

Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

A framework for achievement

Recognising qualifications and skills in the 21st century



Stakeholder consultation: December 2004

First published in 2004

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ISBN: 1-85838-675-6

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Printed in Great Britain

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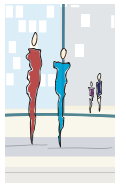
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Foreword



This consultation contains a series of design concepts for a new framework for achievement. The framework will recognise a wide range of achievements, in a more flexible and inclusive way than is currently possible using the National Qualifications Framework.

Our ideas have been informed by the joint remit given in December 2002 to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Learning and Skills Council and the Sector Skills Development Agency to reform vocational qualifications. The Skills Strategy White Paper *21st century skills: realising our potential* (published July 2003) and our stakeholders, who include learners, providers, educators, employers and partners, have also guided our thinking.

These proposals have been developed with the Learning and Skills Council and the Sector Skills Development Agency.

Today's qualifications system is a series of mini-frameworks that have developed in different sectors or through different awarding body conventions. Many qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework are valued, while others are duplicated, confusing or have no obvious pathways for progression to employment or learning.

The proposals in this document set out a radical new structure that recognises achievement through a system of interconnected units. Each unit has a level of challenge and credit, which indicates the volume or size of the achievement. Although this concept is not new, its development into a framework – one that is made up of coherent combinations of units that can be accumulated and transferred easily between qualifications and between awarding bodies – is an ambitious and reforming template for organising achievements and qualifications.

Our proposed design for the framework will make it possible for many more employees to gain credit for in-house training. Private training providers that offer high-quality short courses will be able to participate. Outcomes relating to employment sectors or occupations will be driven by the needs of employers.

The framework relies on a common bank of units, all of which contribute to one or more qualifications. This will simplify and rationalise the qualification offer by reducing duplication and overlap between similar qualifications. New skills requirements will result in the development of new units, rather than the proliferation of new qualifications.

The flexibility afforded by the new framework means that a wide range of valuable learning, such as that offered through the Open College Network and other adult- and community-based programmes, can be recognised.



We have placed great emphasis on the importance of having qualifications in the framework that recognise the concept of 'qualified' or 'competent' in a particular occupation. We will work closely with the Skills for Business network and employers to make sure these qualifications meet skills needs and are at the heart of the new framework.

Our proposals have been developed alongside the Working Group on 14–19 Reform, chaired by Mike Tomlinson, whose proposals are now being considered by government. Not only do the proposals complement each other, they add up to a powerful 14–90 reform agenda.

Since the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority took on responsibility for the reform of vocational qualifications in December 2002, in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council and the Sector Skills Development Agency, our vision has been to have a coherent and high-quality qualifications system that recognises competence, supports other learning, recognises the skills and achievements people value and meets the needs of employers and individuals.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Learning and Skills Council and the Skills for Business network share a long-term vision for the new framework. We would like to see the framework encompass all formally assessed learners' achievements outside higher education across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also want achievements within the framework to articulate with those in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Our aspiration is that achievements in Northern Ireland, England and Wales will be recognised within the framework, and will be comparable and transferable across the three countries.

It is, however, important to recognise that frameworks across the UK are at different stages of development. In Wales, the devolved administration and the regulatory and funding bodies have already consulted on some of the issues in this document. In Northern Ireland, work to develop a system of credit accumulation and transfer has progressed throughout much of the past decade.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Learning and Skills Council and the Sector Skills Development Agency recognise these different paths of reform. Notwithstanding our commitment to develop a framework capable of recognising achievements across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this consultation document relates solely to the process of reform in England. It is not intended to be a final statement on a revised national qualifications framework or a three-country credit framework.

Please give these proposals your full attention. We want to consider the views of a wide range of stakeholders so that when we present proposals to ministers next year, we will do so with the confidence that we have thoroughly consulted on the practicality, utility and fitness of the proposals.

As part of the consultation process, the Learning and Skills Council will run a series of regional events in January and February 2005. These will involve the local councils and their provider networks, and focus on the implications of the new framework.



The Sector Skills Development Agency will work with sector skills councils, and bodies representing sectors that do not have sector skills councils, to engage employers in developing the new framework. This will include setting up a panel of experts from different sectors, representing employers of different types and sizes. The Skills for Business network is an essential resource for identifying the qualifications that employers need and value.

I am confident that your input will ensure that the Framework for Achievement is of tangible benefit to learners and employers.

Ken Boston AO

Chief Executive, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Millions of people follow thousands of qualifications across the country, so we really need a way to understand the relative value of what they achieve. The Framework for Achievement will be simple without being simplistic. It will offer a way of directly comparing achievement from different kinds of learning, and will record the efforts of learners through a credit transcript, which can be used by employer and learner alike.

This is very exciting, but also very challenging. To make it work, we need a framework that is universally agreed. That means working closely with everyone involved in post-16 education and training to make the most of this opportunity.

Mark Haysom

Chief Executive, Learning and Skills Council

The key to engaging employers is flexibility, to be able to build qualifications that are tailored to their competence needs, sector by sector, for both large and small businesses. We welcome the prospect of a system that reduces the existing confusion of competing qualifications, supports progression routes and ensures qualifications are up to date and, above all, fit for employment purposes.

Christopher Duff

Chief Executive, Sector Skills Development Agency



Context

The White Paper *21st century skills: realising our potential* sets out the government's skills strategy for England. It identifies key objectives that need to be achieved to strengthen the UK's position as one of the world's leading economies. These will be achieved by ensuring that employers have the skills to support the success of their businesses and individuals have the skills they need to be employable and personally fulfilled.

Chapter 5 of the White Paper, 'Reforming qualifications and training programmes' proposes that qualifications reform should be underpinned by a unit-based national system of credit and qualifications. Since September 2003 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) have been working on such a system in England.

Parallel to this work, QCA, LSC, the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the devolved administrations across the UK have been working on the reform of vocational qualifications that was announced by the government in 2002.

In April 2004, the development of a credit framework and the reform of vocational qualifications were brought together in a single programme of work. In July, QCA set out the aims of this programme of work in *New thinking for reform* (QCA/04/1306).

To take forward this programme of work, we propose to establish a new framework for achievement (FfA). This framework will encompass a much wider range of achievements than the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). We are now consulting on the development of the FfA by seeking the views of all important stakeholders.

Why develop a new framework?

The case for reform is based on key messages from government, employers, learning providers and learners themselves. Some of these messages are:

- Our qualifications system is not responsive enough. The needs of individual learners and employers are not always easily met through existing qualifications.
- Our qualifications system is not inclusive enough. Many learners' achievements in employment, community-based learning activities, and other less-formal contexts are not currently recognised through existing qualifications.
- Our qualifications system is too complicated. The relative values of different kinds of achievement are not always represented clearly and explicitly through the range of existing qualifications.
- Our qualifications system is too bureaucratic. The administrative burden of accrediting qualifications, and the registration, assessment and certification of learners is often too high, and a barrier in the existing system.

We have noted these concerns. Our proposals for reform build on many features of the NQF as well as on key characteristics of awards offered outside the NQF. They are far-reaching, but we believe they can be accomplished within the existing arrangements for the regulation of qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and through the existing powers of QCA.



The features we will build on include:

- the experience of developing unitised qualifications, which is now well established in most vocational awarding bodies
- the recent reduction in the time taken to accredit qualifications within the NQF
- the successful partnerships established in some occupational sectors in the process of qualifications development
- the credibility of some qualifications within the NQF with learners, employers, universities and professional bodies
- the experience of many providers in developing and offering programmes to adult learners within a credit system
- recent innovations (using new technology) in the delivery of assessments.

By building on the best elements of existing qualifications and credit systems, we will make the process of introducing the FfA more manageable for organisations that offer awards, both inside and outside the NQF, and for organisations that deliver programmes that lead to these awards.

We will also build on other recent strategies and innovations. For example we will:

- work closely with the Skills for Business (SfB) network, drawing on its responsibility for developing national occupational standards
- take into account the LSC's development of a funding model that meets the principles and priorities for public funding set out in the Skills Strategy
- ensure that success measures are appropriate to all learner achievements in the learning and skills sector
- examine the current regulatory arrangements for the NQF to see if they are appropriate to the FfA
- identify the appropriate level of regulatory intervention that is needed to maintain the stability of the framework.

Where are we now?

