A Consultation on Withdrawing the Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework

Contents

Summary

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was launched in 2008 as a reforming framework for adult vocational qualifications. With its requirements for a uniform building-brick approach to learning, qualifications, and credit transfer, the intention was that it would improve the quality of vocational qualifications, support progression and enhance mobility.

To make the QCF possible a detailed set of rules, including how qualifications should be designed and structured, was required. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*[1] of August 2008 were jointly developed by our predecessor body (known as Interim Ofqual), the Welsh Government and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland.

For some time we have been concerned that the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* have not delivered on their intended outcomes and that they sometimes stand in the way of the development of consistently good, valid and reliable qualifications. We have also considered the reports recently commissioned by Government into vocational education, apprenticeships and adult vocational qualifications and noted their comments about the QCF. At the end of 2013, we commissioned our own review of the QCF and this was considered by the Ofqual Board in March 2014 (see appendix 1). The recommendations of this review form the basis of this consultation.

Based on the findings of the review, we are now consulting on proposals to remove the QCF regulatory arrangements. That does not mean that we want to change or remove all qualifications which are designed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. We believe that those qualifications (which we refer to in this document as QCF-type qualifications) that are good qualifications and that meet our requirements for validity, should continue to thrive. They will be regulated, as they are now, through our *General Conditions of Recognition* (General Conditions).[2] But where we find QCF-type qualifications that do not meet our General Conditions, we will expect them to be amended or withdrawn. In the autumn, we plan to make proposals that all qualifications are underpinned by a validity strategy. When we set out our proposals, we will seek further views on the practical aspects and timeframe for implementation of this.

We are responsible for the regulation of vocational qualifications in England and Northern Ireland, and the Welsh Government is responsible for the regulation of

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[1] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qualifications-and-credit-framework

[2] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/general-conditions-of-recognition

vocational qualifications in Wales. Many qualifications are offered in more than one of these jurisdictions. This is our consultation about what we need to do to make sure that in future, all vocational qualifications for which we are responsible are valid, reliable and fit for purpose. We will continue to work closely with the Welsh Government on the future proposals for regulation of vocational qualifications.

Purpose of the consultation

This consultation will run for 12 weeks. It is running alongside an accompanying consultation on guided learning hours (GLH).[3] Before responding, you may also wish to consider a third recently published consultation on *Lifting the Accreditation Requirement Consultation*[4] and our open letter about our future regulatory approach.[5] You should find it helpful to consider all four publications together. In particular, our consultation on lifting the accreditation requirement and this consultation both point to a clear focus in our regulatory approach on validity and an intention to move away from rules, guidance and processes which can obscure that.

We recognise that to implement these proposals, we will need to have a further consultation on the technical detail and to set out detailed transitional arrangements and impacts on IT requirements. We expect to do this consultation around the turn of the year.

How to respond

The closing date for responses is **16th October 2014**.

Please respond in one of three ways:

- complete the online response at: http://surveys.ofqual.gov.uk/s3/removing-regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qcf

- email your response to consultations@ofqual.gov.uk – please include the consultation title, Withdrawing the Regulatory arrangements for the QCF, in the subject line of the email and make clear who you are and in what capacity you are responding;

- post your response to: Consultation on Withdrawing the Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework, Ofqual, Spring Place, Coventry Business Park, Herald Avenue, Coventry, CV5 6UB.

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[3] http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/guided-learning-hours-july-2014

[4] http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/lifting-the-accreditation-requirement

[5] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/open-letter-developing-way-regulate

Evaluating the responses

To evaluate responses properly, we need to know who is responding to the consultation and in what capacity. We will, therefore, only consider your response if you complete the information page, which you can find on pages 27 to 30 of this document.

We will publish the evaluation of responses. Note that we may publish all or part of your response unless you tell us (in your answer to the confidentiality question) that you want us to treat your response as confidential. If you tell us you wish your response to be treated as confidential, we will not include your details in any published list of respondents, although we may quote from your response anonymously.

1. Introduction and background

1.1 The Qualifications and Credit Framework

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was intended to:

- enable students to build up credit and to move from the study of smaller pieces of learning (units) to full qualifications at their own pace and in their own time;

- support student progression from one qualification to another;

- reduce the number of qualifications and improve quality by requiring awarding organisations to share the units making up their qualifications (unit sharing);

- ensure that students did not have to repeat learning by including arrangements for credit transfer which enabled students to use the credit achieved in one qualification towards the achievement requirements of another.

1.1.1 The QCF was the result of work done by the four UK government administrations and the UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme Board. The objectives for the QCF were ambitious and aspirational; they were a set of policy objectives aimed at addressing educational and, to some extent, social issues. Our own statutory objectives, set out in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (the Act), amended by the Education Act 2011, have a clear regulatory focus. They give us responsibility not for the design of qualifications but for their validity and reliability. We are responsible for the standards of qualifications and for promoting public confidence in them.

1.1.2 In 2011 we issued the General Conditions. They set out our requirements of the awarding organisations that we regulate. The General Conditions apply to all of the qualifications we regulate, including QCF-type qualifications. We used our powers under General Conditions B7 and D5 to require awarding organisations to adhere to certain paragraphs of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework.*[6] That means that, at the moment, QCF-type qualifications are subject to the General Conditions

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[6] The paragraphs of the QCF rule which take effect as a regulatory document under General Conditions B7 and D5 are listed in our *List of Additional Regulatory Requirements* (www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/list-of-additional-regulatory-documents)

and certain portions of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*.

1.1.3   Since the introduction of the General Conditions, there has sometimes been a tension between them and the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, which has created confusion and sometimes made it more difficult for us to take action against organisations whose qualifications have not come up to standard.

1.2   Concerns about the QCF

1.2.1   At the end of 2013, aware of the issues raised about the QCF in recent Government reviews,[7] concerns expressed by awarding organisations and based on our own experiences of regulating QCF qualifications, we commissioned a review of the QCF, involving discussions with many stakeholders in England and Northern Ireland. The review identified a number of problems with the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* and the way in which they affect qualification design. Specifically:

- the whole structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer; in practice, there are very low levels of take-up of credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit-based system have not been realised;

- unit sharing has not had the desired effect of reducing the number of vocational qualifications; in fact there are over 10,000 more qualifications now than when the QCF regulatory arrangements were launched in 2008;

- there is a strong feeling that the requirement to unit share has significantly damaged qualification innovation and development;

- the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* impose a mastery approach to assessment, which requires students to satisfy all of the assessment criteria as evidence that they have met all of the learning outcomes; this works against the use of compensation and can lead to over-assessment at the unit level;

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[7] Getting the job done: The Government's Reform Plan for Vocational Qualifications available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/286750/bis-14-577es-vocational-qualification-reform-plan-summary.pdf

Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications in England available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303906/review-of-adult-vocational-qualifications-in-england-final.pdf

- the unit-level focus on assessment is not easily compatible with synoptic and end-point assessment which can be effective forms of assessment of some vocational qualifications;

- there is confusion about vocational qualifications which are not developed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* and what this means for qualifications frameworks.

1.2.2 Alongside our review of the QCF we have been developing our regulatory strategy. From now on, we will be clearly placing validity at the centre of our approach to regulation: a qualification as a whole must be valid, not just the individual units within it. That means we will want to be satisfied that awarding organisations develop and deliver qualifications which have a clear purpose and support, which are assessed in reliable ways and which, across the entire life-cycle of the qualification, benefit from continuous improvement through quality assurance activity and feedback. We want to be confident that awarding organisations are designing qualifications in the most appropriate ways to meet their intended purposes. We do not have specific preconceptions about what those designs should be.

1.2.3 We are concerned that there are QCF-type qualifications which meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* but do not meet our requirements for validity. We believe that the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* are not necessary to support delivery of our strategy or to secure the standards we seek for all regulated qualifications, and that they sometimes hinder achievement of those aims.

1.2.4 Qualifications are shown to be valid over time rather than at any fixed point. Aspects of validity run through qualifications from design to delivery and it is a primary measure of the quality of qualifications and whether they are likely to satisfy the needs of those who depend on them.

1.2.5 In the autumn we plan to make proposals about the approach awarding organisations should take to evaluate the validity of each of their qualifications. Exam boards are currently required to set out an assessment strategy for each of their new GCSEs, AS qualifications and A levels. We consider that a similar approach would also be suitable for other qualifications. We believe that awarding organisations should, over time, review all of their existing regulated qualifications and confirm the validity of each qualification that is to remain on offer.

1.3 Removing the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*

1.3.1   We are consulting here on proposals to implement our QCF review recommendations. We believe that dealing separately with each of the issues identified would provide only a piecemeal solution and would risk creating confusion about which aspects of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* were and were not operational. We propose that we withdraw the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*[8] rather than tackling these problems individually.

1.3.2   That does not mean we are proposing to get rid of or require wholescale change to all QCF-type qualifications. Many of these are fit for purpose and are valued by, and deliver good outcomes for students and employers. What we propose is that from now on, we rely solely on the General Conditions, where necessary supplemented by new General Conditions or guidance, to regulate qualifications that have been or would have been designed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*.

1.3.3   In removing the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* we will reinforce the centrality of our General Conditions and the requirements they impose on all regulated qualifications to be valid, reliable and fit for purpose. We want awarding organisations to focus on producing qualifications that meet these requirements on an ongoing basis, rather than designing qualifications to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* as if that were sufficient. The validity of a qualification depends not just on how it is designed, but on how it is awarded year on year. Those QCF-type qualifications that already meet the requirements in the General Conditions will need little, if any, change and we have developed these proposals to ensure that where the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* have worked well, the benefits can still be delivered. Those QCF-type qualifications that do not meet the General Conditions will need to be amended or withdrawn from the market.

1.3.4   The approach taken in this consultation is to identify the key areas of regulation which will be affected by withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, and how we will use the General Conditions to regulate in future. In most respects, we believe the Conditions are already sufficiently comprehensive to enable us to do this and secure the validity of qualifications. In just a few areas, we have set out

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[8] We shall do so by removing the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* from our *List of Additional Regulatory Documents* (www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/list-of-additional-regulatory-documents) which outlines the documents with which awarding organisations are required to comply under General Conditions B7 and D5

where we propose to introduce a new General Condition or guidance to support transition or the maintenance of a framework. A descriptive framework can be a valuable regulatory tool and so we want to retain those of our requirements already in place – for level, size (where applicable) and level descriptor – which would support such a framework. We do not, in the main, see the additional General Conditions we are proposing as substantially changing our existing expectations on awarding organisations or their regulated qualifications.

