

Qualifications and Credit Framework

Key questions and answers

September 2009

Purpose and scope:

This document has been produced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to answer key questions various stakeholders and delivery partners may have around the role of the LSC (and its successor organisation the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) when it comes into being in April 2010) in the implementation of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). This document covers all aspects of LSC / SFA's remit around the implementation of QCF, specifically around taking forward the design and delivery of the Service Layer across England, Wales and Northern Ireland and to ensure that planning, funding and performance in England are aligned to the QCF. The Service Layer comprises of the systems that will support credit accumulation and transfer and allow learners to see an electronic copy of all their QCF achievement. For further details on the Service Layer or other aspects of QCF, please contact the LSC QCF Service Desk (details below).

The questions and answers in this document have been split into two sections; the first section covers England specific questions on funding, planning and performance. The second section covers three country (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) specific questions on the Service Layer. Both sections will have questions which may be relevant for your organisation. All questions and answers have been pooled together from specific questions already received and from issues raised in general feedback from awarding organisations, providers, Sector Skills Councils and other organisations.

We are aware that specific needs of organisations will change over time, so we will send out updated Q&A information sheets with our regular policy updates over the timeline of QCF implementation and also through the communication channels set up by our partners across the UK Vocational Qualification Reform programme. If there are questions you have which you do not feel are answered below, please contact the LSC QCF Service Desk on 0870 267 0054 or at qcfservicedesk@lsc.gov.uk and we will get a formal answer to you as soon as possible.

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Section 1: How is the LSC taking forward QCF implementation in England?

Funding overview

The major changes to QCF funding are on **what** is funded and **how** it is funded

What changes are you making to funding and when?

There are two areas of funding that we are focusing on:

- The policy – this relates to **what** is funded
- The methodology – this relates to **how** something is funded, the way rates are calculated and how the money is paid to a provider.

Policy

This relates to what is funded rather than how. We have said in our last two Annual Statements that we want to progressively focus funding on QCF provision post-19, beginning in August 2009. From August 2009 we expect providers to start delivering QCF provision where it is appropriate and available. Furthermore, from August 2009 we are promoting QCF provision as the provision of choice in Train to Gain, Pre-Employment Training, Offender Learning and Skills and Adult Responsiveness. We do not intend to continue funding National Qualification Framework (NQF) provision for new learners where appropriate QCF provision exists. We will not continue funding NQF provision if an SSC advises us it is not a priority for funding. Where there is no QCF qualification we will be working with SSCs to understand why this may be the case and to understand timescales for the switch from NQF to QCF. We are working with SSCs now to understand the implications of the transition from NQF to QCF across sectors and sub sectors, and where any gaps in provision may arise in order that we can work to resolve these gaps with the intention of ceasing funding for NQF qualifications for adults beyond August 2010. Liaison and discussion with awarding organisations will also be critical here and we will work through our Awarding Organisation Advisory Group to ensure engagement of awarding organisations in discussions.

We have also said that we will focus funding on provision that supports employment and employability. This has not changed. QCF gives us the opportunity to articulate how we will do this and be clear about which provision is prioritised for public funding. Each of the delivery gateways / programmes that the LSC delivers (Adult Responsiveness, Train to Gain, Pre-Employment Training, Offender Learning and Skills and Apprenticeships) will have a list of QCF provision that is prioritised for funding within that gateway aligned to the aims of the programme. For example the list of units and qualifications eligible for funding in Train to Gain are those that support employers and helps build a productive workforce. In the pre-employment programmes the list of units and qualifications are those capable of best supporting individuals into sustainable employment. In the future the LSC, and its successor organisation the SFA, will publish a list of what we will fund, identifying what is appropriate in each delivery gateway.

Methodology

For 2009/10 we are not changing the funding methodology as a result of QCF. The current methodology is capable of funding both units and qualifications and we are testing our approaches to doing this through the unit funding trials in Adult Responsiveness and the SME flexibilities in Train to Gain. This works by setting a rate at the unit level and using the same calculating principles as we do for qualifications – essentially we treat both as learning aims.

For 2010/11 we think there are some changes we can make to the funding methodology that make the funding of units and qualifications better aligned to QCF. Any changes we make to funding must not put anyone at risk, especially learners. So the approach we are taking at the moment is to identify where and what needs to change, what the impact and consequences of the change would be before we make that change. So, we know we want to fund both units and qualifications. And to do this we are looking at how we can base this on activity levels involved in providing a programme of learning. We want to look at programme weighting factors, and to assign these at unit as well as qualification level depending on the individual learners' aims.

From 2011/12 we should begin to see more significant changes and we will in the future look at the possibility of having a credit based funding methodology i.e. rates assigned to credit. At the moment the QCF is still in its very early stages and it is too early to make any changes in this areas.

Funding of qualifications and units

Both QCF units and qualifications will be funded by the LSC / SFA

Will all qualifications on the QCF be funded?

No. Not all accredited units/qualifications will be funded – this is the same as the situation now. Certain qualifications will be prioritised for public funding and others won't. The LSC, and the SFA (when it comes into being in April 2010), will prioritise funding of QCF qualifications and units from August 2010. The LSC intends to publish a quarterly list of those QCF qualifications prioritised for funding across each delivery gateway. This will replace the current Section 97 process and also be part of the LSC (SFA) remit to deliver the Adult Entitlement.

Does this mean the LSC / SFA will only be funding units?

