the SCQF and promote creative thinking about how to use the framework. Further work is required to improve members’ knowledge and understanding of the framework. It is particularly important to instil the concept that the framework can be useful even when an organisation does not deliver “accredited” courses. Changing the perception of the framework as alienating to vulnerable learners is essential to broadening the SCQF’s use within the sector.

Sector specific support

Sector specific support is another issue that has been raised by many of our members. Members responding to the survey have stated there is a need for *“local support for varied specific queries”* and *“examples of work that fit within the framework to identify relevance to the work”*. Workshops and hotline numbers have been suggested as potentially helpful. Relating the SCQF to other qualifications such as ECDL, MOS and PC passport as well as the English and Welsh frameworks is also desirable. Also suggested was a pictorial framework or flowchart that could help learners develop a portfolio so they could understand how to build on their prior learning.

The investigation and dialogue fostered in this project sends a clear indicator that LLS members are in need of sector specific funding, training and support in order to move forward with the use of the SCQF. Furthermore, members are eager for this guidance and await examples of how the framework can be applied to the work the sector carries out. Further provision on widening access to the SCQF within adult learning in the voluntary sector promises creative participation from determined and resourceful adult learning voluntary organisations.

Appendix 1 Survey questions

1. Contact Name
2. Organisation
3. Are you aware of the Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF)?
4. How would you rate your Understanding of SCQF? (None, A Little, Some, Fair, Good, Very Good)
5. Are you using it?
6. If yes, (using SCQF) please tell us how you are using it. If no, please specify why not.
7. What support do you think you would need to make best use of SCQF?

Responses to Survey Question Six

Survey Question Number Six: If yes, (using SCQF) please tell us how you are using it. If no, please specify why not.

1. Delivering and assessing SQA Units Writing SQA Units.
2. Don't know how it works.
3. We train adults in introductory IT (non-certificated) and/or ECDL (British Computer Society certificated). Our other courses are run under Community Education and tend to be recreational e.g. cookery, art, etc. or are land-based/vocation and are certificated through LANTRA or another body such as REHIS.
4. Usage has been quite superficial at this time. As a charitable organisation the training and development offered to the staff is limited and restricted the funding and support. We are attempting to put some form of qualification foundation for staff in our employment via the skills for justice agency. The SCQF has been used to identify at what level is any qualification we are able to offer.
5. Only some knowledge of how to use it. Not sure significance to our clients.

6. Through the delivery of SQA modules at access 3 and intermediate 1 levels.
7. Identify students' progression. Inform community learners of where their qualifications "fit in".
8. Funding restraints on the project to develop our work.
9. Guidance for students, helps them to understand the levels of qualification and the possible progression routes.
10. We specify SCQF levels in our Programme Framework and refer to them in dealings with college tutors and HE admissions staff. We do not refer to SCQF in dealings with students or prospective students because it is not yet known or understood by them and could give rise to confusion particularly where progression is concerned.
11. Do not know enough about it.
12. Well, I'm not really sure about what exactly it is!
13. To place our mentees on various education streams.
14. N/A as we are not an SQA accredited centre.
15. For delivery of pilot project in SVQ level 2.
16. We operate in a non-award context with the accredited qualifications aspect delivered through a university.
17. I am not using it in my job of offering an education programme, but other staff may be as part of their use of volunteers, etc.
18. Swap Programmes are currently being levelled on the SCQF. This is a task all three Swap consortia who are engaged in / with SQA. Programmes will then be at a minimum of level 6 which is the entry level required for HE.
19. I use it because I need to use it as the accredited courses that we deliver are done through our local college.
20. We offer SQA's, ECDL* and MOS which all have levels within the SCQF. *Although not official the ECDL has an informal level within the framework. We relate to these

qualifications and their SCQF levels in funding applications for a way of qualifying outputs and results, with respect to qualifications gained. We also have to relate to this when designing ILA approved courses i.e. there for ILA Scotland universal campaign ICT qualifications must be SCQF level 5 or below.

