

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

Interim Definition of Full Level 3 Qualifications

Briefing Note

June 2009

Further information

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Interim Definition for Full Level 3 Qualifications in the Qualifications and Credit Framework

Background

1. The new interim Full Level 3 definition supports the implementation of the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF). The QCF is a new regulated framework which will recognise a wide range of different unit and credit-based vocational qualifications. It will be implemented across England, Wales and Northern Ireland and is intended to articulate and align with the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF). Overall, the framework will provide an improved offer and experience for learners and more responsive provision for employers through increased flexibility and engagement.

2. On 14th November 2008 Siôn Simon, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Further Education, wrote to LSC, formally remitting the responsibility for delivering the QCF across the employment and skills sector¹, including responsibility for delivering the fully specified QCF Service Layer² and for ensuring that planning, funding and performance can be aligned to and support the full flexibility of the QCF. LSC has reiterated its commitment to the introduction of the QCF in the [Statement of Priorities 2009/10](#).

3. Qualifications in the QCF will be built up from units, with each unit (and qualification) having a credit value. A new understanding of what constitutes a full Level 3 will be needed because the framework for qualifications in England will change from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the QCF, and the definition currently used for qualifications accredited into the NQF will no longer be appropriate in the QCF. Therefore, an interim definition is being introduced with an identified credit threshold necessary for full Level 3.

New Interim full Level 3 definition

4. The Secretary of State has now agreed an interim definition for full Level 3. This definition is based on a credit value range of a minimum threshold of 25 credits to a maximum threshold of 70 credits for QCF provision. This credit value range is intended to support both occupational competence and 'licence to practice' *and* progression to higher education and higher level skills. The interim definition will be implemented for the period to 31 August 2010, which LSC will monitor, manage and evaluate. Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), Standard Setting Bodies (SSBs) and Sector Bodies (SBs) will be able to vary the thresholds as appropriate, providing that the resulting qualification confers a basis for occupational competence and 'licence to practice'/progression to higher education and higher level skills in a sector, sub-sector or occupation.

¹ QCF implementation is led by the UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme Board (UKVQRPB) and, in addition to the LSC's remit, has other strands of activity, including QCF Readiness led by Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Accreditation Layer and regulatory framework led by Ofqual, and also work on Sector Qualifications Strategies action plans, National Occupational Standards and QCF research and evaluation led by UKCES.

² QCF high level operating model has three distinct layers: an Accreditation Layer, an Industry Layer and a Service Layer. QCF Service Layer supports learners, Awarding Organisations, learning providers and Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers by providing systems and services enabling Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) to take place.

5. As a part of UK-wide Vocational Qualification Reform Programme (VQRP), and also linked to the implementation of the QCF, the Secretary of State has recently agreed an interim definition for full Level 2, set at an identified threshold of 13 credits for QCF. This will also be an interim definition, initially for the 2-year period, until August 2010. SSCs/SSBs/SBs are responsible for determining the content and appropriate credit threshold for their sectors and also have the flexibility to set the threshold higher or lower than 13 credits as appropriate for relevant sector, sub-sectors and occupations.

Reasons for change

6. Full Level 3 is the level of skill considered as a foundation for occupational competence and progression to higher level skills. The interim definition for a qualification in the QCF at full Level 3 to date has been based on the comparative level of a qualification as set out in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

7. In the QCF there are no 'types' of qualifications, as vocational qualifications will be defined by purpose rather than type, and outcomes are measured in the achievement of credit and size in learning time, not guided learning hours (GLH). In the QCF, a single credit is awarded for achieving the outcomes in ten hours of learning time and the size of qualifications is signalled through the use of the terms 'certificate' and 'diploma'.

8. In the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in 2007, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) signed up to a set of indicators for skills improvements by 2011, including threshold targets for adults qualified to Level 2 and Level 3. The Level 2 and Level 3 indicators will be measured by the percentage of the population qualified to Level 2 (79%) and Level 3 (56%) by 2011, as reported through the Labour Force Survey. The minimum credit threshold has been set to maintain stability in terms of the qualifications that currently count to the PSA target.

9. The interim credit threshold range for full Level 3 is based on modelling undertaken by LSC which was aimed primarily to maintain stability and consistency in the setting and monitoring of targets and the allocation of funds for the current CSR period. The minimum threshold of 25 credits was the average size to keep the system in balance. While some smaller NVQs will be excluded, some larger VRQs (between 250 and 590 guided learning hours) would now count as full. For the interim period, the LSC will work closely with SSCs/SSBs/SBs to manage the size and breadth of QCF qualifications being approved as full Level 3 to ensure fitness for purpose and that the qualifications continue to focus on the knowledge and skills that employers demand and value at Level 3 in that sector.

Identifying purposes for full Level 3

10. The list of qualification purposes was developed by the qualification regulators, in collaboration with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (TASSC), the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). Awarding Organisations are now required to select identifying purposes for their qualifications.

11. It is deemed that the main purpose identifiers suitable for full Level 3 should encompass:

- B. Prepare for further learning or training and/or develop knowledge and/or skills in a subject area;
- D. Confirm occupational competence and/or 'licence to practice'; and
- E. Updating and continuing professional development (CPD).