No. The LSC / SFA will fund both units and qualifications. Each delivery gateway / programme will set out what is a priority for funding within its offer (see section below). The current set of Public Service Agreements (PSA) targets count the achievement of full (target bearing) qualifications and the LSC Grant letter sets expectations about how many full qualifications the LSC will deliver for the money it is given. This delivery responsibility is passed to providers along with the money. While the LSC is directed to secure a certain number of full qualification achievements it will continue to focus provider activity to reflect this. However, in some delivery gateways the balance may change. For example, in OLASS, units and the ability to undertake smaller episodes of learning are critical given the circumstances of the learner, and this is the same in Pre Employment Training.

How will funding support unit based learning?

Unit based learning is not solely dependent on unit funding. Many providers deliver qualifications using a unit based approach already. In some ways the QCF is catching up with good delivery already out there.

Where funding is aligned to qualifications the rate paid aims to broadly reflect the cost of delivery. It should not cost any more to deliver a qualification using a unit based curriculum or pedagogy than a whole qualification approach. We are undertaking evaluation as part of the unit funding trials to explore if there are any differing costs associated including registration and certification. Funding is already capable of supporting a learner who only needs to do some of a qualification to complete because of prior achievement and it is capable of only paying a proportion of funding where a learner may leave half way through for example. The way this calculates in the methodology currently is 'clunky' and can be bureaucratic to administer. The new approaches to unit funding that we are testing will make this easier.

Will providers start to be funded on a unit basis for all their provision?

No. This is because, as indicated above, in certain areas we still need to support the achievement of full qualifications.

How decisions are made on the funding of units/qualifications

Who decides what is funded?

The LSC / SFA will decide what is funded for post 19 learning. We will be advised by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) through their action plans what is a priority for public funding for employers and will also ensure that provision can meet government targets and priorities. For other categories of provision we will take advice from other strategic partners. We are currently working to confirm these partners.

What role do SSCs play in deciding what will be funded?

SSCs will advise LSC / SFA on what provision should be a priority for public funding to meet employers needs. The sector qualification strategies and action plans will do this. SSCs also set the threshold for Full Level 2 and 3 vocational qualifications designed to deliver occupational competence. These are the qualifications which will be target bearing and be counted as part of the government's PSA targets for adults.

In 2009/10 how much funding do you expect will be focused by providers on QCF provision?

This will depend to a large extent on the availability of provision. For vocational qualifications, the speed at which the QCF will be populated will be informed by SSCs' trajectories for reforming and moving provision within the QCF as outlined in the SQS Action Plans. Where suitable QCF provision is available, we would expect this to be delivered by the provider as the preferred qualification. We would expect the volume of suitable provision to increase significantly, once definitions are agreed for Full Level 2/3 in sectoral and occupational areas and also as clarity with regard to Foundation Learning post 19 is confirmed in September 2009.

The latest QCF information can be found in the LSC's Policy Updates

If a Sector Skills Council advises the LSC of a fit for purpose qualification and / or units, will it / they be funded?

We will need to balance SSC advice with meeting government targets and priorities and also to understand the nature of the demand that may come from Regional Development Agencies. The LSC / SFA will prioritise funding of QCF qualifications and units from August 2010, and that prioritisation will need to take account of national priorities as well as sectoral and spatial priorities across regions. We will also identify what might be lower priority qualifications which may be in receipt of discretionary funding.

If awarding organisations are developing qualifications in a Sector Skills Council's sector area, how can the SSC be sure these will receive public funds?

All QCF qualifications that fall within a sector footprint must be approved by the relevant sector body prior to accreditation by Ofqual for consideration of public funding. The process for SSC approval has now been agreed by the UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme Board and guidance produced. This can be accessed on the QCDA website at: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/24918.aspx>

For the purposes of TtG, the LSC / SFA are working closely with the SSC/Bs to ensure that through their action plans they advise the SSC as to which qualifications they feel should be priorities for funding within their sector.

Notifications and information on funding

How will the LSC / SFA notify providers of what is funded in each programme?

This information will be provided through the appropriate programme funding guidance and documentation plus the Learning Aims database (LAD). Following the repeal of Section 97, LSC / SFA intends to publish a list which sets out those qualifications that have been prioritised for public funding and through which delivery gateway (programme) they can be accessed, this will be alongside and as part of the Adult Entitlement. Further information on this can be found at <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/adultentitlement>

Where can I find out if a QCF qualification is eligible for funding?

This information is on the LSC's Learning Aims database (LAD): <http://providers.lsc.gov.uk/LAD/> Associated programme funding guidance for providers, e.g. Train to Gain, will also have specific information. As indicated above, a list of qualifications prioritised for public funding will be published quarterly and this will tell you for certain that a qualification or unit is prioritised for public funding within one of the delivery gateways/programmes. The overall quantum of qualifications and units that can be funded will be capped by the total size of the allocation the LSC / SFA receives in its Grant Letter.

Where will I find the list of qualifications that will become ineligible for funding?

A copy of the final list of ineligible qualifications for 2009/10 can be found at: <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/ukvqrp/support/>

Where can I find out about what has been accredited into the QCF?

Qualifications that have been recently accredited into the QCF can be found on the QCDA National Database of Accredited Qualifications (<http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/index.aspx>) by searching in the Qualification Type box by 'QCF'.

Where is the latest information on the QCF and funding available?

This and other information on the QCF is available in LSC's quarterly QCF Policy Update. The latest issue is available at: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/national/nat-lsc_qcf_policy3-jul09.pdf

It takes time between an awarding organisation telling providers that their qualification is eligible for funding and providers actually seeing it on LAD – why is this?

