

Development of an International Qualification Framework for the Strength and Conditioning Profession: International Universities Strength and Conditioning Association Position Statement

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INTRODUCTION

In the profession of strength and conditioning (S&C), there is a need for a standardised, comprehensive framework that can allow for the alignment of international certifications, qualifications, and standards. This need stems from the lack of clarity surrounding the awarding levels of different governing bodies and organisations worldwide, as well as the increased connectedness of international sport and physical activity. Central to such a framework is understanding the current issues affecting S&C coaches,¹ current professional standards and guidelines,² and remuneration structures.^{3,4} As the sole dedicated international accreditation body, the International Universities Strength and Conditioning Association (IUSCA)⁵ carried out market research analysis and stakeholder engagement with regional and international educational authorities (Ofqual,

European Commission, UNESCO, USDE, CHEA, TEQSA, ASQA) to develop a global framework for the rating and awarding of S&C courses, certifications, and qualifications.

This has resulted in the proposed development of the International Qualification Framework (IQF), presented in this paper, which aims to provide transparency and understanding of the global qualification structure, and the equivalent levels of education and standards across different awarding organisations. A universally recognised framework will accommodate the diverse range of S&C qualifications within the profession, thus facilitating global mobility and international recognition of S&C professionals.

This position statement serves as an introduction to the IQF, outlining the developmental framework, purpose, and benefits of international

standardization to accrediting bodies. As an introductory document, its primary goal is to establish a common understanding and foundation, which can lead to further collaboration with stakeholders in the development of essential resources.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK

Step 1: The first step to creating the IQF was to determine a universal rating system that could be applied to the current and future S&C sector. This approach required detailed examination of qualification rating systems to determine appropriate qualification level range to be rated separately, while allowing for general comprehension and practical application. It was agreed that the standardised rating system of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)⁶ and Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF),⁷ which have set formal educational standards, rated from 1-8, would achieve this objective. A pilot of the EQF has been carried out with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)⁸ and the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF).⁹

In this framework, Level 1 corresponds to foundational learning, equivalent to early school education. Level 2 is generally equivalent to the educational attainment in high school. These levels then progress through various 'further' and

'higher' educational levels (FE and HE), with a bachelor's degree being classified Level 6, and a master's degree classified Level 7, culminating in Level 8, which represents doctorate level. In between these levels, all education, both formal and informal, academic, and vocational, can all be rated appropriately (Table 1).

Step 2: Once the ratings system was determined, step two involved identifying professional bodies and organisations that deliver S&C education programs and award qualifications and credentials. This process allowed quantification of recognition levels. The following organisations were identified: (1) National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA),¹⁰ (2) Australian Strength and Conditioning Association (ASCA),¹¹ (3) UK Strength and Conditioning Association (UKSCA),¹² (4) Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA),¹³ and the (5) International Universities Strength and Conditioning Association (IUSCA).⁵ It was recognised that organizations like the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM),¹⁴ British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES),¹⁵ and National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM),¹⁶ also offer certifications in S&C-related fields, such as personal trainer, physical and strength coach, tactical S&C, and performance and sport scientist. However, these certifications are beyond the scope of this paper, although may form the basis for future uses of the IQF.

Table 1. RQF/EQF Levels and Corresponding International Academic Standards

RQF/EQF Level	Academic Standard (UK, US, Australia)	Provides
8	UK: Doctorate; US: Doctoral degree; Australia: Doctoral degree	Highest level of academic achievement and research capability.
7	UK: Master degree; US: Master degree; Australia: Master degree	Specialized knowledge for expert professional practice.
6	UK: Bachelor degree; US: Bachelor degree; Australia: Bachelor degree	In-depth study and research skills for professional employment.
5	UK: HND/Foundation degree; US: Associate degree; Australia: Diploma/Advanced Diploma	Advanced learning for complex work or study.
4	UK: HNC/CertHE; US: Undergraduate; Australia: Certificate IV/Diploma	Specialized professional or technical skills and knowledge.
3	UK: A-Levels; US: High school junior/senior; Australia: Certificate III/IV	Readiness for higher education or professional work.
2	UK: GCSEs (9-4, A*-C); US: High school freshman/sophomore; Australia: Certificate II	Intermediate knowledge and skills for skilled work or further education.
1	UK: Foundation learning; US: Elementary education; Australia: Certificate I	Basic knowledge and skills for further study or entry-level employment.

Abbreviations: HND, Higher National Diploma; HNC, Higher National Certificate; CertHE, Certificate of Higher Education; GCSE, General Certificate of Secondary Education.