2. Our proposals

2.1 Recognition arrangements

2.1.1 We regulate awarding organisations to make sure they have the capacity and capability to develop and award qualifications to the standard we expect. The statutory process under the Act that we use to assure ourselves of an awarding organisation's capacity and capability is called recognition. Almost all recognised awarding organisations offer QCF-type qualifications. Some awarding organisations are recognised only to offer QCF-type qualifications.

2.1.2 Withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* will affect how we describe the recognition of those awarding organisations that offer QCF-type qualifications. We believe that does not mean that we will need to change the basis of recognition – all awarding organisations are already recognised for the qualifications they offer – but rather the way in which that recognition is described. For awarding organisations that are currently recognised to award qualifications under the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, this would avoid a situation in which they have to make a full application for new recognition.

2.1.3 All awarding organisations, including those whose recognition is described as being only for QCF-type qualifications, must meet the General Conditions. We therefore propose that those awarding organisations that are recognised to offer QCF-type qualifications will continue to be recognised for the qualifications which they are currently offering but that this recognition will now be described according to sector (for example, healthcare or construction) and by level.

2.1.4 This proposal will apply to both current and future qualifications. Only if an awarding organisation seeks to offer qualifications of a very different type (for example, to move from offering qualifications in healthcare to ones in engineering) or at a different level, would it need, as now, to apply to us to extend its recognition.

2.1.5 We propose to work with awarding organisations individually to make sure that their future recognition is aligned with their qualifications offer. We believe that describing recognition in the way we propose will, for the most part, be a straightforward exercise. We will manage the implications of this and will set out detailed proposals in our technical consultation.

2.2 The role of third parties involved with the QCF

2.2.1   The QCF was designed to allow organisations other than recognised awarding organisations to work on the design and development of units for submission into the 'unit bank'. The same organisations can also work on the design of rules of combination by which units can be grouped together to make qualifications. These organisations are usually sector skills councils or similar, and for the purposes of the QCF we call them Unit Submitters and Rules of Combination Submitters. We recognise the value of these organisations making a contribution to the content and design of qualifications. We want to see this continuing in the future where it enables sector employers to get the qualifications they want. Part of the role of employers and other users in the qualifications system is to specify the skills and knowledge that they need qualifications to assess, and to review whether qualifications are meeting those requirements.

2.2.2   However, we regulate awarding organisations, and it is only these awarding organisations that we can hold to account. It is right that organisations other than recognised awarding organisations should be able to contribute to the design and content of qualifications, but the current approach implies that such organisations have a formal role in the regulated system. We are not able to take regulatory action against Unit Submitters and Rules of Combination Submitters and so the current arrangements blur the responsibility that awarding organisations must take for the validity of their qualifications.

2.2.3   We believe it is not appropriate to continue to recognise the role of Unit Submitters and Rule of Combination Submitters through regulation. We intend to close the unit bank, so that awarding organisations have to be able to demonstrate the validity of any (current and future) units and qualifications they award, and cannot place any reliance on Unit or Rule of Combination Submitters. There will be no further place in our regulatory regime to recognise Unit or Rules of Combination Submitters to carry out the range of functions that they currently perform.

2.3   Units and the structure of qualifications

2.3.1   QCF-type qualifications are designed around units. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* refer to units as the 'building blocks' of all qualifications. All QCF-type qualifications are developed from the unit up and each unit must have its own learning outcomes, assessment criteria, level and credit value.

2.3.2   Our review of the QCF found a range of views on the unitised structure of QCF qualifications. There is evidence to suggest that the unitised approach to learning has had a positive effect in encouraging disadvantaged and hard-

to-reach students back into education; 'bite-sized' units have appealed to them, and students have been able to commit to a unit in situations where commitment to a full qualification might have overwhelmed them.

2.3.3   The unitised offer has also appealed to some employers. They have appreciated the flexibility that the unit provides to construct and tailor qualifications to suit workplace demands or to enable employees to take a unit without having to invest in a full qualification.

2.3.4   One of the problems with the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* is that they require every learning outcome to be assessed at the unit level. This can lead to over-assessment and to the approach to assessment being atomised and broken down to its smallest parts. Moreover, during our review, educators expressed concern about the structure of qualifications which are built upwards from the unit rather than being designed as a meaningful whole, and then unpacked where appropriate, into components. Unitisation can make it harder to assess an understanding of connections between and application of different skills and knowledge, which can be very important in some job roles and sectors.

2.3.5   The evidence suggests that the unitised approach is an aspect of QCF qualification design which has worked well for some qualifications and students but not for others. We know that before the QCF existed, many qualifications were structured in modules or chunks. That is not the same as conformity with the unit-design template required by the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. We consider that the one-size-fits-all approach to using units as the key building block of all vocational qualifications is not necessary and in some cases has proved inappropriate and damaging.

2.3.6   We want awarding organisations to focus on the validity of qualifications: decisions on the appropriate structure and design of a qualification and in particular whether it should be unitised, should depend on whether that is the right approach to meeting the needs of employers, students and other users. The rules for a qualification should not always compel a particular approach to assessment, for example by requiring all outcomes to be assessed to demonstrate mastery of the subject or skill. The chosen method of assessing a qualification should be fit for purpose. We believe we do not need to impose requirements about how qualifications are structured and whether they are made up of units or modules or in some other way.

2.3.7   We propose that an awarding organisation should be able to construct qualifications with modules or chunks or component parts, where that is in line with what employers need, but that this should not be an expectation for

all vocational qualifications. The fitness for purpose of qualifications will be considered against our General Conditions and in particular we will focus on their validity and reliability. Our General Conditions already enable us to do this.

2.4   Credit size and accumulation

2.4.1   To provide clarity about how qualifications are built up, the QCF required all units and all qualifications to have a level and credit value. Credit is the term widely used in the UK, Europe and internationally to provide an indication of the size of a qualification. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* require all units to have a credit value of one credit for those learning outcomes achievable in ten hours of learning time.

2.4.2   The intention was that credit would support the unit-based structure of the QCF and would enable a student to build up units into qualifications. The use of credit was also intended to support UK-wide and European mobility of workers and portability of qualifications.

2.4.3   Combined with the unitised structure of qualifications, the use of credit has enabled students to be recognised for their achievements even where they have not achieved a full qualification. It has also supported the accumulation of credit towards a full qualification, where that credit was from a unit that is referred to in the rules of combination of the qualification.

2.4.4   We do not want to stop the size of regulated qualifications being described in credit terms where this is a useful and familiar term and provided the qualification is otherwise valid and reliable. Neither do we want to require all awarding organisations to allocate a credit value to their qualifications if they do not wish to. If credit is to have a useful meaning, however, the amount of learning time indicated by any particular credit value must be consistent across awarding organisations.

2.4.5   Arising out of our obligations under the Act, we are consulting in parallel to this consultation on how the size of qualifications should be estimated and described. We propose to update the existing methodology for calculating credit to reflect the outcomes of the *Guided Learning Hours Consultation*.[9] This would involve using new definitions for the components of credit, but not necessarily mean any change to actual credit values.

2.4.6   Within this consultation, we propose that where qualifications are to have a credit value, we will need a General Condition to make provision for that. We further propose that it should be possible to attribute credit down to the smallest part of the qualification that can be discretely assessed but not to anything smaller. We will need a new General Condition to require awarding organisations to use a consistent methodology in such circumstances.

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[9] http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/guided-learning-hours-july-2014

2.5 Credit transfer and recognition of prior learning

2.5.1 The QCF was designed to allow students who had been awarded credit by one awarding organisation to have that credit recognised by another awarding organisation and to allow credit gained in pursuit of one qualification to be used to help secure another. The intention was to facilitate flexibility in the way students could learn and build up qualifications.

2.5.2 The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* require awarding organisations to support credit transfer. They do this by setting out how qualifications should be put together using rules of combination and credit from shared units.

2.5.3 To date we have seen little evidence that students are taking advantage of the credit transfer arrangements (see appendix one).

2.5.4 We propose that an awarding organisation should be permitted to recognise credit awarded to a student by another awarding organisation, but that this should not be mandatory. We propose that an awarding organisation that allows credit transfer, whether systematically or on a case-by-case basis, or that chooses to recognise prior learning in other ways, must have and publish a clear approach. An awarding organisation will always be responsible for its own awards and so must satisfy itself as to the quality and validity of a student's prior learning.

2.5.5 Where users of qualifications, such as employers, colleges and training providers, believe that unitisation will help a qualification achieve its purpose, they should set that out as part of their expectation of qualifications. Where awarding organisations want to work together to develop arrangements for sharing units or transferring credit, we would encourage them to do that. We will consider whether there is a need for regulatory oversight or guidance for any such arrangements.

2.5.6 An awarding organisation may also want to recognise learning for which a student has not been awarded credit. We propose that an awarding organisation that wishes to recognise prior learning must adopt an approach that ensures it does not undermine its responsibility for the standard of the qualification.

2.5.7 To help students and other users to reach informed decisions, we will consider how we can facilitate the availability of public information about awarding organisations' approaches to the recognition of prior learning.

2.5.8 We propose to introduce General Conditions to reflect this policy.

2.6 Assessment requirements

2.6.1 The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* require assessment on completion of each unit to ensure that the learning outcomes have been met. While this supports recognition of a student's achievement, it can also lead to over-assessment with students having to demonstrate that they meet all of the assessment criteria for each learning outcome within each unit. This approach makes other equally valid approaches to assessment, such as synoptic, compensatory or end-of-qualification assessment, significantly more difficult.

2.6.2 The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* on assessment were designed to support and be compatible with the unit-based structure of qualifications and credit accumulation and transfer. They require that all units contain learning outcomes that are capable of assessment and assessment criteria that specify the standard the student is expected to meet.

2.6.3 These requirements were intended to ensure that users could be confident that students had met the learning outcomes for every unit and, in consequence, to underpin and create confidence in credit transfer.