We don't notify awarding organisations directly that their qualifications are prioritised for funding. At the point a qualification is submitted to Ofqual for accreditation the awarding organisation may believe that it will

QCF funding structures will differ through each delivery gateway

be prioritised for funding as it meets the credit value for fullness set by the SSC. At this point, the qualification detail hasn't reached the LSC as it is still in the accreditation process with Ofqual. We receive a list from Ofqual once they have carried out all their checks and have accredited the qualification. At that point the LSC / SFA will make a decision about funding and which delivery gateway / programme it will be delivered through. After doing this the funding team assign the appropriate rate and the detail is included on LAD and any appropriate programme guidance is updated accordingly, alongside the lists of prioritised qualifications which will be produced once a quarter. We always aim to do this as quickly as possible and we are looking at how our systems can support us in doing this even more quickly. However, it is important to note that the LSC process of prioritising and assigning funding can only start at the point Ofqual notify us the qualification has been accredited.

Developing qualifications

When should awarding organisations start developing a qualification in order for a provider to deliver it and for it to be considered for funding?

As commercial entities, it is down to individual awarding organisations to decide what qualifications they wish to develop and when. However, awarding organisations should bear in mind the timescales and approaches the LSC has laid out for implementing the QCF. From August 2009 we will start to promote QCF provision as the provision of choice in Train to Gain, OLASS, Pre-Employment Training (PET) and in Adult Responsiveness. Particularly we will be looking at full Level 2, Level 3, Entry and Level 1, and we will ensure we keep updating the list of QCF qualifications, which are fundable, through our policy updates (available at <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/ukvqrp/support>).

As we have already indicated, part of implementing the QCF is about SSCs advising us which qualifications they wish us to fund. The Leitch Implementation Plan (2007) directed us to fund only those vocational qualifications which SSCs advise us are key. So really we need SSCs to identify the qualifications, awarding organisations to develop them for the QCF and Ofqual to accredit them – and that means that implementing the QCF will not be 'big bang', but will grow incrementally over the next two years. But there are already over 1,500 qualifications in the QCF, and some of these will be prioritised qualifications for public funding. There will be no percentage set but we will be looking at where there are QCF qualifications available and providers are still delivering NQF options. We will want to understand why this is the case and agree accelerated timescales for providers to switch over. Where new, fit for purpose units and qualifications are available we want learners and employers to be able to benefit from them as soon as possible.

The role of delivery gateways in funding

What will be funded in each delivery gateway and will there be different rules and eligibility?

There will continue to be different offers and rates paid for different programmes as currently.

Taking each delivery gateway one by one:

Adult Responsiveness

We are currently confirming the QCF offer within the Adult Responsiveness model. In terms of Full Level 2 we expect there to be a slightly broader range of qualifications than in Train to Gain to take account of individuals preparing for employment or undertaking further learning where applicable. We expect to confirm the list of additional full level 2 qualifications for Adult Responsiveness offer shortly after the main publication of Full Level 2 thresholds. In addition, we will also confirm the nature of the Foundation Learning (previously Foundation Learning Tier or FLT) offer in the Adult Responsiveness model, specifically in terms of the implications for First Steps learning.

Train to Gain

Train to Gain will continue to offer Full Level 2 and 3 qualifications to employers. Now the interim definitions for occupational competence have been defined by SSCs we expect this to be the first delivery gateway with a significant amount of QCF provision. Awarding organisations are redeveloping vocational qualifications against the sector and sub sector thresholds and as these become accredited we will expect to switch provision and funding to the new qualifications. We expect this switch to start during 2009/10. We are also looking at what the QCF offer at levels 1, 4 and 5 in TtG will be and will be working with SSCs to confirm this in due course.

The QCF funding of units **and** qualifications offers greater opportunity for both learners and employers

Pre-Employment Training

Most funding of pre-employment training programmes is based on the length of programme rather than attaching a rate to a qualification. QCF will give the opportunity for more of the provision offered as part of these programmes to be recognised as QCF units and / or accredited QCF qualifications. Where qualifications are delivered through pre-employment training such as the Employability Skills Award we will expect these to be accredited onto QCF and will require as part of the offer the QCF version to be delivered rather than the NQF.

Offender Learning and Skills' Service

OLASS has published a core curriculum that all providers will start to deliver as part of the new contracts starting in Autumn 2009. We expect the learning within the core curriculum to be a combination of accredited QCF qualifications and recognised QCF units and for the delivery to follow the principles of Foundation Learning. OLASS funding is based on delivery time. We are considering whether unit funding trials would work for OLASS provision to explore how funding might be linked to units.

Apprenticeships

The consultation on the specification for Apprenticeships has now finished. We have previously stated that we will expect Apprenticeship frameworks to be redeveloped using QCF units and qualifications by September 2010 (taking into account the outcomes of the consultation). Until the outcomes of the consultation are published and the specification is agreed it is difficult to say how Apprenticeships may be funded in the future.

Will providers be able to decide the mix of units and qualifications they deliver and will they be funded for them?

Within the scope of the programme guidance and contract then yes, providers will be able to decide this. Each delivery gateway / programme sets out what its offer to learners and employers is, what can be funded, how this will be paid and the volumes the provider is contracted to deliver. Some programmes such as Train to Gain will continue to have a focus on skilling the workforce to Level 2 and 3 and will expect the mix of provision delivered to be qualification based. Other programmes such as some of the pre-employment programmes have less of a focus on full qualifications and will include more unit based provision within the offer in coherent packages of units. One of the benefits of QCF is its flexibility to support different groups of learners in different ways.

Credit and units

What's wrong with the current way the LSC funds units?