Some progress has been made in recent years in the development of a qualifications system that is more responsive to the needs of individuals, employers and providers. Although there have been recent changes in the procedures for accrediting qualifications within the NQF, progress has also been made outside the NQF.

Before *21st century skills* was published, a series of reports and policy documents recommended the development of a system of credits that would ensure that qualifications were more flexible and responsive to demand. Credit systems outside the NQF have demonstrated their potential to recognise a wide range of achievements in learning and respond quickly to the demands of individuals, employers and providers.

In Wales in 2003 the Welsh Assembly launched the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). The CQFW is a broader framework than that proposed in this document. It includes achievements in higher education and informal learning that the FfA will not encompass. We have taken due note of aspects of the CQFW in developing the FfA.



Also in 2003, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was established in Scotland. Like the CQFW, the SCQF is broader in scope than the FfA, and some of the technical features of the SCQF are different from those proposed for the FfA. However, we will maintain contact with colleagues in Scotland to ensure that we forge the closest possible links between the FfA and the SCQF.

The Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS) project undertook development work from 1996 to 2002. Since then, credit development in Northern Ireland have been the responsibility of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). QCA and CCEA are working closely together to ensure that the FfA is entirely consistent with developments in Northern Ireland.

Since 2003 QCA and the LSC have been working together on a remit to establish a credit framework for adults in England. They have taken into account work that has been done in other parts of the UK. In addition, a range of projects and research activity related to this remit is now under way and is helping to inform these proposals for the new framework.

QCA published *Principles for a credit framework for England* in March 2004 (<http://www.qca.org.uk/qualifications/types/8354.html>). This document acknowledges the debt owed by QCA to the development work of organisations such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and its predecessors on the concept of a credit framework. It also builds on the practical work of Open College Networks (OCNs) over a number of years.

The establishment of the Skills for Business network and the work that has already started in relation to occupational standards, sector skills agreements and sector qualifications strategies provides a new and substantive basis for reforming occupational qualifications. The new framework will build on this work and make sure that the needs of employers are met. It will do this by developing new credit-based qualifications that qualify people for employment in particular occupations.

What do learners, employers and providers want?

For *learners* there must be easy access to the framework and straightforward opportunities for their achievements to be recognised. There must also be effective systems of advice and guidance to help learners navigate through the framework and make informed choices about credits they will need to accumulate to follow pathways towards a qualification.

For *employers* the framework must make sense. Several aspects of the current system have caused employers a lot of confusion:

- there are too many qualifications
- assessment is over-specified and therefore limiting
- qualifications take too long to develop
- it is difficult to adapt qualifications to new skills and new business needs.

These aspects will not be a feature of the FfA.



Units must be credible, relevant and adaptable as these are the building blocks of qualifications that meet particular need or market demands. Credit must be meaningful, transparent and stable across all parts of the framework. Qualifications must be robust, responsive and flexible.

For *providers* the framework must support provision that:

- supports high rates of achievement and progression
- can be delivered through innovative teaching and learning programmes
- is managed robustly
- ensures diversity and equality of opportunity.

For many providers the framework will open up new possibilities for the design, delivery and management of learning opportunities. For some providers the framework will pose challenges to programme structures and will impact on their current approaches to teaching and learning.

All providers will want to be assured that the framework supports a system that is flexible and responsive, but that its flexibility and responsiveness does not come at a prohibitive price. The costs of developing and using the framework must not constrain access.

Providers will also want assurance that systems and processes complementary to the framework (such as the Unique Learner Number), are being addressed as the framework develops, before investing in changes to their business management systems.

Providers will also wish to know what impact the framework will have on their relationship with funding, regulatory and inspection bodies. They will want to know how the new framework may relate to the development of any new 14–19 diplomas, the apprenticeship reform programme and how it can assist progression to higher education.

Meeting the challenge

If we are to meet the challenges set out in the Skills Strategy for the 21st century then we need to establish a new framework that can not only accommodate a wider range of achievements but can also be responsive to changing demand in relation to learning and skills. If what it contains does not recognise and meet the changing needs of individuals, providers and employers over time we will not have succeeded. If the framework is not regarded highly or understood easily by those using it then again we will not have succeeded.

The development of the new framework offers an opportunity to make significant changes to the way in which we recognise achievements. The new framework must be accessible both in its structure and its language and the design of the framework must be stable enough to provide all users with confidence in the value of what it contains. Robust quality assurance arrangements to underpin the framework will be essential.



In taking forward the development of the FfA we have the opportunity to establish structures and procedures that will avoid some of the more complex features of our existing qualifications system. The introduction of credits into the new system will help. We can also establish more efficient systems for developing units and qualifications. These will result in a less complicated framework, one that makes sense to all users.

We are committed to working with our partners in the coming months and years to establish this new framework. If we are successful then we will have created a unique structure that combines significant elements of both our existing qualifications system and the credit systems that have developed outside it. We will also have created new relationships between credit-based qualifications and occupational standards and, we hope, between credit systems and any new diplomas for 14- to 19-year-olds.

This consultation document begins the process of practical development of the FfA by inviting key stakeholders to provide their comments and raise questions in relation to the proposals for the framework. If we are to meet the challenging time scale for developing the new framework then we need to make sure that consultation is relevant and can provide a sound basis for moving forward together on implementation.

We believe that the new framework will be:

- responsive to the needs of individuals, employers and providers
- inclusive of a wide range of achievements
- clear and accessible to learners and providers
- cost effective to use and to manage
- valued by all users.

We believe that the framework can be developed over time, to:

- include all formally assessed achievements outside the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)
- articulate with the SCQF
- articulate with the CQFW
- align with higher education credit systems in England and Northern Ireland
- facilitate credit transfer arrangements with European credit systems.

Responding to this consultation

To help you respond to the questions raised in this consultation, we have produced a separate response form.

The response form is in two sections:

- part A is general. It has nine questions about the design, development and use of the new framework
- part B is more detailed. It has 23 questions about the technical aspects of the framework. Some of these questions may require a knowledge of credit systems and qualifications.

Please respond to as many of the questions as you wish. QCA values all responses.

Electronic copies of the consultation document and response form are on the QCA website (www.qca.org.uk/ffa/).



Features of the framework

1

A simpler framework

In designing the new framework we have noted the concerns that the NQF is too complicated and difficult to understand. In particular, we have tried to respond to demands for a clearer and more consistent language through which individual achievements are recorded and represented.

The new framework will support simpler processes for developing units and qualifications. We will support collaboration between awarding bodies, sector skills councils (SSCs) and others in developing units and will also create conditions for unit sharing between different qualifications and awarding bodies.

Our current qualifications system has led to the development of a very large number of qualifications (both inside and outside the NQF). This leads to unnecessary duplication in the development of qualifications and makes it harder for people to understand the current system. We intend to establish a more rational framework, in which fewer qualifications are offered.

To make the framework simpler, we propose:

- use of a standard template for all units
- support for collaboration between different users of the framework in developing units and qualifications
- rationalising unit development through the establishment of a unit databank
- use of credit value to indicate the relative size of achievements
- development of a credit transcript within which all individual achievements will be recognised
- establishment of a standard format for all qualification titles.

This range of features will help all users understand the relative values of different achievements within the framework more easily. It will clarify progression opportunities for individual learners. It will simplify decision-making for those who offer employment, career progression or further learning within the framework.

We also recognise that this process of rationalisation may produce tensions with our commitment to develop an inclusive framework. Striking a balance between achieving simplicity and supporting inclusivity will sometimes be difficult, and we particularly welcome views on how this might best be done.



1. *Do you think that the proposals will make the framework simpler and easy to understand?*

2

A more responsive framework

In designing the new framework we have noted the concerns that the existing NQF is too inflexible and not responsive enough to the needs of individuals or employers. We also recognise that some aspects of the NQF create difficulties for providers in offering flexible, individualised learning opportunities that lead to recognised achievements.



To make the framework flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals, employers and providers, we propose that:

- users will be able to achieve individual units or small clusters of units as well as whole qualifications
- users will receive recognition for small steps of achievement at frequent intervals through the award of credit
- users can transfer credits between different qualifications and different awarding bodies
- individual routes to qualifications will be developed through the use of flexible rules for combining achievement of credits.

These features will help individuals, employers and providers to plan programmes of learning that lead to frequent and fit-for-purpose recognition of individual achievements. The framework will support personal and career development as well as progression to further learning opportunities.