2.6.4 We know that in practice, these *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* on assessment have had a number of consequences. In effect, they impose a mastery requirement on assessment, which requires students to demonstrate that they have met all of the assessment criteria for all of the learning outcomes within each unit they have completed. This is fine for some qualifications, for example those which confer a licence to practise, where it may be appropriate to require demonstration of mastery of all learning outcomes and satisfaction of all assessment criteria. For example, care workers generally need to be competent and safe to deal with all the aspects of care rather than with one particular aspect.

2.6.5 For other qualifications, sampling of students' ability across the learning outcomes – particularly in a knowledge-based subject such as accountancy – or the use of a compensatory approach might be acceptable. A compensatory approach can make it easier to grade qualifications, taking account of performance across the qualification. A candidate's demonstrable strength in one area of the assessment can be used to make up for his or her weakness in another. In a creative or design-based qualification it might even be better for a candidate to show real strength in one particular area rather than being adequate across a number of areas of the qualification.

2.6.6   The mastery approach and the compensatory approach are mutually exclusive and the unitised approach to assessment also works against the use of end-point, synoptic, assessment within a qualification. In some instances, compliance with the QCF requirements has conflicted with the design and development of appropriate, valid and reliable forms of assessment and created an unhelpful tension between compliance with the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* and compliance with our General Conditions.

2.6.7   We believe that our Conditions are already sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to enable us to regulate the assessment arrangements of vocational qualifications. They require assessments to be fit for purpose, valid and reliable.

2.7   Shared units – design and development

2.7.1   A key design feature of the QCF is unit sharing. Shared units, setting out the assessment objectives to be achieved by those passing the units, are designed and developed by recognised awarding organisations or by unit-submitters. Once ready, the unit is placed into the unit bank from where it can be accessed by any awarding organisation looking for a unit to include within its qualification. Different awarding organisations' versions of each unit are interchangeable when rules of combination are applied to determine whether a student has passed a qualification.

2.7.2   Unit sharing was intended to support and underpin credit transfer and mobility. The theory was that if every awarding organisation was using the same units, the unit could implicitly be trusted and credit transfer could take place. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* do not specifically require unit sharing, but in the past we issued non-statutory guidance (subsequently withdrawn) which indicated that unit sharing was to be the norm unless there was a specific reason not to share.

2.7.3   Unit sharing was also intended to support the development of a compact number of good quality qualifications by having awarding organisations use the same units (either produce their own versions of existing units, and/or award qualifications on the basis of units awarded by another awarding organisation) rather than developing multiple versions of similar units.

2.7.4   In practice, it seems that unit sharing has had minimal impact on credit transfer. The amount of credit transfer which is taking place within the vocational qualifications sector is tiny. Unit sharing has also not had the intended effect on the size of the vocational qualifications market. The number of live QCF-type qualifications on our Register for Regulated

Qualifications (the Register)[10] in July 2014 stood at 16,800. This represents an increase of more than 10,000 qualifications since implementation of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* in August 2008.

2.7.5   We know from our review that as well as not achieving either of the objectives for which it was intended, many stakeholders believe that unit sharing has had a significant, negative impact on development and innovation in the vocational qualifications market. We have been told that there is a reluctance to develop new and exciting products when there is a likelihood that other awarding organisations could use them within their own qualifications without contributing to the design process or bearing some of the attendant risks and costs.

2.7.6   Unit sharing has also meant that, whilst we have always been clear that awarding organisations are responsible for the quality of units and qualifications, when problems are identified there has been a blurring of accountability for putting things right. The ability to resolve these problems is not always in the hands of the awarding organisation which is using the unit. In retrospect, we believe all of these issues were predictable and the design of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* should have done more to mitigate them. There are some important lessons here for the development of future qualifications systems.

2.7.7   We know there are many advantages to incorporating other views and perspectives into the design and development of vocationally relevant qualifications. We want awarding organisations to continue to collaborate with employers and employer representative groups to develop high-quality, valid and reliable qualifications. We recognise that it may also be appropriate for them to collaborate from time to time with other awarding organisations. However, we do not think that means we need to put in place rules to support or facilitate unit sharing. Our focus should be on ensuring that where qualifications include collaborative elements, these meet our regulatory requirements for all qualifications and that there is clear accountability with each awarding organisation being wholly responsible for each of the qualifications which it offers.

2.7.8   We therefore propose:

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[10] http://register.ofqual.gov.uk

- to give notice of closure of the unit bank to all awarding organisations, Unit Submitters and Rule of Combination Submitters;

- at the end of the notice period it will not be possible for awarding organisations or other organisations to place units into the unit bank or for awarding organisations to take units from the unit bank;

- at the start of the notice period we will write to all awarding organisations, Unit Submitters and Rule of Combination Submitters to confirm that unit sharing is not a regulatory requirement, and to remind them that, regardless of whether units are taken from the unit bank or not, the awarding organisations awarding qualifications based upon them are accountable on an ongoing basis for the validity and standards of those qualifications.

2.8   Shared units – ownership

2.8.1   The issues surrounding the use and ownership of shared units are complex. We have considered a number of ways in which to deal with this in order to:

- facilitate an orderly wind-down of unit sharing and a smooth transition to a situation in which collaboration is a decision of awarding organisations and their partners rather than a perceived regulatory requirement;

- minimise the unnecessary proliferation of vocational qualifications;

- recognise that shared units were designed and developed by one or sometimes more organisations and have been in use often for a lengthy period by others;

- reduce the likelihood of a significant bureaucratic burden being imposed on awarding organisations, colleges and others as qualifications are restructured, renumbered and resubmitted; we are keen to avoid this both to minimise the impact on resources and to avoid a repeat of the administrative impact of the launch of the QCF;

- avoid a damaging impact on students, which could arise if existing qualifications making use of shared units are withdrawn at short notice.

2.8.2   In order to mitigate the risks identified above, we propose that with effect from 2nd January 2015, we will assume that unless awarding organisations or Unit Submitters tell us otherwise, a copy of every unit currently in shared use will be treated as having been given in perpetuity by the developing organisation to each awarding organisation which has developed a version of that unit. From that date on, the unit will be treated as if it is the using

awarding organisation's own. The awarding organisation will assume full responsibility for that unit within its qualification.

2.8.3   The approach we are suggesting is a pragmatic one but is also a reflection of what is currently happening. The advantage of this approach is that it minimises the impact on students and other users and helps to avoid the proliferation of qualifications (qualifications remain as they are; it is our treatment of ownership which changes).

2.8.4   We are clear that if any changes are to be made to the status quo, it is essential that adequate notice is given to users of shared units, students and colleges. We therefore propose that if an awarding organisation or Unit Submitter disagrees with our proposed approach, it should notify us that it does not want to give a copy of its units to awarding organisations. We also propose that organisations should give reasonable notice of withdrawal of their units to those organisations which are using them. In these circumstances, in order to minimise the risk of adverse impacts on students and colleges, as well as the likely administrative impacts, we propose that the notice period should be not less than two years. This would support a smooth transition. If necessary we will introduce a transitional General Condition for awarding organisations in order to give effect to this notice period.

2.8.5   For any awarding organisation affected by the decision of another organisation to withdraw its units, we propose that on withdrawal, the unit will either have to be replaced by a new one developed by the awarding organisation which previously used the shared unit, or the qualification will have to be withdrawn. We propose that awarding organisations which are using shared units which are to be withdrawn will be given a period of two years in which to make these adjustments.

2.9   Qualification titles

2.9.1   The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* include requirements about qualification titles. They were aimed at resolving confusion amongst employers and others about qualification titles and require that:

- qualifications of between 1 and 12 credits are called Awards;

- qualifications of between 13 and 36 credits are called Certificates; and

- qualifications of 37 credits or more are called Diplomas.

2.9.2   The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* also require that qualification titles identify the level of the qualification and

give a short and accurate indication of its content. There is no evidence that these titling rules have simplified or clarified the qualifications available.

2.9.3   If we withdraw the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, our General Conditions will continue to apply to titling. The General Conditions require awarding organisations to ensure that the titles of their qualifications include the awarding organisation's name, the level and type of qualification, an indication of content and any endorsements.

2.9.4   An awarding organisation must also ensure that the title of the qualification is an accurate reflection of the knowledge and skills that will be assessed as part of the qualification. It must use the titles of qualifications in a consistent way and ensure that the titles of its qualifications do not mislead users.

2.9.5   As stated elsewhere, we are proposing that it should no longer be mandatory for vocational qualifications to be credit bearing. We therefore do not believe we should require the use of specified titles linked to size of qualification.

2.9.6   The term '(QCF)' currently appears on the Register in the titles of qualifications designed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. If the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* are withdrawn the term will no longer be needed.

We propose:

■   an awarding organisation should not use the term '(QCF)' within the title of its qualifications;

■   the term '(QCF)' should be removed from the titles of any qualification on the Register;

■   awarding organisations should have until the date of each qualification's next review to remove '(QCF)' from its materials.

2.9.7   At the time when the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* were developed, it was agreed that in limited circumstances the acronym 'NVQ' (National Vocational Qualification) could be added to the title of a qualification. If we lift the QCF regulatory arrangements, our General Conditions will in any case prevent an awarding organisation from using the acronym 'NVQ' in the title of one of its qualifications, where it would be misleading to do so. That is because the qualification is not an NVQ-type qualification which confirms that the holder has passed an assessment of occupational competence. This is a

recognised brand and we expect that the use of the acronym should always be in an appropriate context.

2.10 A descriptive qualification framework

2.10.1 As well as providing a set of qualification design rules, the QCF provides a structure within which the relative size and level of qualifications can be expressed using consistent terminology, providing the essential characteristics of a descriptive qualifications framework. We believe that it is not the principles and ideas behind qualifications frameworks which have led to problems with the QCF but the QCF design rules.

2.10.2 A qualifications framework enables us to explain in a consistent way how levels and sometimes sizes of qualifications relate to each other, in other words how demanding a qualification is relative to another (accepting that different qualifications may be testing very different types of knowledge and skill, and therefore can sometimes be compared only in fairly superficial ways). It is one of the ways in which we can ensure that awarding organisations describe (and market) their qualifications accurately.