The LSC has funded units since 2001. It is true that the current system offers some qualifications that can be broken down into units but it does not provide the benefits of a genuine unitised system. The QCF is an organising framework with qualifications built up from units, each unit will have a level and value in its own right, allowing incremental achievement and credit accumulation. Credit will allow greater opportunities to transfer achievement between providers, awarding organisations and qualifications. Learners will have their achievement of units and qualifications recorded on their learner record. The formal recognition and flexible use of units under QCF will also benefit employers in that they can access qualifications comprised of combinations of units that will better meet the skills needs that are specific to their employees.

What is the definition of credit in the context of Guided Learning Hours?

Credit is a measure of a volume of achievement – so essentially a measure of output not input. Under the QCF, the achievement of one credit has been defined as requiring 10 hours of notional learning time. Learning time may include Guided Learning Hours (GLH) but also includes other relevant activities the learner undertakes such as independent study.

To inform future decisions on the approach to provider funding in England, work is being done to identify what proportion of learning hours you could reasonably expect to be occupied by GLH for different delivery gateways. It is not anticipated that funding rates would be linked directly to credit until 2012 at the earliest.

The LSC's QCF planning is based around providers' provision planning cycles

Is there an official LSC line on the funding of restricted/shared units?

Shared units are available to all awarding organisations to award credit and therefore, provide the sort of flexibility necessary to realise the benefits of credit accumulation and transfer of units under the QCF.

Restricted units are only available to specified awarding organisation(s) to award credit. Currently there are approximately 9,000 units on the QCF, approximately 6,000 of which are shared (July 2009). At the moment the LSC will fund both types of units in order to support the initial growth of the QCF. However, it is important to note that the qualifications regulator, OfQual, generally expect units within the QCF to be shared unless compelling reasons are put forward by awarding organisations. The regulators wish to support a framework that is easily understood by users, both learners and employers and maximises the opportunities for learners to be able to transfer credit. The use of shared units will assist with transparency and ensure that learners are able to realise the full benefit of transferring credit. As part of the shadow business cycle for 2010/11 delivery, LSC / SFA will consider its position on whether to prioritise the funding of shared units over restricted units as a means of maximising the benefits of credit accumulation and transfer for all learners.

How will recognition of prior learning and/or the transfer of credit from achieved units affect funding?

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is critical for the success of the QCF. For funding purposes the LSC currently distinguishes between the accreditation of prior learning and experience (APEL), where the prior learning is uncertificated, and prior attainment, where the prior achievement is certificated.

Where a learner's previously uncertificated learning or experience is recognised through a process of APEL towards the achievement of the qualification, the full value of the learning aim can be drawn down where it contributes to less than 50% of assessment of the learning aim. Where a learner starts a programme with prior certificated achievement, such as having achieved units through another period of learning, and these are used towards the achievement of the qualification on the basis of exemption, funding will need to be reduced appropriately on the ILR to avoid double funding. Further information on APEL, prior attainment and funding can be found in the LSC Funding Guidance 2008/09 Principles, Rules and Regulations: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/FundingGuidanceUpdate_0910_v3.pdf As the QCF is implemented we will be reviewing the policy on Recognition of Prior Learning.

Credit transfer and accumulation

Do credits a learner has accumulated through prior learning have an expiry date for use towards units and qualifications?

The credit learners have earned is theirs forever; however their ability to 'transfer' or 'use' that credit towards another qualification may have a time limit. They may need to "top up" their learning with a more up-to-date unit.

If a learner has undertaken two units of a qualification and already has the skills required by the other units of the qualification, are they eligible for the qualification? If not, what would they need to do to obtain the qualification?

If the qualification is a QCF qualification and a learner has been awarded credit for units, these will contribute to the qualification. The learner's skills will then need to be assessed under the RPL processes for the rest of the qualification. Guidance on this can be found on the QCDA website at <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/25050.aspx>

Qualifications and timetabling

QCF will not diminish the value of learners' existing NQF qualifications

Is the LSC expecting providers to start delivering a certain percentage of QCF units and qualifications from this August? Is there a 'quota' now for QCF?

What we have done is to ensure through the provider contract that all providers will start to deliver QCF provision where it is appropriate and available, but we are not putting a percentage on this. From August 2009 we are starting to promote QCF provision as the provision of choice in Train to Gain, OLASS, PET, and in the Adult Responsiveness model. Particularly we will be looking at full Level 2, Level 3, Entry and Level 1, and we will ensure we keep updating the list of QCF qualifications which are fundable through our policy updates.

Changing qualifications needs a long lead in time. Will providers' 2010 prospectuses now be out of date?

No, the work that is being done now to implement the QCF should not impede any current provision planning. The LSC's business cycle is based around the provision planning cycle of providers and the LSC / SFA will drive implementation of the QCF in accordance with this cycle. The dissemination of qualifications that are no longer eligible for funding and the SSC priority lists are both published in line with the business cycle. Also, many of the qualifications that are accredited into QCF will be a redevelopment from existing qualifications where they meet employers' needs. In these cases where a new QCF qualification replaces an old NQF equivalent there should be no reason why providers wouldn't update provision in the same way they do now when a qualification comes to the end of its accreditation date. The 'readiness' programme being co-ordinated by the QCDA will also help providers work through any transition issues (see below).

What will be the timetabling implications of the switch to QCF?