We recognise that some of these features of the framework will create challenges for awarding bodies and providers. We will work with these key stakeholders to ensure that awarding bodies are able to develop new business models appropriate to the framework, and that providers are able to offer programmes that take full advantage of these models.

The LSC recognises that funding will be a critical consideration in moving the framework forward to implementation. As part of its 'LSC agenda for change' programme, it will radically overhaul funding methodology. The FfA will be a key driver in the development of the new methodology.

We will also work with key partners to ensure that inspection arrangements across the learning and skills sector are reviewed and updated to support these features of the framework.



- 2. Do you think that the proposals will create more flexible and responsive systems for recognising achievement?**

3

A more inclusive framework

A significant number of awards in the post-school sector are not currently accredited within the NQF. These include awards made through publicly-funded provision as well as a number of employer-based training programmes. We want the FfA to be a more inclusive framework. At the same time, we will establish clear limits to its scope.

For example:

- it is a framework for achievement, not a 'framework for learning'. It does not seek to encompass the provision of learning opportunities, nor make judgements about their quality
- some achievements are not appropriate to include within the framework, such as those that are not formally assessed (for example in learning for personal and community development)
- only achievements that are specified within the requirements of the framework can be recognised
- some achievements will be too small to be recognised
- only achievements that are subject to the agreed quality-assurance arrangements of recognised awarding bodies can lead to awards within the framework



- the development of units and qualifications within the framework will be led by demand. There is no facility within the proposed procedures for accreditation within the FfA to simply 'carry over' existing qualifications from the NQF.

Within these limitations, and taking account of our commitment to develop a simpler framework, we propose:

- to encourage a wide range of organisations to collaborate in the process of unit development
- to establish a single system of credit accumulation and transfer which recognises all types of learner achievement
- to base the framework's quality assurance processes on good practice developed both inside and outside the NQF
- to base our evaluation of the framework's success over time on its ability to include the widest possible range of achievements.

These proposals will support the extension of the scope of the FfA to include the widest possible range of achievements. The framework will support an increase in the number of people gaining recognition of their achievements, and will realise the objectives of both the Success for All and Skills Strategies.



- 3. Do you think that the proposals will make the framework capable of including the widest possible range of achievements?**

4

A less bureaucratic framework

There is concern that the NQF's procedures are too bureaucratic. This is a barrier both to the submission of proposals for inclusion in the NQF and to the achievement of qualifications by some individual learners. Some of these issues are being addressed through the changes made to accreditation procedures within the NQF. We are also responding to the particular issues for awarding bodies and providers raised in the recent report of the Bureaucracy Review Group. (For the report, see www.successforall.gov.uk.)

We will also build on sector skills agreements and sector qualifications strategies to establish an infrastructure for the accreditation of qualifications related to occupational standards. By working in collaboration with SSCs at a strategic level in the development process we will avoid some of the time-consuming aspects of the current accreditation procedures within the NQF.

To develop a less bureaucratic framework we will build in new features for the accreditation of qualifications, admission of units and assessment and certification of learner achievements. We propose:

- to base our recognition of bodies to make awards on fit-for-purpose requirements, supported by monitoring of quality assurance systems based on a risk management approach
- to establish procedures for awarding bodies to place units in a national databank without submission of individual units for admission to the framework
- to require that awarding bodies submit for accreditation the minimum amount of information necessary to accredit a qualification
- that awarding bodies will not be required to specify particular forms of assessment to be used for particular units or qualifications.



These features will reduce the bureaucratic burdens on individuals, on providers and on awarding bodies in making use of the FfA. QCA's current work to reduce the bureaucratic burdens of the NQF will be extended to encourage more people to make use of the new framework in the future.



4. Do you think that the proposals will make the framework less bureaucratic than the NQF?

5

A more diverse framework

There is concern that the current NQF is too centralised, places too great an emphasis on standardised outcomes and is over-regulated. The changes described above address some of these issues. The framework must also recognise diversity, both in terms of what it offers and how people use it. Therefore, in establishing the new framework and developing its operational systems, we will consider the possibility that:

- the existing powers of the regulatory authorities may not be fit for purpose for a wider and more diverse range of achievements
- the range of organisations approved to develop and award qualifications within the NQF may be too narrow for the intended purposes of a more diverse framework
- the current design of qualifications within the NQF may be too narrow to accommodate the diversity of achievements that could be recognised within the new framework
- the current links between approval of qualifications and funding may be too restrictive to support a wide range of achievements across a range of learners, delivered by a range of providers
- the current links between the achievement qualifications and government targets may need to be redefined if we are to achieve the aims of the Success for All and Skills Strategies.



5. What issues do you think are important to make sure the new framework recognises a diverse range of achievements?

Benefits to users

If we are successful in carrying through these reforms then we believe there will be significant benefits to all users of the framework in the future. We will also need to ensure that we allow sufficient time for these reforms to achieve their purposes.

6

Benefits to individuals

Our first concern in taking forward these reforms is that 'we should place the learner at the centre of everything we do'.

The reforms will greatly increase the number of pathways to achievement and the mobility of learners between these different pathways. They will ensure that a wider range of achievements can be recognised within the framework, and that a wider range of learners can earn credit. They will also enable those learners wishing to achieve a particular qualification to accumulate credits through those units required for achievement of that qualification.



In summary, the reforms will increase learner choice, ensure routes to achievement are responsive to learner demands and guarantee that credits are accumulated and transferred towards high-quality qualifications with maximum exchange value.

This is how individuals will benefit:

- Everyone who seeks formal recognition of their achievements in learning will have the opportunity to earn credit within the framework (based on the criteria set out in 'A more inclusive framework' above).
- People who seek recognition of their achievements for a particular personal, career, employment or professional progression opportunity will be able to accumulate credits towards an appropriate qualification.
- People who leave their chosen programme of study, for whatever reason, will be able to earn credits for what they have achieved and use these credits towards a chosen qualification on their return to learning.
- People who change their mind about their initial target qualification may transfer relevant credits towards a different qualification without undue costs or bureaucracy.
- Learners will be able to present to any interested party a record of their achievements that is easily accessible, simple to understand and comparable with all other achievements within the framework.



6. Do you think that the proposals will benefit learners?



Benefits to employers

We will build a framework that provides opportunities for employer training to lead to recognised achievements within it. We will also ensure that employers have access to units and qualifications that support relevant skills' development and business needs.

Employers will be more closely involved in the process of development, while the recording and representation of achievements will communicate their value to employers. We will ensure that what people achieve is relevant to their role as an employee (or potential employee) and that how these achievements are recorded is relevant to employers (or potential employers).

The workforce will become more flexible as credits are transferred between different career paths, and as employers begin to use the credit system to create customised training and development opportunities in response to business needs. We look to the SfB network to support employers in making effective use of the framework.

This is how employers will benefit:

- The involvement of employers in the development of units within the framework will increase the range of recognised achievements that are relevant to these employers.
- The ability to offer individual units or customised packages of units that relate to employer-based training programmes will increase the relevance of these programmes to employees.
- The ability of employees to receive credit towards a qualification for learning undertaken at work will support employers' retention and career-development strategies.



- The branding of qualifications with a particular link to occupational standards will help employers to make informed decisions about the recruitment of staff to particular employment roles or positions of responsibility.



7. Do you think that the proposals will benefit employers?



Benefits to providers

The reforms we propose will be delivered through structured learning opportunities that lead to the award of credits and qualifications. We therefore need to ensure that providers will benefit from the reforms.

As the specifications of the new framework will include the widest possible range of achievements, we are keen to ensure that our proposed reforms support the offer of learning opportunities from all potential providers. These include:

- community-based organisations
- employers and employer organisations
- schools
- further education colleges
- government agencies
- local authorities
- prison education services
- private training organisations

We envisage a future in which access to the framework is available through a wider range and greater number of centres, through a wider number of learning opportunities and through procedures that impose fewer bureaucratic burdens on providers. We believe that our commitment to an inclusive approach to the recognition of achievement will be a positive incentive to providers to offer learning opportunities leading to the award of credit.

Providers will be able to:

- develop innovative learning opportunities using units and qualifications that meet individual and group needs
- plan provision on the basis of the needs of learners rather than qualification aims, enabling individual routes to achievement to be managed within cost-effective cohort and group sizes
- make efficient use of e-learning, workshops and other specialised facilities by encouraging the clustering of learning opportunities around units shared between several progression routes
- improve retention and progression rates by recognising smaller steps of achievement more frequently
- reduce the bureaucratic burden of centre approval and learner registration
- make use of more learner-centred assessments leading to the award of credit.