2.10.3 Qualifications frameworks help people who want to take a qualification to make an informed decision about their choice and also assist in decisions about funding and recruitment and selection. A qualifications framework will also support our work on providing key information to users to help them understand how qualifications can work for them.

2.10.4 Many, if not most, countries have a qualifications framework; the difference with the QCF is that it was introduced as a reforming framework. Existing qualifications had to be changed so they complied with the QCF design rules. As explained previously, it was the QCF design rules that imposed change on existing qualifications – in some cases with undesirable outcomes – rather than the elements of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* which determine the framework itself.

2.10.5 The QCF levels have been mapped onto the European Qualifications Framework. They do not perfectly align with each other, but the fit is reasonable, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1

QCF level										
E1	E2	E3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
—			1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8
EQF level										

2.10.6   If the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* are withdrawn, we will still want to have a clear way to explain the relationship between the different qualifications we regulate. Two of the key components of a qualifications framework are already dealt with within our regulatory framework; our General Conditions require all regulated qualifications to include a level within the qualification title. We set out the different requirements for estimating size in our *Guided Learning Hours Consultation*.

2.10.7   We do not have evidence to suggest that the number of levels (three entry levels plus levels 1 to 8) in the QCF is problematic. Nor do we want to introduce unnecessary change and instability into the qualifications system. Our review of the QCF did not identify any issues with the use of descriptive frameworks, just with the prescriptive design features required by the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. The levels specified within the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* apply to all of the qualifications we regulate and we see no reason for that to change.

2.10.8   We will continue to require qualifications to have a level and, as at present, there will be eight levels (1 to 8) and three entry levels. This will minimise the need for change and limit any confusion that might be created by withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. We propose that all regulated qualifications should be associated with one of[11] the eight levels or three entry levels.

2.10.9   The third key component for a qualifications framework is a set of level descriptors. At the present time, the only level descriptors which exist within our regulatory framework are those included in the *Regulatory arrangements*

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[11] GCSEs and some similar qualifications cover more than one level.

for the Qualifications and Credit Framework. We rely on these level descriptors for all qualifications. In due course we will review and revise the descriptors[12] for each level, but for the time being we propose to continue using the descriptors set out at annex E for all regulated qualifications. When we amend them, our aim will be that any qualification that accords to a current level descriptor will accord with the corresponding level descriptor in the new framework and the current levels will not be recalibrated.

2.10.10 We propose to introduce a new General Condition, building on our current requirements, that will not only require an awarding organisation to assign a level to each of its regulated qualifications but will also require it to assign a level descriptor that most closely matches the achievements associated with the qualification. As with our other regulatory requirements, we may check and take action if that level cannot be justified by evidence. For the time being, using the QCF level descriptors, an awarding organisation must select the level with the level descriptor that most closely aligns to the learning outcomes of the qualification.

2.11 Equality analysis

2.11.1 The Equality Act 2010 requires us to have regard to the potential impact, both positive and negative, of our proposals on those who share protected characteristics, namely age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. In Northern Ireland and in accordance with the Section 75 duties arising out of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) we must also consider political opinion and caring for dependents as protected characteristics.

2.11.2 So far we have not identified any impacts from our proposals apart from those discussed below. We have drawn on the outputs of our review and we will continue to review any literature and engage with stakeholders to help identify the potential impacts of any of our proposals on students who share a protected characteristic. We hope to use this consultation to increase our understanding of any possible effects to inform our eventual decisions. We encourage everyone who responds to this consultation to consider the potential equality effects of our proposals and to give us any relevant information or evidence they may have. We will take all the information and evidence we receive into account when making decisions.

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[12] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qualifications-and-credit-framework, annex E

2.11.3 We judge that our proposals on the structure of qualifications are likely to have a mainly positive impact on all students. Our proposals will provide greater freedom to awarding organisations to design and develop vocational qualifications in different ways, which in turn will create greater choice for students. The unitised structure of QCF-type qualifications, which appeals to some students, can continue to be a feature of qualifications while, at the same time, there will be greater scope to design different kinds of qualification which might appeal to other groups of students.

2.11.4 So far, we have not identified any negative impacts arising from our proposals on credit transfer. We are not proposing that credit transfer should cease, only that responsibility for determining whether credit transfer or the recognition of prior learning is a matter for awarding organisations rather than for the regulator.

2.11.5 Our proposals on the assessment of QCF-type qualifications are that in future, these should be subject solely to the General Conditions. Our General Conditions already require awarding organisations to design qualifications which, as far as possible, minimise bias, comply with the requirements of the law on equality, monitor qualifications for disadvantage and have in place clear arrangements for making reasonable adjustments in relation to the qualifications that it makes available. We judge that the General Conditions are sufficiently comprehensive to ensure that the needs of students with protected characteristics are given due weight, consideration and protection.

2.11.6 Our proposals on assessment will also make it possible to move away from the mastery approach required of all QCF-type qualifications and to provide for compensation. This will mean that for some qualifications, a student's real strength in one area may be able to compensate for comparative weakness in another. We judge that this is likely to have a beneficial effect on all students and for many types of qualification will result in fairer outcomes.

2.11.7 We have set out a series of practical proposals to deal with the end of unit sharing. We recognise that if our proposals are not supported, there will be a potential impact on students. We have therefore proposed that in the alternative, awarding organisations give two years' notice of their intention to withdraw a shared unit in order to ensure that students have adequate notice of changes to their learning arrangements and their qualifications.

2.11.8 We recognise that the requirement to use specific titles for QCF qualifications, dependent on their size, provides clarity and certainty to all users of the qualifications, including students whose life experiences may not have exposed them to an understanding of the range and types of available qualification. In removing the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications*

and Credit Framework and titling requirements, there may be a negative impact on some students for whom the size and level of demand of a qualification may be less clear in the absence of a specific title. We are seeking views on the need for guidance on the use of titles to provide some consistency and clarity on the relative size and demand of qualifications.

2.11.9   We recognise that the use of the QCF as a framework and the use of the QCF level descriptors provide some clarity and consistency across the huge range of available QCF-type qualifications. Withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* may create some confusion about how qualifications relate and compare to each other and about how a student can progress from one qualification to another. This confusion may have a particular impact on students from backgrounds where there has been less exposure to the way in which the education system works. We believe that the continued requirement to use levels (as required by the General Conditions) for qualifications, together with the proposals set out in our consultation on *Guided Learning Hours*[13] and our proposal that the QCF level descriptors should continue to apply for the time being, will provide sufficient clarity on the relationship of one qualification to another.

2.11.10 With the exception of those set out above, we have not yet identified any other aspects of our proposals to remove the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* that may have a negative impact on students because of age, disability, race, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, or sex or sexual orientation, political opinion or caring responsibilities.

2.12   Regulatory impacts

2.12.1   There are many thousands of QCF-type qualifications covering a range of subjects and vocations. We must therefore consider the impact of these proposals, if introduced, on the stakeholders who will be directly affected by any decisions we take: students, employers, awarding organisations, colleges, training providers and other groups.

2.12.2   Before we take any final decisions, we will evaluate and take into account the potential impacts of our proposals. We have asked a number of questions within this consultation which will help to inform our understanding of those impacts as will other responses that we receive. Where we have yet to refine the details of our proposals, we will use the responses we receive to this

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[13] http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/guided-learning-hours-july-2014

consultation to inform our approach to how we do that in the best and least burdensome ways.

2.12.3   When we announce our final policy decision, we will also publish a full regulatory impact assessment of the effects of our decisions.

Responding to the consultation

Your details

To evaluate responses properly, we need to know who is responding to the consultation and in what capacity. We will therefore only consider your response if you complete the following information section.

We will publish our evaluation of responses. Please note that we may publish all or part of your response unless you tell us (in your answer to the confidentiality question) that you want us to treat your response as confidential. If you tell us you wish your response to be treated as confidential, we will not include your details in any published list of respondents, although we may quote from your response anonymously.

About you

Name*

Position*

Name of organisation or group (if applicable)*

Address

Email

Telephone

Would you like us to treat your response as confidential?*

If you answer yes, we will not include your details in any list of people or organisations that responded to the consultation.

( ) Yes   ( ) No

Are the views you express on this consultation an official response from the organisation you represent or your personal views?*

( ) Personal views

( ) Official response from an organisation/group (please complete the type of responding organisation tick list)

If you ticked 'Personal views' which of the following are you?

( ) Student

( ) Parent or carer

( ) Teacher (but not responding on behalf of a school or college)

( ) Other, including general public (please state capacity)

_____

If you ticked "Official response from an organisation/group", please respond accordingly:

Type of responding organisation*

( ) Awarding organisation

( ) Local authority

( ) School or college (please answer the next question)

( ) Academy chain

( ) Private training provider

( ) University or other higher education institution

( ) Employer

( ) Other representative or interest group

( ) Other representative group/interest group (please skip to type of representative

Group/interest group)

School or college type

( ) Comprehensive or non-selective academy

( ) State selective or selective academy

( ) Independent

( ) Special school

( ) Further education college

( ) Sixth form college

( ) None of the above (please state what)

_____

Type of representative or interest group

( ) Group of awarding organisations

( ) Union

( ) Employer or business representative group

( ) Subject association or learned society

( ) Equality organisation or group

( ) School, college or teacher representative group

( ) None of the above (please specify)

_____

Nation*

( ) England

( ) Wales

( ) Northern Ireland

( ) Scotland

( ) Other EU country (please state which) _____

( ) Non-EU country (please state which) _____

How did you find out about this consultation?

( ) Our newsletter or another one of our communications

( ) Internet search

( ) Our website

( ) From another organisation (please state below)

( ) Other (please state) _____

May we contact you for further information?

( ) Yes   ( ) No

* denotes mandatory fields

Questions

Question 1. We propose to change the way we regulate some vocational qualifications by withdrawing the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. From now on, we will only use the existing General Conditions of Recognition – supplemented in some instances by new General Conditions or guidance – to regulate qualifications that have been or would have been designed to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed change?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Are there any other options that we have not considered?

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Question 2. We propose to change existing recognition arrangements for some vocational qualifications, following the withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. We invite your comments on the proposed changes.

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Question 3. What are the implications, if any, of closure of the unit bank?

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In your opinion, what would be the impact of this measure?

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In your opinion, are there any unintended consequences of closing the unit bank that we have not considered?