There will be timetabling challenges for providers in offering a curriculum that is built on units, but many providers have the foundations for this already. They will need to look at the new qualifications that are on offer and the mandatory and optional units that can be built up to form those qualifications then think about the best way to deliver them. There will be some units that are offered in more than one qualification – thinking about where efficiencies can be gained in delivering those units across groups will be a factor in decisions. As will the range of optional units offered - providers may already be in consortia arrangements for Train to Gain provision – they may want to consider taking advantage of these where there are specialised units they would like to include but are not best equipped to offer.

Will a full level 2 consist of multiple qualifications?

No – the QCF allows the combination of units reflecting the required knowledge and skills into a single full level 2.

How do learners' existing qualifications map to the new qualifications (QCF)? Will the new qualifications (QCF) diminish the value of these qualifications?

Completed qualifications, accredited on the NQF, will remain valuable to both learners and employers. Just as an O-level is still understood by employers today, qualifications completed on the NQF will not diminish in value.

How will these changes affect provider success rates and who will be awarded the success when a learner transfers from one provider to another?

Initially there will be no change and providers will still be measured on existing qualification success rates and contribution to LSC targets such as Skills for Life and Full Level 2 and 3. However as part of the unit funding trials, the LSC National Office will be working closely with Ofsted in identifying and scoping what future changes will be required in the QCF, such as the introduction of a Credit Success Rate measure. Clear guidance on success measures will be available from the LSC / SFA by 2010 and ongoing updates will be provided through the LSC QCF Policy Updates. The next update will be available in the autumn from the LSC website: <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/ukvqrp/support>

How will performance management be handled under the unit-based approach of QCF?

The current qualification success measure will continue to be applied to providers delivering QCF provision in 2009/10 including for the purposes of minimum levels of performance. Alongside the existing measures the LSC is currently investigating options for establishing performance management arrangements that will best support the QCF. We recognise that the QCF has the potential to change the mix and balance of provision between units and qualifications. We also further recognise that some of the client gateways will deliver a greater volume of units than qualifications. As such there is a need for a more holistic performance measure that can capture a provider's performance across the breadth of its provision and reflect the aims of different programmes.

The LSC is supporting Careers Information and Advice practitioners in supporting learners

Through the unit funding trials, the LSC has been trialling the concept of a Credit Success Rate (CSR) that can take account of the volume and levels of credit planned and achieved, and explore what this will mean for minimum levels of performance. The various ways in which a CSR could be used in performance and contract management are currently being considered. The CSR would have the potential to be included within: Framework for Excellence, Ofsted inspection indicators, Minimum Levels of Performance (MLP) calculations, and contract management arrangements.

How will the QCF help providers retain learners?

The QCF offers the opportunity to build on existing good practice and build an offer that allows people to fit in learning around their lives and progress at a rate that suits them – we often think about people incrementally achieving units and gaining a qualification over time but people could also double up and complete qualifications in shorter times by taking more units in one go. There is also evidence to suggest that more frequent incremental recognition of learners' achievement through the award of credit will in turn improve retention and achievement rates.

What will be the impact on Careers Information and Advice provided to learners?

There will also be a significant impact on the Careers Information and Advice provided to learners. Again, as part of the QCDA readiness programme (see below), we are working with discreet Careers Information and Advice services, such as *nextstep* and the Careers Advice Service, but the support given by providers and their staff is often the first point of contact for learners. It is expected that advisors will help learners become better informed consumers and advocates for the benefits offered by the QCF. The LSC will be providing support materials for Careers Information and Advice practitioners through existing practitioner portals. Furthermore, as part of the implementation of the QCF across England, QCDA are co-ordinating a 'readiness' programme for awarding organisations, SSCs and providers. Information on the 'readiness' programme is available on the QCDA website at http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_22230.aspx

How can providers prepare for QCF implementation? What is being done to build capacity across the sector?

The QCF readiness programme has identified a set of 'readiness' indicators for all parts of the sector, including providers (see link below). The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), the Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and the Association of Colleges (AoC) are working together to build capacity within providers to enable them to meet these indicators. Specific information on the LSIS QCF Readiness Provider Support Programme, and details of the 'readiness indicators' are available at: <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/252035>

Information on the support the ALP gives to providers as part of the readiness programme can be found at: <http://www.learningproviders.org.uk/topics/details/qualification-and-credit-framework-qcf/>

Information on the support the AoC gives to providers as part of the readiness programme can be found at: <http://www.aoc.co.uk/>

Section 2: How is the LSC implementing the Service Layer in the England, Wales and Northern Ireland?

The Transition Service and the Strategic Service

The Transition Service is a vital step in ensuring the final Strategic Service is effective

Why do we need a Transition Service AND a Strategic Service?

The Service Layer supports credit accumulation and transfer in a simple-user friendly way; the Transition Service receives learner achievement data from awarding organisations in a pre-prescribed format on a regular basis. The data is sent electronically using pre-existing LSC secure data transfer mechanisms. Once validated, achievement data is stored securely by the Transition Service and is available to awarding organisations, providers and learners (with mediated access). The Transition Service went live in April 2009, and will operate until September 2010 at which point it will be superseded by a long-term Strategic Solution.

Developing and building a Strategic Service with full functionality and scalability to support credit accumulation and transfer longer term will take time. It is vital that the development of the system builds on user experience and feedback, and this means putting a Transition Service in place in the short to medium term to support credit accumulation and transfer now. This allows the LSC to work closely with participating awarding organisations as well as providers to understand how the service impacts them and what their requirements are. At the same time the LSC will begin the process of designing the Strategic Service incorporating feedback from awarding organisations taking part in the Transition Service to make sure it meets their needs and will continue to do so in the long term. Ultimately the Transition Service will lead to the Strategic Service Layer providing a central source of data so that learner achievements are recorded and accessible to awarding organisations and providers. This means if a learner starts a qualification with one provider and then moves to another provider they will receive the credit for their initial unit and qualifications awarded will take into account past units achieved by a learner.