21. We run Diploma (SCQF level 8) in Volunteering Management in partnership with University of Dundee. We need to ensure that all assessments are in line with the requirements of the framework.
22. I do not have any knowledge other than the name.
23. Not much to date but are starting to classify the courses learners undertake according to it.
24. N/A
25. We don't do accredited courses.
26. Promoting the framework with learners relating appropriate levels with modules offered in the Diploma in volunteering Management. Reference/ link to framework in Volunteer manager training course material on training & development for volunteers management.
27. We use it to help, inform, advise and guidance that is given to staff who are embarking on further study.
28. Working on notional levelling of selected short courses and piloting assessment methods appropriate to SCQF.
29. We use it for development of SQA units, for planning and informally in the area of ESOL as background knowledge to our own work.
30. Trying to use it to help assess learners' progress and level of learning.
31. To assess level of Introductory and Improvers courses we can provide in IT.

Responses to Survey Question Seven

Question Number 7 What support do you think you would need to make best use of SCQF?

1. More knowledge about it and how we can encourage volunteers to be involved.

2. Local support for varied and specific queries.
3. Guidance and understanding.
4. N/a we do not use it.
5. I believe once the voluntary sector can establish and secure core funding for qualified learning and development the SCQF will be invaluable. It would provide guidance, structure and clarity to individuals and organisations who want to move forward and develop professionally. Something Apex Scotland, a leading organisation in its field is trying to achieve.
6. Clear, plain English explanation of it and how to use it. Explanation of its use for our client group, mainly supported educational needs.
7. At the moment we are exploring the use of SVQ in our workplace.
8. Mainstream funding.
9. The organisation displays the small card at all centres for tutors and students. I am unaware of what is needed to make more use of the framework.
10. We would like to be kept informed of developments.
11. Examples of work that fit within the framework to identify relevance to the work. Workshops?
12. We understand the system.
13. Ability to accredit training delivered to voluntary groups towards framework (e.g. committee skills, confidence building).
14. N/A
15. Unsure.
16. We are currently receiving support from SQA but perhaps more seminars with 'live' examples would help organisations.
17. Any information that would help us as a learning centre.

18. It would be good to have a clear pictorial framework or flowchart that you could show to students. i.e. how they could build on what they already have, or are studying, and put this towards other qualifications. This framework could be regularly updated to show where not SVQ qualifications fit in - including ECDL, MOS and PC Passport. Also perhaps clear briefings about how the SCQF relates to the English & Wales QFs, particularly for funding applications etc.
19. Information on what it is and how it works.
20. Clearer info from SCQF and learning providers so it's easier to say where things fit in eg ECDL.
21. N/A
22. Organisations we work with require more support to relate appropriate levels to training they offer volunteers more promotion of RPL, in particular in relation to informal learning and developing through volunteering.
23. Training and Guidance.
24. Financial resources are the main limiter.
25. Have some kind of information session explaining exactly what SCQF is and how it can be beneficial to have an awareness of this.
26. Be a registered SQA learning centre, but as a voluntary organisation that's not appropriate.
27. Don't know.
28. Clearer understanding of how it links to older awards.
Clearer understanding of use in adult learning.
29. None at the moment. SCQF including ECDL would be a great help.

Appendix 2 Face-to-face and phone interview questions

1. How long have you used the framework?
2. Why did you choose to use the framework?
3. Has the framework been of benefit to your organisation?
4. How did you implement the framework?
5. How long did it take to implement the framework?
6. Did you try different strategies when implementing the framework?
7. Did you use any outside resources when implementing the framework?
8. What were/are the issues you have experienced using the framework?
9. Are there any pitfalls to using the framework?
10. Do you have any tips for using the framework?
11. Do you have future development plans regarding the SCQF?
12. Are you interested in becoming a case study?



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