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Question 4. Following the withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* we will not impose design requirements about how QCF-type qualifications are structured nor on whether they are made up of units or in some other way. We invite your comments on our proposals.

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Question 5. To address the withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* on credit accumulation, we propose it should continue to be possible for qualifications to be credit-bearing, provided the qualifications are otherwise valid and reliable. We further propose that it should only be possible to attribute credit down to the smallest part of the qualification that can be discretely assessed. We invite your comments on our proposed approach.

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Question 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following proposals:

(a) Awarding organisations should be permitted to, but should not have to, recognise credit awarded to a student by another awarding organisation:

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

(b) Awarding organisations which intend to allow credit transfer or which intend to recognise prior learning in some other way must publish a clear policy approach to doing so.

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

(c) Ofqual should facilitate the availability of information about each awarding organisation's approach to the recognition of prior learning.

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Are there any other options that we have not considered?

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Question 7. Following the withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, the assessment arrangements for QCF-type qualifications will be governed simply through our General Conditions of Recognition. We invite your comments on this approach.

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Question 8. Following the withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, we will not put in place rules to support or facilitate unit sharing.

Where qualifications include collaborative elements, we will focus on whether they meet our regulatory requirements and whether there is clear accountability with each awarding organisation being wholly responsible for all of the qualifications which it offers. We invite your comments on our proposed approach.

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In your opinion are there any other impacts which these proposals are likely to have?

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Question 9. We have suggested a number of steps to address issues arising from unit sharing, including use, ownership and accountability. To what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Are there any other options that we have not considered?

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Question 10. When we withdraw the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, our General Conditions will provide sufficient limitation on an awarding organisation's ability to make use of 'award' 'certificate' and 'diploma' in the title of a qualification. To what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Question 11. When we withdraw the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* we will no longer require the use of the term (QCF) in the title of qualifications. We have set out proposals dealing with removal of the term (QCF) from the title of qualifications and the time limits for making those changes. To what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Question 12. We will still want to have a clear way to explain the relationship between the different qualifications we regulate. We propose an awarding organisation should be required to allocate the right level to each of its regulated qualifications to indicate the relative demand of the qualification. We also propose that the qualifications framework should use eight levels (1 to 8) and three entry levels, as now.

We invite your comments on the proposed approach.

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Question 13. An awarding organisation that had correctly attached a current QCF level descriptor to a qualification should not be required to change that description. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

( ) Don't know / no opinion

Question 14. We have identified a number of ways in which the proposals on withdrawal of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* may impact on persons who share a protected characteristic. Are there any other potential impacts we have not identified?

( ) Yes   ( ) No

If yes, what are they?

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Question 15. Are there any additional steps we could take to mitigate any negative impact resulting from these proposals on persons who share a protected characteristic?

( ) Yes   ( ) No

If yes, please comment on the additional steps we could take to mitigate negative impacts.

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Question 16. Have you any other comments on the impacts of the proposals in this document on persons who share a protected characteristic?

( ) Yes   ( ) No

If yes, please comment in relation to the specific proposals.

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Question 17. Are there any potential regulatory impacts of the proposals in this document that we have not identified?

Yes ( )　No ( )

If yes, what are they?

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Accessibility of our consultations

We are looking at how we provide accessible versions of our consultations and would appreciate it if you could spare a few moments to answer the following questions.

Your answers to these questions will not be considered as part of the consultation and will not be released to any third-parties.

We want to write clearly, directly and put the reader first. Overall, do you think we have got this right in this consultation?

( ) Yes   ( ) No

Do you have any comments or suggestions about the style of writing?

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Do you have any special requirements to enable you to read our consultations? (For example screen reader, large text, and so on)*

( ) Yes   ( ) No

Which of the following do you currently use to access our consultation documents? (Select all that apply)*

( ) Screen reader / text-to-speech software

( ) Braille reader

( ) Screen magnifier

( ) Speech to text software

( ) Motor assistance (blow-suck tube, mouth stick, etc.)

( ) Other:

Which of the following document formats would meet your needs for accessing our consultations? (Select all that apply)*

( ) A standard PDF

( ) Accessible web pages

( ) Large type PDF (16 point text)

( ) Large-type word document (16 point text)

( ) eBook (Kindle, iBooks or similar format)

( ) Braille document

( ) Spoken document

( ) Other:

How many of our consultations have you read in the last 12 months?*

( ) 1

( ) 2

( ) 3

( ) 4

( ) 5

( ) More than 5

Appendix 1

A review of the Qualifications and Credit Framework

Introduction

1. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) was launched in 2008 by the relevant government departments in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and was intended to play a major role in driving improvement in the quality and standard of vocational qualifications. In 2013 Ofqual commissioned this review of the QCF.

2. The process of the review involved meetings with many of the key stakeholders (see Appendix A) and consideration of the recent findings of Alison Wolf, Doug Richard, Nigel Whitehead and others (see Appendix B). The approach taken within this paper has been to look at the structure of the QCF and summarise the views of stakeholders, using illustrative (non-attributed) quotes where relevant. Appendix C includes all of the main recommendations and a summary of the issues arising in relation to each of them. This review has concentrated on the impact and operation of the QCF from Ofqual's perspective and has been conducted on the assumptions:

    ■   that this report is for and to the Ofqual Board; it contains recommendations which are publishable but the report is drafted to be used by Ofqual to feed into a consultation on Ofqual's proposals for the reform of vocational qualifications;

    ■   that work on the reform of the QCF needs to be aligned with Ofqual's wider reform programme and with work on the regulatory strategy;

    ■   that there are some recommendations which can be actioned quickly and some which will be dependent on longer-term timing and in particular the outputs of the wider reform programme; and

    ■   that its focus should be on the QCF from Ofqual's perspective; it has therefore not addressed wider issues, for example funding arrangements.

3. Over the past few years there has been a sense that the QCF has not delivered on all of the original aims and objectives set for it and was instead contributing to, and in some cases driving, a very different set of outcomes in the vocational-qualifications sector.

4. There were a number of other emerging issues pointing to the need for the review:

- Ofqual was concerned that there are elements of the QCF which are incentivising the development and delivery of qualifications which are neither meeting the needs of the relevant sector nor assessed appropriately. Ofqual was also concerned that the rigidity of the framework has affected the standard of the qualifications.

- In England education policy in general, and more recently the policies surrounding vocational qualifications, has been changing with an emphasis on a move to young learners completing graded qualifications which include synoptic assessment and end-point assessment.

- The creation and structure of the QCF pre-dates the establishment of Ofqual; there are questions about the extent to which the QCF supports achievement by Ofqual of its statutory objectives and the extent to which it is compatible with Ofqual's regulatory model.

5. Critical to Ofqual was that the review should:

- be objective

- involve active, widespread stakeholder engagement before and during consultation

- be evidence based

- take account of policy and regulatory developments.

And that it should:

- assess what, if any, part of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*[14] must be kept, distinguishing between the qualifications that meet the QCF design rules and the QCF itself;

- provide evidence of recommendations, including consideration of the cost and benefits of keeping shared units, propose a way to move from the current system of shared units to any new system and take into account intellectual property ownership;

- check how credit transfer is being used and consider what value retaining a mechanism for this would have;

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[14] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/regulatory-arrangements-for-the-qualifications-and-credit-framework/all-versions

■ engage effectively with the key players, including the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Department for Education and Learning (DEL), the Welsh Government and Scotland.

The vocational qualifications sector

6. It goes without saying that good vocational qualifications are essential to ensuring that the workforce has the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities for the workplace. Vocational qualifications play a vital role in developing the knowledge and skills needed by people moving into employment and into further stages of education, and to support a healthy and dynamic economy. But concern about the quality of vocational qualifications has been a long-standing issue which goes back 40 years and more. The QCF was itself perceived and positioned as a solution to some of the issues identified with vocational qualifications in the period prior to its launch:

> "the last government wanted to improve the status of vocational qualifications…and [be sure] they were funding stuff that was worth having…. They wanted to enable people to build up credit and avoid people doing the same thing twice or more…."

7. More recently the government has initiated three major reviews of the sector led by Alison Wolf, Doug Richard and Nigel Whitehead respectively. Their reviews looked at reform of vocational education for the 14-to-19 market (Wolf), apprenticeships (Richard) and most recently in Nigel Whitehead's case at adult vocational qualifications. The continuing concern about vocational qualifications is clearly not just about the QCF but about wider issues at play, including the structure of the further education system, the funding arrangements for vocational qualifications and how the vocational education sector ensures that it produces people with the necessary competence to make successful transitions into employment and further and higher education. As one stakeholder put it:

> "over the last 30 years we've changed A-level provision once – compare that with how many changes there have been in this sector."

And another said:

> "compared to academic qualifications, the VQ market is very complex. Learners are often quite disadvantaged and so we need more support to understand it and not less."

Wolf, Richard and Whitehead all pointed to the need for change in the sector in order to deliver individuals who are capable of meeting the demands of the workplace. This review looks at the role of the QCF in supporting that aim.

Frameworks in general

8. The use of frameworks for educational achievement really began to develop in the late 1990s. Qualifications frameworks are usually used to classify qualifications and to describe how they relate to each other in terms of their demand (or level) and value (size). Their use has become more widespread with the growth in support for lifelong learning and to support progression and portability. In 2008 member states agreed the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which is intended to enable users to 'translate' qualifications and to support worker mobility and movement. The QCF is referenced to the EQF as are the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

9. The ability of frameworks to specify the relationship between different types of qualification makes them useful as a quality-assurance tool. They help users to understand how qualifications relate to each other and how to move from one qualification to another. This type of framework (descriptive) has rules which define the qualifications and the levels of the qualifications which attach to the framework. The use of frameworks in other parts of the UK education sector is well established. For higher education, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has developed two frameworks, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and (in partnership with others) the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in Scotland. These frameworks describe the achievement which is represented by the higher education qualification and act as a reference point for all higher education providers. For QAA, the frameworks support the maintenance of standards, understanding of international comparability and support student progression and mobility. They are also used as a reference tool in QAA institutional review and audit activity; review teams will use the framework to explore how providers ensure that the standards of their qualifications are consistent with those set out in the framework. Throughout the process of stakeholder engagement on the QCF, the comments made about frameworks in general were positive:

> "[we're] very enthusiastic about frameworks; constructed properly, they're a good thing, especially for the learner...they enable progression."