8. Do you think that the proposals will benefit providers?



9

Benefits to awarding bodies

We are aware of awarding bodies' criticisms of the NQF. Many of these criticisms were recorded in the report on the quinquennial review of QCA, and some have already been addressed through changes to the regulation procedures of the current NQF. We will build on these changes in developing the new framework.

Awarding bodies will play a crucial role in translating the intentions of these reforms into practical arrangements for both providers and learners in their centres. Although some of the reforms will change the existing practices of some awarding bodies, we are confident that a successful framework will support the active and creative contribution of awarding bodies to the recognition of achievements.

Awarding bodies will benefit in the following ways:

- a reduction in the paperwork involved and the time taken in admitting individual units and accrediting qualifications within the framework
- the development of a shared resource that will increase the efficiency and speed with which new qualifications can be developed. (The resource will be a unit databank; for more on this, see 'The unit databank', below.)
- the ability to develop units and qualifications that can meet the needs of individuals and employers
- greater control over the design of assessments, and a reduction in bureaucracy for their centres
- the continuing development of partnerships between awarding bodies, SSCs and regulatory authorities based on a shared interest in the stability of the framework and the successes of learners within it.



9. Do you think that the proposals will benefit awarding bodies?

Summary

The reforms we propose are radical. They will lead to the development of a framework that is fit for the purpose of recognising individual achievements in the 21st century.

The reforms we propose are necessary. We can no longer sustain the development of a national qualifications framework that excludes so many of the recognised achievements of adults and poses barriers to so many learners.

The reforms we propose are ambitious. They will eliminate the distinctions between achievements inside and outside the NQF, and will enable everyone to gain credit for their achievements.

The reforms we propose are achievable. They build on recent good practice developed in different parts of the UK, both inside and outside the NQF.

Part B: Structural and operational issues



The framework in England

The scope of the framework

It is the responsibility of QCA to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications in England. The FfA will be a more inclusive framework than the NQF. It will encompass qualifications transformed from those in the NQF as well as a range of achievements that are currently recognised outside the NQF.

We want the new framework to be capable of recognising all achievements that take place in community-based provision, employer-based training, e-learning programmes and commercial training organisations within the framework.

There will be no compulsion to submit proposals for accreditation within the framework. However, although the framework will permit the inclusion of awards that may be achieved through any type of learning, it will not encompass all achievements within it. (The limitations are set out in 'A more inclusive framework' above.)

Public funding will not be the sole form of funding across the new framework. However, much provision leading to awards within the new framework will be publicly funded. This is to make sure that entitlements to learning can be met and the objectives of the Skills Strategy can be realised.

10

Relationships with other frameworks

We would like to see the framework encompass all formally-assessed achievements outside higher education, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To achieve this, we will need to build relationships with other frameworks. To this end, QCA will work closely with Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland has a different structure within which learning and skills are developed. We will continue to take an active interest in the structure and operation of the SCQF and will wish to build a close working relationship with colleagues in Scotland.

Learners who achieve credits within the SCQF should be able to transfer these credits towards qualifications within the FfA, and vice versa.

We envisage a relationship of 'alignment' between the FHEQ and the higher levels of the FfA. We want learners to have the opportunity to gain credit at the higher levels of the FfA and transfer these credits towards qualifications within the FHEQ, and vice versa.

Where we have the opportunity to reach agreements about the transferability of credits between frameworks we will seek articulation of the credit systems that operate within them (ie with the SCQF and the lower levels of the CQFW). Where such agreements are not feasible (ie with the FHEQ) we will align the FfA as far as possible with these frameworks so that specific agreements on credit transfer and progression between users of the FfA and the FHEQ can be easily established.



We will also take into account the systems of credit accumulation and transfer in Europe that are emerging from the Copenhagen agreement on credit transfer in vocational education and training (CVET). We will work with European partners to ensure that the general principles on which the FfA is constructed are consistent with the vision of a future European system of credit accumulation and transfer.



10. Do you agree that the framework should relate to the other frameworks in the UK and Europe?

The design and development of units

11

Units

To create coherent and frequent opportunities for the assessment of achievements within the FfA, all such achievements will be structured as units. Units will be the building blocks for all qualifications within the framework.

For over a decade, credit systems in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have used a standard format for units. This format was set out in *Principles for a credit framework for England* (<http://www.qca.org.uk/qualifications/types/8354.html>) and is already familiar to many providers and awarding bodies across the post-school sector. We will adopt this format for all units within the FfA.

We will establish a standard electronic template for units, and make this template available to all users. This will make sure that all units in the framework use this template and can be electronically stored by and transferred between all users. Units will be stored in a databank (for more on the databank, see 'The unit databank', below).

The electronic template will include the following features:

- title
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- level
- credit value
- a unique code that will enable individual units to be identified within the databank.

(For definitions of these terms, see the Glossary.)



11. Do you agree that we should develop a standard electronic template for units?

12

Levels

Level will be an integral feature of all units within the framework. In determining the level of a unit we will build on the experience of other credit systems that have established level descriptors. In particular, we will build upon the established level descriptors of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS).



All units within the framework will be identified at one of nine levels (from entry level to level 8). Level descriptors will determine the level of all units within the framework.

Sample level descriptors have already been published in *Principles for a credit framework in England* (QCA, 2004). We will build on these descriptors with our partners during 2005.



12. Do you agree that level descriptors should determine the level of units?

13

Credits and credit value

We have support from ministers to establish a credit system as the basis for recognising achievement within the new framework. We will therefore build on the existing experience of credit systems in the UK in establishing the specifications for credits and credit value. There is no reason to change those aspects of credit systems that have been tried and tested inside and outside the NQF for a number of years.

These definitions are taken directly from (or adapted from), well-established credit systems:

- **Credit:** an award made to a learner in recognition of the achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level. One credit will be awarded for the achievement of those learning outcomes within a unit that a learner is expected to achieve in 10 learning hours.
- **Credit value:** the number of credits that may be awarded to a learner for the achievement of the learning outcomes of a unit.

It should be noted here that credits may only be awarded for the completion of a whole unit. No award of credit will be made for the completion of some of the learning outcomes of a unit.

We will discuss the operation of this credit system further with key stakeholders during 2005. We will also take into account established practices in the SCQF and higher education when we produce future guidance on this issue to users.



13. What issues do the definitions 'credit' and 'credit value' raise for your organisation?

14

Developing and submitting units

The development of units that cover a wide range of achievements will be essential to the effective functioning of the credit system. In establishing arrangements for the development of units we will balance cost-effective approaches to the development process with the need to ensure units are of high quality.

One of the key features that will support responsiveness and flexibility within the FfA is the process of unit development proceeding independently of qualifications development. Units and qualifications will not always be developed in isolation from each other, but the development of one does not depend on the other.



Units are independent entities – not simply ‘parts’ of a qualification. Qualifications are ‘made up of’, not ‘broken down into’ units. We will establish a process for developing units and submitting them for use within the framework.

The process of developing units will contribute to qualifications that are clearly understood by individuals, providers and employers. Whichever model for unit development is adopted, unnecessary duplication of units will be avoided and opportunities for sharing units between different qualifications and awarding bodies will be maximised.

The FfA will make a clear distinction between:

- the process of developing and submitting units for use within the framework
- the assessment of units leading to the award of credit.

We propose two alternative models for submitting units for use within the FfA. Whichever option is chosen, assessment and award of credit will be the responsibility of recognised awarding bodies.

We support the collaborative development of units. For units related to national occupational standards, this should be through sector forums, involving partnerships between awarding bodies and SSCs. Where a sector forum develops units, an awarding body member of the forum would be responsible for submitting these units to the framework.

Option 1 – Any organisation can submit units

QCA will quality-assure all units admitted to the framework.

If the organisation submitting units is a recognised awarding body, then QCA will apply its agreed quality-assurance and monitoring procedures.

If the organisation submitting units is not a recognised awarding body, then QCA will admit units to the framework through a committee established for this purpose.

The following types of organisation may prefer option 1:

- large employers or employers’ organisations
- professional associations
- providers
- universities
- government agencies
- charitable trusts.

The advantage of this option is that the unit development process is spread more widely. It is therefore able produce more units within a particular time frame.

The disadvantage of this option is that it requires additional bureaucratic intervention. This will inhibit the speed and responsiveness with which the framework can respond to changing demands.