What data is held in the Transition Service and how is it managed?

Data held in the Transition Service is mainly a copy of achievement data already collected and held by awarding organisations who are participating in the service. The Transition Service will securely hold a copy of awarding organisation achievement data and an awarding organisation will retain the original.

No changes will be made to the data on the Transition Service

The aim of the service is to enable participating awarding organisations to be able to selectively view achievement data uploaded by other awarding organisations in order to support credit transfer activities for the award of qualifications to learners. Learners will also be able to view their Personal Learning Record via mediated access by providers in order to inform their learning journey.

Is the Service Layer just another service to gather more information on people?

No, the data held on the QCF Service Layer will be a copy of learner achievement data that is already collected and held by awarding organisations. The QCF will bring together this data in a central service.

Data management and security on the Transition Service

How is the data uploaded and validated?

The QCF Transition Service will enable awarding organisations to provide achievement data in two main ways - flat files through a web based portal using 'csv' or 'xml' formats, or submission via a web-service. API Data submission is a two step process whereby files will be initially transferred to LSC / SFA and are then queued for validation and uploaded to the database. Notifications of successful upload or validation

errors will be notified to awarding organisations automatically. Awarding organisations are responsible for the accuracy of data they provide to the QCF Transition Service. If the data provided to the service is defective in some way, they will probably need to provide the data again for inclusion in the service. The LSC / SFA will be responsible for ensuring that the received data is stored securely and not corrupted within the QCF Transition Service and will provide mechanisms for raising and resolving data quality issues through individual data challenge and through incident management via the QCF Service Desk.

Data security on the Service Layer is of central importance to the LSC

How is the achievement data shared?

Direct users of the Transition Service include awarding organisations and providers (with learners using it through mediated access), and each of these parties will view data in some way.

To support credit transfer activities for the award of some qualifications, awarding organisations are able to run credit accumulation transfer queries, which detail whether or not a specific learner has achieved a qualification being searched for. In order to carry out such a query, an awarding organisation will be required to input a Unique Learner Number (ULN), date of birth of the learner and a unit / qualification reference number. Awarding organisations will then need to check that any achievements identified are validated against their rules of combination.

Whilst the Transition Service is not directly accessible by learners, they will be able to view their achievement data in their Personal Learning Record, via mediated access by providers.

Release two in August 2009 also enabled providers taking part in the Transition Service to selectively view achievement data. The system however is not directly accessible to learners; they will be able to view their achievement data through their provider.

How is data kept secure and protected against identity theft?

Access to the QCF Transition Service will be via the secure 'Gateway' service. You will need a nominated administrator(s) who will be fully authenticated before being given access to the secure gateway service to upload data, and will ensure that only authorised representatives access the service. To ensure security, the LSC / SFA will communicate account name and password information separately to nominated individuals. Password rules will be applied to user accounts for security (including minimum length, character mix and change frequency). The LSC / SFA conforms to all standard government security and data protection guidance and has been through the risk management accreditation set process.

How will the data awarding organisations supply be governed?

Awarding organisations are considered the data controller/owner. The LSC / SFA will work with the data owners to establish appropriate checks for the release of data, or the management of data, within the system. We cannot do anything with this data without getting awarding organisations' prior permission and steer, and we are currently working on the best way to do this in practice.

Will the LSC / SFA share data with third parties?

Yes, because we have a statutory obligation to report to regulators and government departments. However, we will not do this without going through the proper governance. Everyone taking part in the Service Layer will sign up to data protocols which we will follow. On top of this, the nature of any reports we would issue would have to be anonymised. We would work with awarding organisations to look at effective standards reports that can be created from the Service Layer.

Why is the turnaround time for achievement data transfer only 10 days?

A 10 day turn around time is a compromise between the need for rapid submission of data to support effective transfer of units and a reasonable delay to allow the files to be collated and submitted. It was proposed as it aligns to the process that many awarding organisations are familiar with through the Diploma Aggregation Service (DAS).

Who has ownership of the achievement data?

Awarding organisations retain ownership and control of the achievement data provided to the QCF Transition Service. We will securely hold a copy of the data provided and will not make any changes to this copy.

We believe learners will use credit transfer due to the flexibility it offers

What happens if data is lost?

If there are any breaches of security within the Service Layer or identified between the Service Layer and awarding bodies, we will seek to form collective response together with the affected organisations with the aim of resolving the situation in the most effective manner.

How does this relate to the Data Protection Act?

The LSC is confident that the QCF Service Layer and its operating policies and principles are compliant with the Data Protection Act, and we will be working with the Information Commissioner to establish good working practices moving forward, building on the work already undertaken by the MIAP Learner Registration Service.

Other Service Layer considerations

How will the quality of awarding organisations' processes be protected?

As part of the development of the Strategic Service, we are working closely with awarding organisations to understand their business processes and how credit transfer may affect the quality assurance procedures for the delivery of awards. On top of this, the existing recognition of awarding organisations by Ofqual is already seen as a mark of quality processes.

Who is responsible for making an award?

Within QCF, awarding organisations retain absolute authority for making an award. However the QCF Service Layer will support an awarding organisation in establishing whether credit has been achieved elsewhere within the QCF.

Do learners have to obtain a Unique Learner Number (ULN)?

In the planning for the Service Layer, the LSC has already stated that the ULN must be used within QCF. This is because the QCF Service Layer uses the ULN to identify the same candidate across all awarding organisations; therefore the use of the ULN is required to participate in credit transfer within the QCF.