The issue for most stakeholders is not frameworks in general but the QCF in particular which has functioned not as a descriptive framework but as a rigid and highly structured set of rules which have of themselves created a type of qualification, the 'QCF qualification', rather than operating as a device to describe and understand the differences between a range of qualifications.

Background to the QCF

10. At the time of its establishment in 2008, the QCF was intended to have a transformative effect on vocational qualifications. The QCF was designed to drive up the quality of vocational qualifications and improve the funding arrangements by:

   - enabling people to build up credit and to move from the study of smaller pieces of learning (units) to full qualifications at their own time and pace;

   - reducing the number of qualifications and thereby concentrating quality by requiring awarding organisations to share the units which formed the building blocks of their qualifications;

   - ensuring learners did not have to repeat learning (and therefore minimising double payment) by incorporating arrangements for credit transfer.

   Beyond this there was also an expectation that the design of the QCF would have a tangible impact on the number of people taking and completing vocational qualifications – that there would be larger numbers of learners engaged in vocational education and that this in turn would produce positive results for society and the economy (as is clear from the original QCF business case).

11. The QCF was designed as a structure, where the level and credit value of qualifications could be identified, measured and expressed. It was designed and implemented on behalf of the UK Government in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the point when work on the QCF commenced, the responsible regulatory body for England was the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The QCA had previously developed the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a descriptive framework which required qualifications to have a level. All regulated qualifications therefore had a level on the NQF. The NQF was in place when the QCF was being developed and it was intended that in the long term, the QCF would address some of the perceived failings of the NQF (particularly in relation to vocational qualifications) and would replace the NQF. All regulated qualifications, including QCF qualifications, are subject to Ofqual's *General Conditions of Recognition*.[15] The NQF has, since the creation of the QCF and the introduction of the General Conditions, come to be used as a generic label for qualifications that are not designed to meet *the Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*. In 2010 QCA was

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[15] www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/general-conditions-of-recognition

formally replaced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA), since abolished, and Ofqual. In the period immediately prior to launch of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*, it was Ofqual in its embryonic form, known as Interim Ofqual, which worked on its development. The QCF Regulatory arrangements (also known as the Grey Book) were introduced by Interim Ofqual, the Welsh Government and the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland in August 2008.

12. The QCF Regulatory arrangements were therefore designed before Ofqual became a legal entity, before the legislation setting out Ofqual's role was in place and before its current regulatory approach was developed and implemented. The significance of the relative timing of the QCF's policy development and Ofqual's creation is not so much in relation to the identity of individuals involved in shaping and subsequently running the QCF, but in the relationship between the aims and objectives set out for the QCF and the statutory objectives established for Ofqual. The QCF objectives are a combination of structural and aspirational, whereas the statutory objectives, set out in The Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (the Act), amended by the Education Act 2011, place a clear focus on the validity and reliability of qualifications by giving Ofqual responsibility for:

- qualifications standard objective (that is that qualifications give a reliable indication of the holder's knowledge, skills and understanding, and that they indicate a consistent level of attainment);

- the assessment standards objective (in relation to national curriculum assessments);

- promoting public confidence;

- promoting awareness of the benefits of regulated qualifications; and

- efficiency (of qualifications).

13. This misalignment of objectives produces an uncomfortable situation in which Ofqual is required to carry out roles and functions which are not consistent or compatible with its own regulatory framework. The most obvious example of this is the relationship between Ofqual and those organisations which submit units (unit submitters) but which are not recognised as awarding organisations. What was acceptable for the QCA has not necessarily translated for Ofqual, which has been given very clear and specific powers under the Act, and while elements of the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit*

Framework were lifted when Ofqual put its initial regulatory framework in place, many aspects of those arrangements still remain.

14. The development of the QCF was the result of the work of a number of organisations and government departments. The major difference between it and other qualifications frameworks in use elsewhere is that it is not only descriptive. The QCF is not simply a tool to describe vocational qualifications and their relationship to each other; it was designed to radically alter vocational qualifications through a set of rules intended to drive a credit-based and unitised approach to learning and qualifications.

15. The aims of the QCF, as set out in the Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework were to "...support the establishment, maintenance and continuing development of a qualification system that is:

  ■ inclusive – able to recognise the achievements of all learners at any level and in any area of learning

  ■ responsive – enabling individuals and employers to establish routes to achievement that are appropriate to their needs, and recognised organisations to develop units and qualifications in response to demand

  ■ accessible – building a system based on clear design features that are easy for all users to understand

  ■ non-bureaucratic – based on mutual trust and confidence, supported by a robust and proportionate approach to regulation and quality assurance."

16. For most people at the time the QCF was intended as a framework to support adult vocational qualifications, and it was expected that the qualifications on it would have a clear connection to progression into work or into other stages of education. The stated policy position at the time indicated an ambition which extended well beyond this and pointed to the QCF becoming the one, all-encompassing framework for qualifications. In his book on the creation of the QCF, Wilson, P (2010) *Big Ideas, Small Steps*, expressed his ambitions for the framework and the hope that the QCF would become the single framework for all regulated qualifications. At the end of the book he describes his future vision of the QCF:

  "In 2020 the marketplace for credit and qualifications has expanded dramatically from the old NQF.... The process of bringing revised A-levels into the QCF from 2013–18 was challenging...[there is] speculation that a "fourth phase" of development of the QCF might

> yet extend the framework to encompass Higher Education." (Wilson,
> 2010)

The quote is included because it illustrates the inherent dichotomy of the QCF: the desire that it should be all encompassing and suitable for all qualifications combined with a set of rules and structural requirements which have inhibited flexibility.

The structure of the QCF

17. This part of the review looks at each of the main structural features with the QCF and sets out the issues which have been raised in relation to each of them.

18. The QCF was structured to provide information about the complexity or difficulty of a qualification (level) and about its value by reference to the amount of learning involved in studying a unit or qualification at a particular level (credit). The framework has been described as a ladder structure and qualifications are built up from the accumulation of units, each of which has credit value. Qualifications are described according to size with an 'Award' being a qualification of between 1 and 12 credits, a 'Certificate' being a qualification of between 13 and 36 credits and a 'Diploma' being a qualification of 37 credits and above. The title of qualifications therefore bears no relationship to their complexity and is purely an indication of their value and size (although it should be noted that the level of the qualification must also be identified in the title). Table 1 below shows how the QCF is structured in a ladder-style with the level of the qualification as the vertical axis and the value or size as the horizontal axis.

Table 1: Ladder-style structure of the QCF

	Award (1 – 12 credits)	Certificate (13 – 36 credits)	Diploma (37 credits +)
Level 8			
Level 7			
Level 6			
Level 5			
Level 4			
Level 3			
Level 2			
Level 1			
Entry			

19. Ofqual's regulatory involvement in units and qualifications begins at the point when units have been accumulated into a qualification. At this point the qualification must be accredited and, once approved, entered into the Regulatory IT System (RITS) (Ofqual will have previously recognised an awarding organisation but has no power to recognise those organisations which exist purely as unit-submitting bodies). All QCF qualifications are also publicly accessible via Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications (the Register).

20. A key requirement for units and qualifications on the QCF was that they demonstrated support from a sector skills council (SSC) or other appropriate body. Awarding organisations were required to work with SSCs to develop units and qualifications and whilst this relationship worked well in some sectors, in others the blurring of accountability and tensions over unit and qualification content meant that some awarding organisations felt they had functioned as delivery agencies rather than as owners and innovators. The support of the SSC (or similar) was intended to indicate the relevance of the unit or qualification to employers and to signal employer support for the unit or qualification. In practice, and as Nigel Whitehead has commented, this requirement appears to have made very little difference to employer engagement with vocational qualifications:

> "However, many employers (especially smaller employers) fail to engage with the vocational qualifications system. Only 28% of business trained staff using vocational qualifications in the year before this survey....The complex, over-prescribed system is a barrier to many employers and does not, even with the help of significant levels of public funding, generate vocational qualifications that are valued widely or seen as a signal of marketable skills."

One stakeholder identified employers' priorities as follows:

> "Employers want to know, what is the qualification, how good is it, what does it mean, what does it enable the person to do."

QCF units

21. The starting point for the QCF, and all those qualifications which comply with its rules, is the unit. The unit is the building block from which all QCF qualifications are constructed. Units can be developed by awarding organisations or by unit submitters and once developed, must be placed into the unit bank, where they are, for the most part, accessible by any awarding organisation to build into a qualification.

22. The regulatory requirements for units are set out in the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* in a unit template. The main requirements of the unit template are that all units must:

    ■ have a clear title;

    ■ state the learning outcomes to be met on completion of the unit and these must be capable of assessment;

    ■ contain assessment criteria that specify the standard the learner is expected to meet to demonstrate that the learning outcomes for the unit have been met;

    ■ identify a single level for the unit;

    ■ contain a credit value which specifies the number of credits that will be awarded to a learner who has met the learning outcomes for the unit, with one credit being awarded for the outcomes achievable in 10 hours of learning (so a unit carrying 10 credits should indicate that it takes around 100 hours of learning to achieve the learning outcomes for that unit).

    Looking at this rigid set of requirements for a unit, it's hard to escape the conclusion that there is little difference between what's expected of a unit and what's expected of a qualification. What all of these unit requirements do is to ensure underpinning and facilitation of credit transfer (see paragraphs 54 to 58).

23. It was the intention of those who drove the original design of the QCF that the unit would be the starting point for all qualifications which, in contrast to other areas of education, would be built-up by the accumulation of units rather than starting with the overall design of the qualification and unpacking it into component parts. This approach was supported by the development of rules of combination, which specified the units which could be grouped together to form the qualification. It was this unitised approach to learning that was intended to support the QCF aims of achieving inclusivity (the achievements of all learners could be recognised at any level and in any area) and accessibility. In fact, most of the stakeholders spoken to as part of this review have said or acknowledged that it was not the QCF which was responsible for creating this unitised or modularised approach to learning and that a modularised offer was already a well-established feature of the vocational qualifications landscape.