Option 2 – Only recognised awarding bodies can submit units

Awarding bodies will be encouraged to enter into partnerships with other types of organisation to facilitate the admission of units. In this option, there is no need for the additional QCA committee that is referred to in option 1.



The advantage of option 2 is that responsibility for admitting units lies with awarding bodies, which are already subject to QCA quality assurance.

The disadvantage is that it may take longer to populate the FfA with units across a wide range of curriculum areas.



14. Should:

- **any organisation be able to submit units, or**
- **only recognised awarding bodies be able to submit units?**

15

The unit databank

Units will be admitted to the framework through a national databank. Only units developed and approved within the standard unit template outlined above will be admitted to the databank.

The information in the databank will be freely available to any organisation that wishes to use it. This includes providers of programmes leading to the award of credit, advice and guidance staff, employers, and so on.

QCA will discuss with stakeholders the most appropriate model for developing this databank. We will build on the existing OpenQuals (www.openquals.org.uk) platform to hold the data, but it may be appropriate to share the concept of 'ownership' of the databank with a broader constituency. We will discuss this further with stakeholders in 2005.

The databank will become an important tool for awarding bodies in the process of developing individual qualifications. It will also support the wider rationalisation of the framework to reduce unnecessary duplication of units and to make the FfA simple to use. This process of rationalisation will operate through:

- controls over the admission of units to the databank
- collaboration in unit development
- using existing units within the unit databank in the development of new qualifications.

Two mechanisms will be available to ensure that the databank contains the requisite variety of units. The first is a requirement for organisations to act with integrity in submitting units to the databank. The actions of awarding bodies will be monitored by QCA to ensure that unnecessary duplication of units is avoided. The actions of other organisations would be subject to more direct controls.

The second mechanism is the role of SSCs in approving unit titles linked to national occupational standards. This role will be enacted primarily through the involvement of an SSC in a sector forum. The parameters for such involvement in the process of unit development will be set through the relevant sector qualifications strategy.

To make sure the mutual recognition of units becomes a general feature of the FfA, all units in the databank will be made available to all awarding bodies operating in the framework. Whatever the development and admission process, the unit may be included in any qualification submitted for accreditation within the framework. This will be an important feature of the rationalisation of the FfA over time.



Once there are enough units in a particular curriculum area, it will become unnecessary and uneconomic to develop new units for the databank. If existing units can be used to develop new qualifications, then there will be significantly fewer incentives to continually produce new units. All credits awarded within the FfA must be achieved through units in the databank.

To make sure that sharing units across different qualifications and awarding bodies becomes a feature of the development of the framework, all units in the databank will be held in shared stewardship for the general benefit of the FfA. Responsibility for the maintenance of the databank and organising (or facilitating) the reviewing and updating process will also be shared.

Shared stewardship of the databank will make sure that interoperability between aspects of the framework (in particular the operation of an electronic credit transcript; see below) is effective. It will also be important to establish and maintain, where appropriate, connections between this databank and SSDA's proposed databank of national occupational standards.

We will discuss further with key stakeholders in 2005 the most appropriate model of stewardship of the databank. The model should be one that guarantees open access to units for all those organisations that wish to make use of them.



15. Do you agree that all units in the databank should be held in stewardship on behalf of all users of the framework?

Mutual recognition of units

16

Credit accumulation and transfer

The government requires QCA to develop the 'mutual recognition of units' as an integral feature of the framework. Mutual recognition within a credit framework refers not only to the sharing of units in the design of qualifications, but also to the mutual recognition of units achieved by learners.

This concept of mutual recognition within a credit framework is embodied within a system of credit accumulation and transfer that supports all qualifications in the framework.

The development of this system of credit accumulation and transfer will have significant consequences for all awarding bodies. The ability to accumulate and transfer credits is essential if we are to realise our vision of a genuinely inclusive framework within which credits are a currency of achievement.

Thus, mutual recognition places a collective obligation on all awarding bodies to recognise and accept the credits awarded by other awarding bodies within the framework.

The FfA's quality-assurance arrangements should foster the mutual trust that awarding bodies need in order to have confidence in each other's arrangements for awarding credits.



Mutual recognition will operate within the context of the rules of combination for a qualification (see below). A learner will be able to use the credit achieved towards a qualification awarded by one body for the achievement requirements of a relevant qualification awarded by another body.

We recognise the impact that credit accumulation and transfer may have on the business models within which many awarding bodies operate. We will discuss the potential impact further with awarding bodies during 2005 and help them prepare to operate within this new context.



16. Do you agree credits should be transferable between qualifications and awarding bodies within the framework?

17

Rules of combination

Within the FfA achievements are recognised both through the award of credit and the award of qualifications. All qualifications will be achieved through the accumulation of credits through defined rules of combination. This will be the central feature of the specification of all qualifications, and will ensure flexibility and responsiveness in the FfA's credit system.

Rules of combination set out the requirements of a qualification in relation to the credits that must be achieved and the units that must be completed. In some instances, rules of combination will also include grading criteria for the qualification.

There will be a range of models for rules of combination within FfA qualifications. Some of these models will have tightly specified requirements for particular occupational or subject targets. Others will have more open rules that encourage progression, through permitting a wide range of choices of unit within a qualification. The degree of flexibility within any set of rules of combination will be determined primarily by the purpose of the qualification. In many instances these rules will be constructed by explicit reference to the relevant sector qualifications strategy.

Learners will often seek recognition of their achievements through the award of credit without reference to the rules of combination for a particular qualification. We do not propose to impose any restrictions on their ability to do this. There will be no accredited rules of combination outside the structure of qualifications.

Any credit awarded to a learner within the FfA may be included within the rules of combination of at least one qualification. Learners may earn credits without seeking to combine them towards a qualification, and providers may offer programmes that lead to the award of credit(s) rather than to a whole qualification. By the same token, credits will not be the sole driver of funding related to the framework.

We intend to develop more detailed guidance on the development of such rules during 2005 through further discussions with partners.



17. Which features of rules of combination should be included?



18

The credit transcript

To enable credit accumulation and transfer, there will need to be an electronic record of learner achievement that can be used by learners themselves as well as awarding bodies.

Awarding bodies will need to be able to enter and retrieve accurate and reliable data to learners' records. Learners will be able to access their record and present it as evidence of their achievement; they will not be able to amend their record.

We propose to call this record a 'credit transcript'. An essential feature of the system will be a 'unique learner identifier'. This will be shared by all bodies awarding credit. Learners will access their transcript through a code based on this identifier; they will also be able to print a paper version of their transcript.

QCA will work with partners to develop this system. QCA will also ensure that the credit transcript is interoperable with the other emerging electronic credit transcripts of UK and European frameworks.

All awarding bodies operating within the FfA will be required to demonstrate that they are able, through the transcript, to exchange data about the credit achievements of learners securely, reliably and accurately. We will wish to discuss the details of this development further with key stakeholders before agreeing a technical specification for the transcript.



18. Do you agree an electronic credit transcript system should be developed?

The design and development of qualifications

19

Developing qualifications

We propose that qualifications for accreditation within the FfA can only be submitted by recognised awarding bodies.

The rules of combination will form the cornerstone of all qualifications, and awarding bodies submitting qualifications for accreditation within the framework must ensure that these rules of combination are fit for purpose, manageable and responsive to the needs of individual learners.

Awarding bodies will be responsible for submitting rules of combination for accreditation within the framework, and in some instances the rules will need to be developed consistently with the requirements of other bodies. Sector qualifications strategies will shape rules of combination for qualifications that have an employment-related purpose.

Within these rules of combination, units may be:

- developed as new units linked to the proposed qualification
- drawn from the unit databank
- combined from both of these sources.



Where units are related to occupational standards we will look to sector qualifications strategies to guide the development of qualifications from these sources.

Awarding bodies will need to provide centres, learners, assessors and others with comprehensive information about the delivery and assessment of learning opportunities leading to the award of qualifications accredited within the framework. However, QCA will not require awarding bodies to provide all this information for each individual qualification submitted for accreditation within the FfA.



19. Do you agree that only recognised awarding bodies should be able to submit qualifications for accreditation?

20

Core, optional and elective units

In developing qualifications within the FfA we will build on established practice within many qualifications already accredited within the NQF. We propose that all rules of combination for qualifications should be built around the concepts of core, optional and elective units.

Core units would have to be completed in order to achieve a qualification. Learners would select optional units from a defined range of choices. Both core and optional units would need to be listed by title, credit value and level within the rules of combination for a qualification. These would be 'named' units within a qualification.