Table 2. IQF Level with Corresponding International Certifications

RQF/EQF Level	International	USA	UK	Australia
8	IUSCA mISCP	NSCA RSCC*D, RSCC*E		
7	IUSCA aISCP*m	NSCA RSCC		ASCA Master Coach
6	IUSCA aISCP	NSCA CSCS	UKSCA ASCC	ASCA Level 3
5				
4	IUSCA Level 4 International S&C Practitioner		CIMSPA/UKSCA Graduate S&C Coach	ASCA Level 2
3			CIMSPA/UKSCA Level 3 Diploma	
2	IUSCA Level 2 Certificate in Strength and Conditioning		CIMSPA/UKSCA S&C Trainer	ASCA Level 1
1	IUSCA Level 1 Certificate in Strength and Conditioning			

*Abbreviations: mISCP, Master International Strength and Conditioning Practitioner; aISCP, Accredited International Strength and Conditioning Practitioner; aISCP*m, Accredited International Strength and Conditioning Practitioner by Masters; RSCC, Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach, RSCC*D, Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach with Distinction, RSCC*E, Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach Emeritus; CSCS, Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, ASCC, - Accredited Strength and Conditioning Coach.*

Step 3: The qualification levels of each organisation were then assessed in consultation with two independent consultants in the field of educational frameworks (RQF/EQF and US Pathways). The corresponding IQF levels were then determined by quantifying the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each awarding organisation, mapping these standards to the relevant levels from 1-8. Table 2 outlines the IQF level and corresponding international certifications.

Step 4: The last stage in developing the qualification framework was to synthesize the competencies and responsibilities at each IQF level and connect these components to the specific requirements of the S&C profession. An S&C job search was performed from September 2021 to September 2023 via online employment marketplaces. Job listings were reviewed for common job types and key attributes. Table 3 summarises IQF level and job role alignment to the core competencies and responsibilities.

PROFESSIONAL RELEVANCE

The IQF addresses several critical aspects of the growing and evolving S&C profession.¹ Firstly, it provides consistency, transparency and clarity in S&C education and certifications across the global landscape. Secondly, it ensures a clear, objective pathway for continued career development, from entry-level through to advanced positions. Finally,

the IQF enhances professional recognition and opens the possibility of portability of certifications internationally. This is an important consideration, allowing employers to compare candidates' expertise on a global scale, rather than limit to restrictions of one awarding organization. Collectively, the IQF potentially opens the job market and enhances the internationalization opportunities for candidates and employers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this paper serves as an introduction to the IQF, highlighting the potential to positively impact the profession, it is important to recognise ongoing development and refinement. This will require a collaborative effort and robust dialogue between stakeholders. Such a collaborative approach promotes industry engagement, with input from the global S&C community to shape the IQF and ensure that it is effective in representing the international collective. Therefore, the IUSCA has identified four potential development areas, these include:

1. Regional integration, particularly into the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and South America.
2. Detailed job descriptions aligned to IQF level.
3. Minimum salaries aligned to IQF level.
4. Detailed qualification mapping and international recognition between accrediting bodies.

Table 3. IQF Level Alignment with Job Roles, Competencies, and Responsibilities

RQF/EQF Level	Competencies and Responsibilities	Job Role
8	Highest level of learning, equivalent to Doctorate level, with highly advanced knowledge and skill set in a specialty. Involves significant management duties and the ability to lead complex analyses and interventions.	CEO, Director, Consultant
7	Highly experienced practitioner with the capability to perform multiple analyses, evaluate complex situations, and manage a group of colleagues. Accredited competence in challenging environments.	Head of Department, Researcher, Director (working towards IQF Level 8)
6	Accredited practitioner with capacity to navigate challenging environments, capable of meaningful data analysis and group management.	Lead Coach/Practitioner in Professional Organisation (working towards IQF Level 7)
5	Advanced practitioner with developed skills and knowledge, working towards formal accreditation and capable of independent application of skills.	Coach/Practitioner in Professional Organisation (working towards IQF Level 6)
4	Proficient with enhanced knowledge and skills, applying knowledge broadly with some independence and responsibility.	Independent Coach/Practitioner (working towards IQF Level 5)
3	Developing skill set, foundational knowledge of all areas, capable of applied thinking and analysis. Minimum level for independent work, reporting to a supervisor.	Coach/Practitioner (entry level), Assistant Coach/Practitioner (within professional org)
2	Emerging entry-level skills demonstrating prerequisite knowledge for the profession, focusing on health and safety requirements, under supervision.	Assistant Coach/Practitioner (within professional org), Intern Coach/Practitioner (supervised)
1	Fundamental learning skills equivalent to general education up to age 15, with no formal responsibilities.	Volunteer Assistant, Shadowing Experience

CONCLUSION

The development of the IQF marks a seminal milestone in the professionalisation of the S&C sector. By providing a clear, consistent global structure for qualifications, the IQF not only supports the career development of S&C professionals, but also upholds the integrity and excellence of the profession, offering tangible benefits for practitioners, educators, and employers.

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