24. For some, the unitised approach has had some positive impacts, particularly amongst groups who might traditionally have been alienated from education, including those accessing education through the Offender Learning and Skills

Service (OLASS) and those coming back into education through Jobcentre Plus;

> "[If you] strip the noise away, there is something useful about a unit-based, credit-bearing framework, particularly for disengaged learners...."

> "Bite-sized learning is good for some and there are some learners (e.g. job centre plus) who are interested in learning rather than qualifications...."

25. Stakeholders have commented on how the unitised structure of the QCF has benefitted the learner with a 'spiky-profile', in other words a learner with strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. The ability to build up to a qualification on a unit-by-unit basis has meant that some learners have achieved qualifications which might not otherwise have been possible. There is also evidence that the unit-based structure appeals to some major employment sectors, including construction, housing and sports and leisure. A good example of this came from the construction sector.

> **Construction industry**: Modernisation and changes in practice mean that many buildings now arrive on site in a partially constructed state. This has changed the requirements for the mix of skills and competences needed amongst site-workers and a change of emphasis from separate and distinct groups of joiners, plasterers and brick-layers to general construction workers who are able to do a little bit of everything. The unitised offer, which enables someone to do a unit in plastering, one in brick-laying, one in joinery and to accumulate these into a qualification, is therefore more appealing to employers than having someone with a specific qualification in one area of construction work.

26. Moreover a number of stakeholders have acknowledged the positive impact of the unitised offer on employers, particularly small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), who are funding workforce learning and development and who are now able to commit resource on a unit-by-unit rather than full-qualification basis:

> "many employers are not involved in supporting learning and development because they can't get funding and so units are attractive"

> "It's appealed to employer training departments who have liked the unit offer rather than having to fund whole qualifications...they start with a unit and then once they've started, they keep going"

27. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has been involved in researching take-up of the unitised offer. In April 2013 it presented its Unit Delivery Research (UDR) Project (commissioned by the SFA) in which it noted that "the offer of a unit, rather than a whole qualification, enables providers to reach new and different kinds of learners". In the same report it also noted that "the distinction between offering stand-alone units or offering units as progression to a qualification are largely meaningless in practice, as the learner intent is often modified through the process of learning and achieving credit(s)." Unsurprisingly, this suggests that some learners like to start small and not to be overwhelmed by the idea of committing long periods of time and personal and emotional resource into studying a qualification, but that once engaged in the learning process, many will change their minds.

28. Ofqual has no regulatory or quality assurance role in the submission of units onto the unit bank. It is therefore up to the awarding organisation that is looking for a unit to incorporate into a qualification to satisfy itself that the unit is fit for purpose. At the time of writing, just over 53,500 units have been placed into the unit bank. Of these, just under 5,000 have never been picked up by an awarding organisation for use within a qualification and of those which have never been adopted, over 2,000 have been sitting in the unit bank for more than 24 months.

29. At the time of launch of the QCF, the unit specifications set out within the regulatory arrangements imposed a new set of disciplines on those involved in vocational qualifications. A number of stakeholders have spoken of the difficulty involved in writing good units to meet the template requirements, and a constant refrain throughout this review process has been the impact of the break-neck speed at which the QCF was launched and at which units had to be written. Many have also said that at the point of launch, some really good vocational qualifications were lost. It was not possible to break these down into component units which met the requirements of the unit template, and so they ceased to be offered in the form which had been available prior to the QCF.

30. The unit template also required submitters to identify employer-based support for the unit (where relevant). This was an important design feature of the QCF and was intended to signal employer support for the unit or qualification and thereby its suitability for the relevant sector. In many cases the employer voice was represented by one of the SSCs and in some cases SSCs have become unit submitters. For some, this practice has not produced long-term benefits:

> "Our view is that the SSC should not be used as a proxy for the employer."

31. There are some things which the Regulatory arrangements do not specify. There is no requirement to specify the method of assessment required for the unit (although it can be provided "if appropriate") and nor is there any requirement to say anything about the underpinning content or curriculum for the unit. This makes it difficult to assess the quality of the units; one stakeholder referred to content being critical to understand "how the unit really works and hangs together for the learner" – a judgement which it's very difficult to make in the absence of that information. By not imposing a requirement to specify the method of assessment, it is difficult to form a judgement about the validity of the assessment and the extent to which it will appropriately measure the learning outcomes for the unit; it also raises issues of comparability as it means the same unit can be assessed in different ways.

Qualifications and unit sharing

32. Qualifications on the QCF are developed by building up and accumulating credit on completion of units. Qualifications are therefore developed by adding units together rather than being designed as a single qualification which is then unpacked into smaller parts (although in order to be accredited a qualification must comply with the rules of combination – see below). In contrast to individual units, QCF qualifications must be presented to Ofqual for accreditation and can only comprise units which are available from the unit bank. Each qualification must conform to a number of requirements, including rules governing:

   ■ title

   ■ size

   ■ Rules of combination (which are used to identify the number of credits that need to be achieved through the completion of particular units, for a qualification to be awarded),

   ■ a description of grading requirements where used and

   ■ any requirements about the way in which specific units are assessed.

33. The regulatory arrangements do not include a definition of qualification other than by reference to its size. The smallest size of qualification is an Award which can be anything from one to twelve credits. It is therefore (theoretically at least) possible to have a qualification with a credit value of one unit, that is ten (or so) learning hours. Some stakeholders have expressed concern that the

structure of the QCF has blurred the lines between what is a piece of learning and what is a qualification:

> "...under the QCF all courses of study seem to have become qualifications; should a short session on writing a CV or Introduction to College be a qualification? Shouldn't this just be part of a good tutor's induction....?"

> "There are a number of qualifications at entry level and L1 which shouldn't technically be described as such...."

34. The perception is that these courses of study have been developed to attract public funding (for which they have been eligible) and that the QCF has in some way legitimised their status as qualifications. This has not assisted the credibility of the QCF and the qualifications which are listed on it.

35. All qualifications proposals submitted for accreditation must identify a purpose for the qualification from a list provided by the regulators. The list of possible purposes is:

   ▪ purpose A – recognise personal growth and engagement in learning;

   ▪ purpose B – prepare for further learning or training and/or develop knowledge and/or skills in a subject area;

   ▪ purpose C – prepare for employment;

   ▪ purpose D – confirm occupational competence and/or 'licence to practise';

   ▪ purpose E – updating and continuing professional development.

In February 2014 there were 15,853 QCF qualifications on the Register. Table 2 below shows them broken down by purposes (note: these figures were compiled in December 2013).

Table 2: QCF qualifications by purpose – December 2013

Purpose	Number	%
A	1,768	11
B	5,997	38
C	2,722	17

D	4,683	30
E	604	4
Total	15,774	100

It is interesting to note that only 17 per cent of qualifications on the QCF are expressed as being relevant to Purpose C – preparation for employment, and 11 per cent are for Purpose A – to recognise personal growth and engagement in learning. Moreover the statement of purpose – something which should ideally translate into what someone can actually do as a result of completing the qualification – does not always accord with size and level:

> "...a qualification of 90 credits can have the same statement of purpose as a qualification of 180 credits set at a different level – there's no differentiation between levels and qualifications..."

36. For many stakeholders, the process of transforming qualifications into a collection of units meant that something significant was lost. Stakeholders have talked about the difference between a set of accumulated units which together make up a Certificate of, for example, 30 credits and something which is designed as a similar qualification worth 30 credits. For many, a qualification should add up to more than the sum of its parts in a way that a set of accumulated units does not. For a number of stakeholders, from the time when the QCF was launched, this approach was damaging and contributed to the destruction of established and well-regarded qualifications. Stakeholders who were involved in the development process talk about having to break down qualifications to try to 'shoe-horn' the components into the unit template in order to get the qualification onto the QCF. Many also take the view that there is something which is educationally flawed in this approach to the creation of qualifications and that in starting with the unit, what's lost is the sense of the whole qualification being worth more than the sum of its parts:

> "Qualifications are about the wrapper – (shared) units work against this. You need to design the qualification...."

> "Qualifications have been designed as a group of related but disparate units so what's gone is the qualification level approach – what should a qualification be and then breaking that down. Small units don't allow for this."

> "...qualifications on the QCF don't stack up holistically"

> "the qualification has to be right for the occupation; don't make something longer or shorter than it should be just to fit a structure...."

And the issues which impact on the quality of units, including the lack of specificity of content, translate upwards to the qualification:

> "We need to remember that qualifications are credit, level and content"

37. Perhaps of more concern are comments that suggest the impact of the move to the unitised approach has extended beyond the qualifications on the QCF to the workforce involved in developing units and qualifications:

> "...there are now AOs that don't know or remember how to write qualifications as opposed to units."

> "[there's a] sense of disenfranchisement, deskilling of the workforce....the workforce has moved away from developing whole qualifications to picking something up and putting a wrapper on it...."

38. Awarding organisations that are developing new qualifications should, in theory, be able to access the unit bank and from it select units developed by them or by another awarding organisation or unit submitter to fit within the proposed qualification. A fundamental idea behind the original QCF was that units must be shared; this was consistent with the aims set out for the QCF of avoiding a multiplicity of qualifications – if a unit was suitable and available for sharing then it could be shared by all and duplication avoided. Of the current 15,853 active QCF qualifications which are listed on the Register, 6,536 contain shared units. Table 3 below sets out figures on the number of qualifications which include one or more shared units, correct at February 2014.

Table 3: Qualifications with one or more shared unit – February 2014

February 2014	Data	%
Number of active vocational qualifications	15,853	100
Number of active qualifications which are awarded and entirely developed by a single awarding organisation	9,317	59
Number of active	6,536	41

qualifications which include at least one unit developed by another organisation		
Number of qualifications which comprise units entirely developed by organisations other than the awarding organisation	(945)	(6)

39. In practice, unit sharing has met with strong resistance from many awarding organisations who have resented the impact of unit sharing on their ability to establish a strong market identity based on the quality of their offer. A number of awarding organisations spoken to as part of this review have said that there is little reason for them to undertake the development work in producing innovative products when they know that other organisations who have contributed nothing to the design and development process will be able to "grab" the unit as soon as it is placed on the Register:

> "...why would an AO invest and innovate if it can't protect its intellectual property?"

> "...why would [we] invest if [our] products can just be lifted?"