We also propose to permit the inclusion of 'open' or 'elective' units within qualifications. This would increase the scope for learner choice within the framework, encourage progression through individualised routes to achievement, and maximise opportunities for credit accumulation and transfer. These units would not be listed by name within the rules of combination, but must be selected from the unit databank.

The rules of combination for a qualification may set parameters on the choice of elective units within any qualification. So, for example, the choice of elective units may be restricted by level, by subject area, by size, or by a combination of two or more of these parameters.

All rules of combination must include named units. Rules of combination may be made up entirely of core units, of optional units or a combination of these. There will be no requirement to include elective units in rules of combination.

It should also be noted that the concepts of 'core', 'optional' and 'elective' are not integral features of a particular unit, but are dependent on their location within a qualification. A core unit in one qualification may be an optional unit in another and so on.

For qualifications related to occupational standards, SSCs may set requirements within sector qualifications strategies on core and optional units for particular rules of combination.



20. Do you agree that rules of combination should be based on core, optional and elective units?



21

Qualification titles

We propose to establish a standard format for all qualification titles so that how achievements fit into the framework will be clear. This will build on the existing arrangements for accreditation of qualification titles within the NQF, but will use the credit system that underpins qualifications within the FfA to represent the concept of 'size' within these titles.

We do not propose to impose qualification titles on awarding bodies. They will be able to choose the wording of qualifications as long as titles observe the agreed conventions. Sector qualifications strategies may determine the wording of qualification titles with a vocational or occupational purpose.

We propose that the level of a qualification is identified by incorporating the appropriate level of the framework into the qualification title. This builds explicitly on current practice within the NQF.

We also propose to identify the relative size of a qualification by linking the use of the terms 'award', 'certificate' and 'diploma' to the credit value of the qualification. We will consult further on the appropriate range of credit values to be associated with these terms. At this stage we seek views on the general use of these terms to indicate qualification size, as set out in the table below:

Title	award	certificate	diploma
Size	small	medium	large

As qualification titles will be part of the information contained in the format for rules of combination, they will be subject to a process of approval within the framework.



21. Do you agree that the level and size of a qualification should be an integral part of the qualification title?

22

Assessment

We are required to establish flexible and responsive assessment arrangements within the FfA. We are also aware of the recommendations of the Bureaucracy Review Group on improving the cost-effectiveness of assessment for both learners and providers.

Units within the FfA must be capable of assessment so that individual learners can be awarded credit for the completion of units.

Requiring all awarding bodies to develop arrangements for unit-based assessment may create additional assessment burdens and bureaucratic costs. We will therefore introduce other measures to reduce the overall burdens and costs. For example, we will exclude information about the method of assessment from the unit specification, encouraging awarding bodies to develop assessment arrangements that are particularly suited to their learners and providers.



The unit specification will also enable awarding bodies to develop assessment guidance that can be applied to units of a similar type. Awarding bodies will be able to produce assessment guidance for centres that covers a number of different units, reducing the bureaucracy of assessment for centres.

The standard unit format will also create a stable product development specification for organisations designing electronic assessment. The business case for developing e-assessment products will be enhanced through the sharing of units between qualifications and awarding bodies.

We also propose to have awarding bodies decide the most appropriate form of assessment within the context of accredited qualifications. QCA will not specify the type of assessment arrangements to be used for individual units. In some instances, however, these may be specified within sector qualifications strategies, or by other industry regulators.

QCA will regulate assessment arrangements through its quality-assurance monitoring relationship with awarding bodies. QCA will establish updated procedures for recognising and monitoring awarding body quality-assurance systems. This will create and maintain mutual trust regarding assessment. These proposed arrangements are set out in more detail below.



22. Do you agree that:

- **assessment arrangements should be regulated through monitoring of awarding body systems?**
- **awarding bodies should be able to determine appropriate assessment arrangements (except where specified by a third party)?**

Grading

23

The framework will be designed to include qualifications that differentiate between individual achievements through a system of grading. Some qualifications within the framework will be graded and some will not.

The framework will also be designed to accommodate grading of components of qualifications in addition to or instead of the whole qualification. The Working Group on 14–19 Reform has made proposals on grading. We will keep these proposals in mind and ensure that they are consistent with grading within the FfA.

There may be a range of different types of grading system within qualifications in the new framework. It would therefore be neither desirable nor practical to develop a single system of grading for qualifications or their component parts. We propose that grading should be a feature of individual qualifications rather than of the FfA itself.

As grading criteria would need to be accredited as part of the rules of combination for a qualification, QCA will ensure comparability of grading arrangements across different qualifications.

The grading of individual achievement cannot undermine the operation of the credit system within the FfA. As credits are awarded on the basis of completion of a unit, any grading criteria applied must be above and beyond the assessment criteria within the unit and cannot compromise an awarding body's responsibility to award credit to learners.



We will discuss the development of consistent approaches to the grading of qualifications with stakeholders during 2005.



23. Do you agree that grading arrangements should be determined within individual qualifications rather than as a standard feature of the framework itself?

24

Qualification purpose

The framework will permit the development of qualifications with different purposes. In some instances qualifications may be grouped by purpose and may share a similar set of characteristics linked to this purpose. We will establish additional criteria for the accreditation of such groups of qualifications within the framework.

These additional criteria will be part of the information submitted to QCA for accreditation of individual qualifications, as a supplement to the rules of combination. These criteria may be established by a third party, as the example below illustrates.

Additional criteria that identify a shared purpose between groups of qualifications will not be located within the individual units of a qualification, nor in the arrangements for the award of credit. This means that the integrity of the credit system can be guaranteed between all qualifications, including those where additional accreditation criteria have been identified.

The following section of this document gives an example of a group of qualifications with a shared purpose within the framework. It is possible that other groups of qualifications (for example entry level qualifications) may be identified in the future. The proposed 14–19 diplomas could also become one of these groups. This depends on the outcome of the 14–19 White Paper.

Occupational and sector-based qualifications

The NQF includes ‘occupational qualifications’ as a category. This category includes primarily national vocational qualifications (NVOs). In developing the FfA we see value in using the term ‘occupational qualifications’ to describe qualifications that have a clear employment-related purpose and are based on national occupational standards and identified within sector qualifications strategies as making a clear contribution to workforce development.

We propose that occupational qualifications should be identified in the framework as a group of qualifications with a shared purpose. These qualifications will therefore need to meet specific requirements in order to be accredited within the framework.

In putting forward this proposal we do not suggest that the category of ‘occupational qualification’ in the NQF should stay as is – occupational qualifications within the FfA will have a wider range of purposes and design features than NVOs.

As part of the apprenticeship reform programme, LSC, QCA and SSDA are working with SSCs to take forward work on apprenticeships and credit. The framework will encompass awards made to people on apprenticeships, and we will be reviewing models of apprenticeship to ensure they develop to be compatible with awards in the new framework.



The specific requirements for occupational qualifications will include the development of rules of combination consistent with the relevant sector qualifications strategy. Awarding bodies will have to ensure that units within these qualifications are based on relevant occupational standards and reflect workforce development needs.

We propose to identify these qualifications through a particular brand to signal the significance of their relationship to occupational standards within the framework. We will discuss further in 2005 an appropriate brand identity for such qualifications.



24. Do you agree that occupational qualifications should be a particular group within the framework, with a distinctive brand identity?

Quality assurance

25

The recognition of bodies to award credits and qualifications

If mutual recognition of credits within the framework is going to work, all awarding bodies must have confidence in each others' quality-assurance systems.

As part of the recognition process of bodies making awards within the framework, QCA will make sure that each recognised body has quality-assured systems in place for the following processes:

- developing high-quality units
- placing units in the unit databank
- drawing on units within the databank in the design of new qualifications
- establishing and maintaining effective relationships with sector qualifications strategies in the development of units and qualifications related to occupational standards
- developing flexible and responsive rules of combination for qualifications
- assessing achievements within individual units
- responding to requests for the award of credit on demand
- recording achievements quickly, accurately and securely within the electronic framework credit transcript
- ensuring that qualifications are awarded on the basis of successful completion of the relevant rules of combination.

QCA will establish requirements and procedures for recognition of bodies to operate within the FfA. These requirements and procedures will be based on the above quality-assurance processes as well as a revision of the existing criteria for recognition of awarding bodies within the NQF. Awarding bodies already recognised to offer qualifications within the NQF and new applicants will need to meet these new requirements.