Progression to Higher Education

12. Currently, NVQs (counted as being full qualifications) are aimed at developing and assessing occupational competence or 'licence to practice' and tend to be substantially smaller (in terms of their GLH input) given their workplace delivery and assessment, than other full Level 3 qualifications (VRQs, Access to HE and aggregated GCE A Levels) which offer a platform for progression to HE and higher level skills. It is likely that this distinction will continue in the QCF to meet differing needs.

13. The definition of 'fullness' needs to continue to recognise the requirements of each sector and, where applicable, be able to support progression to HE / higher level skills. In some cases SSCs/SSBs/SBs will want a single qualification to meet both needs. QCF qualifications can be designed as an integration of both knowledge units and units of competence as appropriate, with the balance varying by sector and/or sub-sector. This integrated approach could become an essential design characteristic, alongside Rules of Combination (RoC), when developing a qualification meeting multiple purposes. The RoC could be used to identify credit value required for specific pathways within a qualification leading to either occupational competence or progression or both.

14. As a result of the above there will continue to be full Level 3 qualifications with a wide variation in size in the QCF (as measured by credits that are required either for competence or progression). For instance where the primary purpose of a qualification is competence, a threshold of 25 credits in the full Level 3 credit value range could be identified. Or where the primary purpose is progression to HE the credit threshold might be set higher in the range up to 70 credits.

Role of Sector Skills Councils

15. In the QCF, SSCs/SSBs/SBs will be responsible for approving vocational qualifications threshold and content for full Level 3 qualifications, with a main identifying purpose D, which are accredited by Ofqual onto the QCF.

16. In addition, SSCs will through their Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) action plans advise the LSC of the key vocational qualifications they believe are fit for purpose for their sector and against which qualifications and /or units public funding should be aligned. SSCs/SSBs/SBs have a formal role in defining the content, ensuring consistency, determining which qualifications are needed in their sector and removing unnecessary duplication. SSCs/SSBs/SBs will also need to consider the portability of qualifications in their sector.

Learning and Skills Council Role

17. In the new arrangements the LSC will:
- Develop and implement processes for reviewing existing QCF qualifications at Level 3 and seeking agreement from the relevant SSCs for confirmation the qualifications meet sectors requirements for full Level 3;
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- Develop and implement a process for introducing new Level 3 qualifications;
- Ensure that funding methodology supports the new Level 3 definition;
- Provide information for providers and other stakeholders by including new interim full Level 3 definition in relevant policy documents and communications;
- Manage affordability of Level 3 provision;
- Provide monitoring and evaluation related to the new definition; and
- Facilitate a Level 3 monitoring group.

Implications for Awarding Organisations

18. The interim full Level 3 definition will mean that Awarding Organisations can progress the development of new qualifications to populate QCF, specifically in the context of public funding.

19. In relation to the existing qualifications, the implications of this threshold are that some vocationally related qualifications, that do not currently count as full, could count in future if they are reformed and accredited into QCF and meet the requirements set out by the relevant SSC. This may be counter-balanced by some small NVQs which currently count, but may not count in future in their present form.

20. It is important that the size of existing valued NVQs is not simply reduced to hit the PSA target or to attract public funding, and there will be no financial incentives to simply produce smaller qualifications. It is expected that the guiding principles for adjustment and development of new qualifications will be to meet the employers' needs and marketplace requirements in terms of providing transferable skills required by employers, and therefore leading to increased employability and allowing mobility in the workforce.

Implications for Providers

21. The LSC expectation is that providers should start delivering the new Level 3 qualifications accredited onto the QCF where they are replacing existing Level 3 NQF qualifications as they become available. The LSC plans to make ineligible the predecessor qualifications for the purposes of new funding starts even where the NQF qualification may still be within its accreditation date. LSC's existing policy not to make in-year changes that may negatively impact on a provider's planned delivery will mean that the timing of the funding changes will be set in order to minimise the impact on providers.

22. LSC would not expect to adjust allocations as providers begin to deliver the QCF full Level 3 qualifications. This assumption will be actively monitored during the two year period of the interim definition.

23. Performance arrangements will also continue unaltered. The new full Level 3 qualifications will be included within qualification success rate calculations in the same way that current full Level 3 provision is. Achievement rates and time taken to achieve the new qualifications will form part of the monitoring that will be undertaken during the two year period.

24. For the 09/10 allocations as part of the business cycle funding will be prioritised on QCF learning, informed by the Sector Qualification Strategy action plans. As part of the commissioning arrangements, LSC will expect providers to switch to delivering the new qualifications where they are available.

LSC Monitoring and Evaluation

25. The introduction of the new definition will be monitored and evaluated over the next two years to September 2010 and the new definition confirmed for 2010/11. Monitoring and evaluation will include affordability and impact on current and future PSA targets. It will also include impact on success rates and delivery. LSC will seek to understand impact at provider and national level to best inform future decisions.

26. The LSC will work closely with SSCs to support them in the role of approving qualifications for full Level 3 and will seek to question and monitor where it appears that high levels of smaller qualifications may be emerging without a robust rationale for the change. LSC will also ensure that all approved qualifications in the new QCF are economically valuable and that the processes that underpin the approval of a full Level 3 are consistent across sectors.

Next steps

27. LSC will be working with SSCs, Awarding Organisations and Ofqual to define the business processes that will support the new definition. Further work also needs to be undertaken to establish how arrangements will work for qualifications that fall outside SSCs' footprint.

28. The implementation work will focus on developing processes for the review of existing Level 3 and approval of the new Level 3, as well as implementation of appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes.

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