Who is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the unique learner number (ULN)?

Everyone who provides a service for learners, including awarding organisations and providers, are responsible for the accuracy of the unique learner number.

What if an awarding organisation's centres are not registered with Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) to use the Learner Registration Service (LRS) or use UK Register of Learning Providers (UKRLP)?

Any organisation that has a legitimate need to register a learner with the LRS can do so. However, in order to protect the service, it is necessary for the LSC to understand with whom it is dealing. So, we will require a list of centres to be provided to the QCF Service Layer so that we can ensure only legitimate assessment centres are granted access to the LRS.

Will learners actually use credit transfer?

Although some awarding organisations do work together to verify claimed achievements from other awarding organisations, this is not universal, and certainly does not offer a straightforward or responsive mechanism to support all learners fully using credit transfer between all awarding organisations. The LSC is working to create greater understanding between learners and providers about credit transfer and the benefits of such a flexible delivery. In addition, the LSC is looking to fund more unit level activity which we believe will also stimulate demand for credit transfer. To further foster greater understanding between learners and providers, as part of the implementation of the QCF across England, QCDA are co-ordinating a 'readiness' programme for awarding organisations, SSCs and providers. Information on the 'readiness' programme is available on the QCDA website at http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_22230.aspx

What are the confirmed business processes for awarding organisations' interactions with the Service Layer to deliver the accumulation and transfer of credit?

The LSC is currently working with awarding organisations, providers and regulators in a series of workshops to validate the business process requirements for the Service Layer in a series of areas including Routes to Achievement, credit accumulation and transfer, qualification award and the end-to-

end business processes. The first of these workshops ran on 27 August and the process will be completed by end of October 2009.

We are working with awarding organisations to develop the Service Layer

Given the number of learners some awarding organisations have, are there key features of the Transition Service that cannot be accessed until the full Strategic Service is in place?

There are aspects of the Strategic Service that are not available on the Transition Service, but this is not to do with the volume of learners. This is more to do with the variety of learners and the length of time we have had to develop the Strategic Service. For example, the Transition Service cannot support certain types of learners, including custodial offender learning. Equally, the Transition Service is not seeking to implement Routes to Achievement and Rules of Combination. It is not a question of scale; the Transition Service can support large volumes of students and is scaled to cope with many millions of records if necessary though the reuse of standard LSC services.

Will awarding organisations have input into the design of the full Strategic Service?

Awarding organisations are inputting into the design of the strategic service. However, they are one group of stakeholders amongst many and we will have to balance the needs of awarding organisations with providers, learners and the regulators. We are running a series of workshops with awarding organisations and other groups in September and October and will feed back on any decisions that are made on functionality.

As QCF is new there are relatively few learners transferring credit between awarding organisations. Therefore, why should awarding organisations sign up to the Transition Service?

One of the key reasons why credit isn't transferred is that there has been no mechanism that allows a learner to transfer credit in a consistent way between all different awarding organisations. Demand for credit transfer and accumulation will grow as the QCF grows, and clarity with regard to funding and information, advice and guidance, supported by the Transition Service, will support this growth. In addition, the QCF Readiness Programme will also support both providers and learners on the possibility of credit transfer at the same time as creating a supply of credit bearing unit level courses and developing the Service Layer.

As the Diploma Aggregation Service has indicated that the Unique Learner Number (ULN) is not a robust tool in areas of data matching and aggregation, why is it being used for the QCF?

There are defined reasons for this. England has no national candidate number; therefore to enable transfer between all awarding organisations across the three countries we have to use a ubiquitous, non-proprietary user identity number for the candidate. Rather than invest public money in developing a second unique identifier for learners, we have chosen to reuse existing services to support this programme.

As the ULN is a relatively new service, there are still issues to resolve, and the QCF programme is taking an active role in resolving these issues. Awarding organisations themselves participate in the continuous improvement of the learner registration service and form a key part of its customer scrutiny group so play a key role in the governance of this.

Why is the Service Layer using the UK Provider Reference Number (UKPRN) to identify schools and colleges, and not the NCN (National Centre Number)?

The National Centre Number is a proprietary service and not wholly independent, so therefore we need to offer a wholly independent service that is capable of supporting centre identification now and well into the future.

What happens if we already have the internal systems to support credit transfer?

We recognise that some awarding organisations offer credit transfer within their own qualifications and with a number of their peers but it is not universally available or accessible by all learners. The Service Layer aims to provide a universal credit transfer service that is capable of responding to the varied needs of the awarding sector.

If an awarding organisation does not recognise the UKPRN, can they use the Transition Service?

We appreciate that the UKPRN is not recognised by a number of awarding organisations, which is why it is not a mandatory requirement for the Transition Service. The Strategic Service is looking into strategies for providing universal centre identifiers.

We are working to provide the Service Layer to a wider variety of learners

Will the QCF Service desk operate 24 hours?

The service desk will be staffed by QCF Transition Service technical experts and will be open Monday to Friday 8am – 6pm (excluding English public holidays). This is a free service and within these hours the service desk should be able to answer the majority of calls. However, if you need an out of hours service is required, we will work to understand the intended usage patterns for data submission to plan for these requirements.

What will the QCF (and specifically use of the Service Layer) cost?

Nothing. The QCF and the Service Layer have always been free services and this is not changing.

The use of the Service Layer and other areas of provision

Are learners' qualifications from abroad recognised under the QCF in the UK?