Monitoring of awarding body systems will be based on an extension of the principles of risk management already being developed within the NQF. Failure of the credit system that underpins qualifications would be an extremely high risk to all awarding bodies in the framework. QCA will therefore pay particular attention to this risk in its early monitoring of awarding body systems within the FfA.



25. Do you agree with the proposed arrangements for recognition and monitoring of bodies to offer awards within the framework?



26

The accreditation of qualifications

In accrediting qualifications within the framework we will reduce significantly the documentation submitted to QCA that relates to individual qualifications. We will focus our quality-assurance arrangements on the risk management-based monitoring of awarding bodies.

Although we expect awarding bodies to provide comprehensive and detailed information about individual qualifications to approved centres, assessors, verifiers and learners themselves, this information will not need to be submitted to QCA for accreditation.

The key feature of a qualification within the framework will be its rules of combination. As a general rule, only these rules of combination will be submitted for accreditation in order to include a qualification within the FfA. In certain instances, additional information may be required (see bullet points below).

Submitting rules of combination for accreditation as well as the recognition and monitoring of awarding body systems (as described above) provides QCA with the necessary number of points of intervention in the quality-assurance systems of recognised awarding bodies.

In some circumstances other organisations may impose additional criteria for the accreditation of certain qualifications. For example:

- the rules of combination of all qualifications accredited within the framework that relate to occupational standards must conform to the qualifications strategy of the relevant sector
- some sector qualifications strategies may require particular forms of assessment to be used in occupational qualifications or in components of these qualifications
- some industry regulators may influence or determine rules of combination.

Generally, QCA will require far less information about individual qualifications to be submitted in the accreditation process for qualifications in the FfA. This will lead to a more efficient process for awarding bodies in getting qualifications accredited.

QCA will work with existing awarding bodies (and new organisations that declare an interest in becoming an awarding body within the FfA) to help them establish the necessary systems and procedures for fulfilling these accreditation requirements.



26. Do you agree that the accreditation of individual qualifications should be based on submission of proposed rules of combination?



27

A new model for the operation of awarding bodies

The new framework will bring significant long-term benefits to learners, providers and awarding bodies. However, it may also bring some risks to some awarding bodies.

There will probably be some initial costs to awarding bodies. These costs will fall mainly into two areas:

- investing in the technology needed to track and recognise learner achievements within the proposed credit transcript
- developing the capacity of awarding body staff to manage the new operational requirements of the FfA.

There will possibly also be costs related to more-frequent assessments of achievement and more-frequent certification for learners. The capacity of awarding bodies to establish effective systems to manage these costs will vary considerably.

However, there will probably be the following cost-savings:

- a more efficient and less bureaucratic system for admitting units and accrediting qualifications within the framework
- an ability to design and operate assessment more efficiently
- access without charge to a unit databank as the key resource through which qualifications will be developed
- access to an electronic credit transcript
- savings in marketing costs as QCA, LSC and SSDA actively promote the benefits of the new framework.

As the market for qualifications expands, the opportunities for income generation for awarding bodies will probably grow. These opportunities include:

- an increase in income from learner registrations as more people seek recognition of their achievements within the framework
- an increase in income from employers as more employer-based training leads to an award within the framework
- an increase in income from certification as more awards are made within the new framework.

We will work with both existing and potential awarding bodies to ensure that the challenges of the new framework to awarding bodies are considered in detail through future discussion, and that we create opportunities for awarding bodies to develop their capacity to offer awards in the new framework based (in some instances) on a very different business model.



27. Are there other possible risks and benefits to awarding bodies in the new framework that are not identified?



The roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders

28

QCA

QCA will have responsibility for the following aspects of the framework:

- establishing and maintaining the technical specifications
- recognising bodies to make awards
- establishing, maintaining and updating a databank of units
- supporting the smooth and efficient operation of the system of credit accumulation and transfer
- supporting systems for establishing, maintaining and updating a web-based credit transcript
- ensuring fit-for-purpose qualifications are offered within the framework
- accrediting rules of combination for all qualifications offered
- monitoring awarding body quality-assurance systems to support the above functions
- protecting, as a last resort, the rights of individual learners seeking access to recognition of their achievements
- protecting and extending the collective interests of all users
- promoting the benefits and opportunities to external bodies.

It would also be feasible for QCA to share these responsibilities (or some of them) with other competent bodies. The specifications of the framework do not exclude other organisations from playing a quality-assurance or supporting role within it.

Whether QCA fulfils the above roles alone or with others, we will work with key partners to monitor the quality of systems that recognise learner achievement within the framework.



28. Do you agree with the roles and responsibilities of QCA?

29

Recognised awarding bodies

Recognised awarding bodies will have a different and enhanced role to play within the new framework. We will have due regard for the increased importance of the services that awarding bodies offer to individual centres within the business model implied by the new framework.

Awarding bodies will be centrally involved in the process of unit development, with their partners. Depending on the outcomes of this consultation, awarding bodies will be the primary or the only organisations able to place units in the framework's unit databank.

Irrespective of which organisations place units in the databank, only recognised bodies will make awards within the framework. As all qualifications will be based on the accumulation of credits, all recognised awarding bodies must be capable of awarding both credits and qualifications.



One of the conditions of recognition to operate within the FfA as an awarding body will be an acceptance of the principle of 'mutual recognition' in relation to units and credits. All awarding bodies will have access to all the units in the databank in the development of their qualifications. Every awarding body will be bound to accept the credits awarded by any other recognised awarding body (within the rules of combination for their qualifications).

Stewardship of all units placed in the databank will be exercised collectively on behalf of all users of the FfA. Once a unit is located within the rules of combination for a qualification, the awarding body for that qualification will be responsible for conducting valid and reliable assessment of that unit, and for awarding credit for successful completion of that unit. A single set of rules of combination will be shared by all awarding bodies offering that qualification.

We will work with awarding bodies to implement the principle of 'single validation' in the recognition of centres. This is one of the recommendations of the Bureaucracy Review Group. Such 'single validation' will also need to ensure an individual centre is capable of meeting all the possible assessment requirements of different awarding bodies. More discussion with awarding bodies will take place on this issue during 2005.

All awarding bodies will be required to use the standard credit transcript to support the system of credit accumulation and transfer. All awarding bodies will be responsible for entering accurate and reliable data under secure conditions in this transcript.

Awarding bodies will be free to establish their own procedures for the awarding of qualifications, which may be electronic or manual or a combination of the two.

Awarding bodies will need to have in place arrangements for ensuring that they are able to award qualifications based on completion of the rules of combination for that qualification. QCA will establish a standard format for qualification certificates that awarding bodies will be required to follow.

Regardless of which awarding body (or bodies) has awarded credits to a learner, the awarding body with whom the learner is registered when he or she completes the rules of combination leading to that qualification will be responsible for awarding it.

Awarding bodies will be responsible for establishing their own arrangements for the registration of learners. Several possible models for registration are feasible. QCA will work with awarding bodies to identify and disseminate good practice in this area. We will also ensure that the arrangements for registration of learners with an awarding body do not constitute a barrier to accessing opportunities for the recognition of achievement within the framework.

Registration with an awarding body will be the learner's point of access to the framework. In registering a learner, an awarding body will act as a gatekeeper to the whole FfA, not just its own awards. Although learners will register with individual awarding bodies, learner registration, like credit accumulation and transfer, will become a collective rather than individual responsibility for awarding bodies within the FfA.



29. Do you agree with the roles and responsibilities of awarding bodies?



30

The Skills for Business network

The SfB network is responsible for identifying the knowledge and skills people need to meet the requirements of employers. The SfB network has a clear responsibility for the development, maintenance and updating of occupational standards. It will also be responsible for ensuring that the needs of employers are reflected within the framework, and for promoting occupational standards and related qualifications to these employers and others. SSCs have an important role in influencing the broader education and training landscape.

SSCs will develop sector qualifications strategies. A sector qualifications strategy specifies the current and future qualifications and broader achievement needs of a sector, including a timeline and methodology for implementation. This builds on the existing research, analysis and activity of SSCs in their sectors, with the SSDA working with QCA, LSC and relevant bodies in England to put in place qualifications strategies for sectors without SSCs. These will designate which qualifications in a sector are to be branded as 'occupational qualifications'. Each sector qualifications strategy will also make clear what it means to be 'occupationally qualified' in a particular sector.

All qualifications approved within the framework that are related to occupational standards must conform with the qualifications strategy for that sector. In approving rules of combination for such qualifications, we will make sure that they do conform.

Where learning outcomes are related to occupational standards, we expect SSCs to be involved in the process of unit development. We will support partnerships between SSCs and awarding bodies through sector forums in this process. The SfB network will have a role to play in ensuring that its national occupational standards directory is linked to the unit databank so that units related to occupational standards can be clearly identified by individuals, employers and providers.

The Skills for Business network will also be responsible for promoting occupational qualifications and helping employers to understand the FfA. We will work closely with the Skills for Business network to promote the benefits of the framework to learners, employers and other agencies in the various sectors.

30. Do you agree with the roles and responsibilities of the SfB network in the framework?



31

The Learning and Skills Council

The LSC has a statutory role in the planning and funding of provision for learners aged over 16 in England, in order to encourage learner participation in education and training and employer participation in the provision of these. The LSC understands that the planning and funding of provision is integral to the development of the FfA and that the introduction of the framework may change the way the LSC identifies and measures priorities and contracts with providers, and monitors and tracks learners.

As part of its agenda for change, the LSC will ensure that the implications of the framework for providers are addressed with regard to the five themes in the agenda:

- skills/employers
- quality
- funding
- efficiency
- data.



In developing the framework, the LSC will work with key partners to ensure:

- the framework supports identified local, regional and national priorities and targets
- the framework supports widening participation and raising achievement
- providers who access awards within the framework can do so in the knowledge that the framework is fit for purpose and can be used in a cost-effective way
- the wide range of learner achievement within the framework can be monitored, tracked and recorded
- the implementation of the framework is aligned across the LSC's business-planning cycle and reflected in the reviews of funding and planning that will emerge as a result of the agenda.

During 2004/5 the LSC will consult with providers and work with key stakeholders on further critical questions about LSC funding and planning to support the framework.



31. Do you agree with the roles and responsibilities of LSC in the framework?

32

The transition to the new framework

Following publication of the final report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform, the government has announced that a White Paper on these reforms will be published in early 2005. At this juncture, no firm decisions on these reforms have been taken.

The following proposals for transition therefore relate to all qualifications offered to learners over the age of 19. Until the publication of the White Paper, no decisions can be made about how qualifications for 14- to 19-year-olds will relate to the new framework.

QCA must plan the transition of qualifications for adults from the NQF to the FfA and make arrangements for discontinuing the current processes of accreditation of these qualifications within the NQF.

QCA will need to collaborate with its regulatory partners in Wales and Northern Ireland. The following proposals set out our initial ideas on the management of this process. Any implementation of these proposals will depend on the outcomes of further consultation with colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland.

We propose a pragmatic approach, based on manageable time scales, awarding bodies' own developmental priorities and the need to protect the interests of learners working towards qualifications within the NQF.

We are committed to establishing the FfA from January 2006. To put explicit structures and procedures for the recognition of awarding bodies and the accreditation of awards within the FfA by this date, we must finalise and publish these structures and procedures by September 2005.



The deadline for submitting new qualifications for adults for accreditation within the existing regulatory criteria for the NQF will be agreed with awarding bodies by 31 August 2005.

In order to prepare the FfA to open for business in January 2006, QCA will work with bodies seeking approval to offer awards within the FfA in the period up to 31 December 2005. We anticipate that the first recognition of bodies to make awards within the FfA will be made during this period.

There may be circumstances in which it is reasonable to extend the period of current accreditations within the NQF. Awarding bodies will be able to apply to QCA for a single extension of the current period of accreditation for a qualification for up to one year following the deadline agreed with awarding bodies for final submissions.

We intend to complete the process of transition of all qualifications for adults to the FfA by December 2010. To achieve this, we need to make sure that the accreditation of these qualifications within the NQF comes to an end by 31 December 2009.

This means that final registrations on these qualifications within the NQF will end in December 2009. Most of the final certifications within the NQF will be completed before the end of 2010. However, the final award of some qualifications to some learners within the NQF may take place up to 2013.

Within these time frames awarding bodies are free to plan their own priorities for development of new qualifications within the FfA. Sector qualifications strategies will shape the development of qualifications related to occupational standards. We assume that most awarding bodies will plan their transition to the new framework based on the expiration of similar qualifications within the NQF. However, there may be instances when awarding bodies choose to submit new proposals to the FfA before these expiry dates.

Similarly there may be instances when, in response to government policy initiatives, we invite submissions from awarding bodies to the framework. Aside from such instances, we do not intend to intervene in awarding bodies' own priorities for development during this period of transition.



32. Do you agree with the proposals for managing the transition from the NQF to the new framework?

Glossary



The definitions of these key terms have been developed over many years, in credit systems in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the National Qualifications Framework in England.

Term	Definition	Comment
Assessment criteria	Descriptions of the requirements a learner is expected to meet to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved	Assessment criteria are grouped into sets that are related to each learning outcome in a unit
Award	A certificate issued to an individual that recognises an achievement	There are two types of award – credits and qualifications
Awarding body	A body recognised to award credits or qualifications	A body is recognised once it meets the regulatory authorities' requirements
Component	A sub-set of a qualification to which a particular set of assessment methods are applied	A component includes the information in an individual unit or (in certain instances) a group of units, together with the information necessary to conduct the assessment of the unit(s)
Core units	Units in a set of rules of combination that must be achieved for the qualification to be awarded	Although most rules of combination will identify core units, it will be possible for qualifications to be constructed entirely of core units or optional units
Credit	An award made to a learner in recognition of the quality-assured achievement of designated learning outcomes at a particular level	One credit is awarded for achievement of those learning outcomes in a unit that a learner is expected to achieve in 10 learning hours
Credit accumulation	The process of putting together a combination of credits to meet the achievement requirements of a qualification	Although learners may record the achievement of any number of credits in their credit transcript, credit accumulation refers to the process of combining credits for the purpose of achieving a qualification
Credit framework	A set of interlocking technical specifications that collectively provide the basis for supporting a system of credit accumulation and transfer	The FfA goes beyond a credit system by combining the features of credit with qualifications



Term	Definition	Comment
Credit transcript	The electronic document in which all credits awarded to a learner are recorded and stored	The credit transcript is owned by an individual learner, but credits are recorded in the transcript by approved awarding bodies
Credit transfer	The process of using a credit or credits awarded in the context of one qualification towards the achievement requirements of another qualification	The facility to transfer credits is governed by the rules of combination for qualifications
Credit value	The number of credits that may be awarded to a learner for the successful achievement of the learning outcomes of a unit	The credit value of a unit is an integral part of the unit specification. The credit value of a qualification is determined by aggregating the credit values of all units required to achieve it
Elective units	Units in a set of rules of combination that are not named individually	Credits gained through elective units may be part of a qualification, but are not an essential part
Exemption	The facility for a learner to claim exemption from some of the achievement requirements of a credit-based qualification, using a non-credit-based achievement deemed to be of equivalent value	The achievement of a qualification may be based in some instances on a combination of credits achieved and credits exempted
Learning outcome	A statement of what a learner can be expected to know, understand or do	Learning outcomes are grouped into a coherent and explicit unit
Level	An indication of the relative demand, complexity and/or depth of achievement, and of the autonomy of the learner in demonstrating that achievement	The level of a qualification is determined by the level of the majority of units for that qualification
Named units	Core and/or optional units in rules of combination	Named units are listed in the rules of combination for a qualification
Optional units	Units in rules of combination from which a designated number of credits must be achieved and which offer some choice to individual learners	A qualification may include some optional units alongside core units or may be made up solely of optional units
Qualification (1)	A combination of units offered to a learner for the purposes of entry, advancement or progression to employment, career or professional goals	In this sense, 'qualification' is something offered to a learner



Term	Definition	Comment
Qualification (2)	An award made to a learner for the achievement of the specified combination of credits required for that award	In this sense, 'qualification' is something a learner achieves
Rules of combination	A description of the requirements for credit accumulation for the achievement of a named qualification	The FfA does not support the development of rules of combination outside the context of a qualification
Sector qualifications strategy	A specification of the current and future needs of a sector, with a timeline and implementation plan	These strategies are developed by SSCs and the SSDA in partnership with QCA
Unit	A coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, having a title, credit value and level	These specifications for a unit, together with its unique identifier, are complete and may not be supplemented with additional information in a unit

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