If learners already have certificated qualifications they may be able to put these towards QCF qualifications. The QCF enables individuals to avoid duplication of learning and assessment. Individuals with certificated achievements outside the QCF can claim exemption from the requirement to achieve credits for designated units.

Can awarding organisations use the service to support overseas learners?

The LSC and its successor agencies have specific powers described in law around this area, and we cannot at present offer the specific Service Layer to learners overseas. However, the SFA can make arrangements with the approval of the Secretary of State to provide services to a wider variety of groups. We are currently investigating with BIS which further groups the QCF Service Layer should be made available to.

Does this apply to privately funded learners?

The Service Layer will be able to record achievement data submitted by awarding organisations for any of their learners (with the exclusion of learners overseas) who have achieved in the QCF. The source of funding will not impact whether the Service Layer is able to store the information.

What about other areas of provision, eg pre-19, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland?

The Service Layer will work across Wales and Northern Ireland. It will not operate in Scotland. At the moment the QCF in England is focused on post 19 provision. We will be working with DCSF to look at the applicability of the Service Layer to those areas of pre 19 provision, such as Foundation Learning, which draw on QCF units and qualifications.

Contact details and further support

LSC QCF Service Desk

If there are questions you have which you do not feel are answered in the above section for which you need an immediate response, please contact the LSC QCF Service Desk where we will get a formal answer to you and publish any general queries in the next Q&A leaflet. The service desk contact details are:

Telephone: 0870 267 0054
Email: qcfservicedesk@lsc.gov.uk

The LSC website

A lot of QCF help and information on is stored on the LSC website, with specific sections for awarding organisations, providers and Sector Skills Councils. The website can be accessed at: www.lsc.gov.uk

Further support

There are various sources of specific help alongside the LSC around QCF:

- **Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA):** As part of the implementation of the QCF across England, QCDA are co-ordinating a 'readiness' programme for awarding organisations, SSCs and providers. Information on the 'readiness' programme is available on the QCDA website at http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_22230.aspx. QCDA also provides news on QCF developments in their e-newsletter, QCF e-news: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/19911.aspx>
- **Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS):** BIS provide programme wide information on vocational qualifications reform in England, accessed via their website: http://www.dius.gov.uk/skills/vq_reform. The BIS VQ Reform e-newsletter provides a regular update on the overall programme: http://www.dius.gov.uk/skills/vq_reform/news
- **Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator (OfQual):** Information on the regulatory aspects of QCF can be found on the QfQual website: <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/51.aspx>. OfQual also provide the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) <http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/index.aspx>
- **LSC Qualification and Framework Reform:** This website provides updates on the LSC's key areas of work and links to relevant guidance: <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/>
- **Specific Qualifications themselves: information on these can be gathered** from the relevant awarding organisations, through supporting materials, events and further resources for qualifications.

Provider specific support

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), the Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and the Association of Colleges (AoC) are working together to build capacity within providers to be able them to meet the 'readiness' indicators for QCF.

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) is the improvement body dedicated to the development of the FE and skills sector, and it leads the provider strand within the QCF readiness programme. Details of the QCF Readiness Provider Support Programme and the dedicated support for providers is available on the programme website: <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/252035> LSIS is currently trialling the QCF Action Planner, also available through the programme website, which helps providers to audit where they are in relation to the QCF provider readiness indicators and action plan their next steps.

Association of Learning Providers (ALP) represents the voice of independent learning providers throughout England and is working together with LSIS and the AoC to ensure providers have the

capacity to deliver QCF. Information on the support ALP give can be found at:
<http://www.learningproviders.org.uk/topics/details/qualification-and-credit-framework-qcf/>

Association of Colleges (AoC) exists to represent and promote the interests of Colleges and provide members with professional support services. The AoC is working together with LSIS and the AoC to ensure providers have the capacity to deliver QCF. Information on their support can be found via their website: <http://www.aoc.co.uk/>

Potential questions for next question and answer sheet

As this document was finalised, we are aware there are other questions that providers may have that we have not been able to get a formal response to yet. We will ensure this is done in time for the next Q&A document, sent out with the next LSC QCF Policy Update this autumn.

Useful QCF web links featured in this document

LSC web links

- **QCF Service Desk:** qcfservicedesk@lsc.gov.uk (phone number: 0870 267 0054)
- **Quarterly QCF policy updates, lists of 2009/10 ineligible qualifications** (and other QCF guidance): <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/ukvqrp/support>
- **Learning Aims Database (LAD)** for information on funded qualifications:
<http://providers.lsc.gov.uk/LAD/>
- **The LSC Funding Guidance 2008/09 Principles, Rules and Regulations** (further information on APEL, prior attainment and funding):
http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/FundingGuidanceUpdate_0910_v3.pdf
- **Information on Adult Entitlement:** <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/adultentitlement>
- **General LSC website:** www.lsc.gov.uk

QCDA web links

- **QCF Readiness Programme:** http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_22230.aspx
- **QCDA National Database of Accredited Qualifications:**
<http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/index.aspx>
- **QCDA guidance on Recognition of Prior Learning and QCF:**
<http://www.qcda.gov.uk/25050.aspx>
- **Guidance on SSC approval process by UK Vocational Qualification Reform Programme Board:** <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/24918.aspx>
- **General QCDA website:** <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/>

Provider specific web links

- **LSIS QCF Readiness Provider Support Programme:**
<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/252035>
- **Association of Learning Providers (ALP):**
<http://www.learningproviders.org.uk/topics/details/qualification-and-credit-framework-qcf/>
- **Association of Colleges (AoC):** <http://www.aoc.co.uk/>