> "AOs are not interested in developing...cutting edge qualifications when another AO could steal it...."

> "[unit sharing] definitely inhibits innovation and encourages proliferation of units with only marginal differences"

40. Some stakeholders have acknowledged the positive impacts of unit sharing; it has allowed new players to enter the vocational qualifications market and, through the use of a combination of shared and own units, to build up expertise in new areas thereby strengthening provision in that area. That said, there is a number of awarding organisations offering regulated vocational qualifications whose offer consists of shared units developed entirely by other organisations. This raises issues about what an awarding organisation is if it's not a body which is capable of developing and awarding its own qualifications, and how and why these organisations have been recognised.

41. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* do not mandate unit sharing but in the early days of the QCF, funding requirements

and guidance issued by Ofqual pointed very clearly to an expectation of unit sharing. In April 2009 Interim Ofqual issued guidance (since withdrawn) on Designating Units as Shared or Restricted in which it stated its expectation that units would generally be shared unless there was a "compelling reason" why they should be restricted. This approach, Ofqual said, would support delivery of a framework that was easily understood by employers and learners and would maximise opportunities for learners to transfer credit. Some stakeholders have said that this guidance was further supported by behaviour and that at the point when qualifications were submitted, Ofqual made clear that there was no option but to unit share by directing awarding organisations to use units which were already available in the unit bank, regardless of their quality, rather than develop their own.

> "It's not in the rules that you have to share but then look at Ofqual's behaviour – it wouldn't approve a unit if there was one that was very similar – so it's compelling unit sharing by the back door"

42. Many have said that unit sharing has contributed to the availability of poor-quality qualifications and to the plethora of qualifications. The absence of a significant quality assurance check on units developed for the unit bank combined with, at the very least, an impression that there was a requirement to unit share, placed some awarding organisations in a situation where they said they felt that they no choice but to use units which they considered to be of poor quality rather than to develop their own. On the other hand – and as concerns about quality developed some traction – allowing awarding organisations to create their own units rather than use those that are readily available has led to a large number of units and qualifications which on the surface at least appear to be very similar. For example, there are 259 business management qualifications at Level 3.

43. The present situation is an uncomfortable one for Ofqual. There is an impression amongst some stakeholders that unit sharing is still required, whereas others are now working on the basis that units do not have to be shared unless they are expressly made available for sharing. There is not necessarily an inconsistency in terms of Ofqual's operational approach but there is certainly a confused perception of current requirements. This needs to be addressed. There is no reason why awarding organisations should not share units if they wish or collaborate in some other way on the development of high-quality qualifications. Such forms of collaboration were a feature of the pre-QCF vocational qualifications landscape and occur within other parts of the education sector. On the other hand, operating a regulatory requirement to unit share seems to have produced no clear benefit in terms of the quality of vocational qualifications and has at the least contributed to a strong antipathy towards the QCF in some parts of the sector:

> "The use of shared units has been perverted by the SSCs and by the professional bodies"

> "[We] couldn't get support [for our qualification] in some cases unless we agreed to take something we knew wouldn't work."

44. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* have also contributed to the plethora of qualifications on the QCF. Rule 1.13 of the regulatory arrangements states that:

> "Once a unit is placed in the QCF unit bank only the expiry date for that unit may be amended. It may be withdrawn if it does not feature in any accredited qualifications."

The rationale behind the requirement is understandable; there was a desire to avoid creating a situation in which units were frequently altered, amended or updated and employers and others were possibly confused or unclear about what a particular qualification said about the knowledge, skills and abilities of the person before them. The rule was essentially intended to provide regulatory support to rigorous version control but was in effect left to operate on its own. This has produced a situation in which any change to a unit which is already incorporated within a qualification, other than a change of expiry date, results in the whole qualification being treated as a new qualification with all that entails in terms of a new identification number and entry on the Register. This applies even when the amendment is not just minor, but trivial. It also ignores the reality of delivering education; when content has to be updated (for example to reflect a change in legislation or practice), the change may have no impact on the learning outcomes for the unit or qualification which to all intents and purposes remain the same. The number of qualifications on the QCF could and would be significantly rationalised if there was a way in which units (and therefore qualifications) could be updated or amended (through some form of robust version control), certainly to reflect minor changes or modifications, without having to be treated as a new unit or qualification:

> "In 2008 there were around 8000 VQs and we thought that number would go down; there are now around 19000 qualifications on the QCF...that number is an output of the way Ofqual chooses to regulate."

> "[We're] unable to make changes to the units on RITS and so it's lead to a proliferation"

> "Even when it's just a typo, you have to create a new unit...."

And:

> "Units with errors just get left on the system – there's no incentive to remove them."

Ofqual also appears to have taken limited action to drive forward the withdrawal of unused units and qualifications.

Credit

45. While this report has started with consideration of units and qualifications, for many involved in developing the QCF, its key feature is credit. Within the QCF Regulatory arrangements there are provisions relating to credit value (or size), credit accumulation and credit transfer. In the vocational qualifications sector, the term 'credit' can mean any of those three things. Each is considered in turn below.

(a) Credit for value or sizing

46. Within the QCF credit is used to describe the value or relative size of qualifications. The use of credit facilitates distinction between the three qualification types which are possible within the QCF, that is Award, Certificate and Diploma. The Regulatory arrangements state that all units must identify a credit value for the unit which specifies the number of credits to be awarded to a learner who has achieved the learning outcomes of the unit. Within the regulatory arrangements one credit is to be awarded for those learning outcomes achievable in ten hours of learning, so as a general guide, a qualification of ten credits should have involved the learner in around 100 hours' effort to meet the learning outcomes. The credit value of the unit should remain constant regardless of the method of assessment used, the qualifications to which it contributes or how it was taught. The regulatory arrangements also state that the number of Guided Learning Hours (GLH) for the unit can be set out if needed within the unit template.

47. There is a range of views about the use of credit to describe the value of QCF qualifications. Some stakeholders have said credit it is too blunt an instrument and for that reason leads to inconsistency by the regulator in its approach to accrediting qualifications. A search of the Register reveals that there is a number of units which appear to carry the same number of credits and yet which are underpinned by different requirements on the hours needed to complete the required learning outcomes. This inconsistency contributes to a range of perceptions – that some awarding organisations get away with more than others, that it's hard to compare one qualification with another (even when they appear very similar) and that the process of attributing credit lacks rigour.

48. Some stakeholders have suggested that it might be more appropriate to describe the value or size of units by reference to GLH. GLH is a term which is used elsewhere in the education sector to describe the size of a unit or module or qualification by reference to the amount of learning which is facilitated by a tutor or teacher, and so would include, for example, classes, small-group work, lectures, seminars. Some parts of the education sector also refer to notional learning hours (NLH); a description which includes GLH but extends beyond this to include, for example, time spent on preparation, assessment and practicals:

> "having a measure of size is useful but we are divided on credit versus GLH. How relevant is GLH to "competence" when it's not necessarily about completion of taught hours."

49. One of the difficulties acknowledged with the use of any term is how to ensure it gains traction with employers or anyone else who needs to make a decision about someone's employment or progression based on their qualifications. The terms credit, GLH and NLH are all used in higher education, but it has been argued they are not generally understood by employers. Whichever term is used, there's a need for clarity about exactly what is included and what is not included within the definitions. The key issue for most stakeholders is one of consistency; if there is to be a requirement for the value or size of a qualification to be specified then there should be a consistent approach to measuring and identifying that value:

> "if we need to define size then we want a single currency"

> "employers don't understand credit; what we need to do for them is facilitate comparability and we need to use words which support this."

50. The calculation of value or size is not an easy one. The approach taken by the partnership (the Scottish Qualifications Authority, QAA, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland) which runs the SCQF, and by others, is to have a separate credit-rating body. The advantages of such a body are the ability to bring together and build on the expertise of a group of individuals who understand the nuances of credit rating and to take a consistent approach to rating.

> "There's no guidance on calculating GLH on RITS. It leads to inconsistency...there are huge discrepancies."

> "...there are huge issues about consistency with some awarding organisations/unit developers allocating x amount of credit to a qualification and others taking a different view"

51. Ofqual is currently involved in a piece of work on how it applies value or size to qualifications. That work has been driven by the Government's policy, Raising the Participation Age, and the commencement in May 2013 of key provisions within the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. There is a clear need to join up consideration of recommendations arising from this review with that consultation.

52. The other issue which came up repeatedly throughout the stakeholder engagement process in this review was credit value and funding. A significant number of vocational qualifications attract funding from the SFA, which has used the QCF to support its business rules for selection for funding. For many, this has had a perverse effect on how qualifications are structured and sized:

> "Some qualifications are obviously chasing funding...(but some of the growth in the number of qualifications is about awarding organisations bespoking their offer for employers)"

> "Credit is always going to be interesting when the size/value of a qualification is linked to funding…."

> "Funding drove everything onto the QCF – it wasn't good for the overall quality because of the break-neck speed."

(b) Credit accumulation

53. The original intention was that learners would build up ('accumulate') credits into full qualifications. In this way, learners who perhaps might be initially over-whelmed or daunted by the idea of a full qualification and who wanted to start off with a smaller piece of 'bite-sized' learning could eventually be recognised for their achievement, however big or small. Feedback from stakeholders suggests that credit accumulation has worked, particularly amongst some learners, who have used the 'stepping-stones' approach to move from units to qualifications. Again, this was identified as a positive feature of the QCF for the non-traditional and hard-to-reach learners, although for others most learners still embark on the educational process seeking a qualification. A note of caution was sounded by some who identified the need for clear communication with learners about what they are likely to achieve as a result of their efforts:

"sometimes people think they have a qualification when all they have is 6 credits..."

(c) Credit transfer

54. Much of the design of the QCF with its building-block units was intended to support and underpin credit transfer. As stated elsewhere in this report, the design of the unit template functions to underpin credit transfer by imposing qualification-type requirements on the unit. In QCF terms credit transfer means the recognition and acceptance by one awarding organisation of units achieved with another awarding organisation, enabling the learner to build up his or her study into full qualifications even where the learner was not able to complete the qualification with a single awarding organisation. This feature, it was suggested by those who designed and developed the QCF, would facilitate flexibility and would save public money by ensuring learners did not have to repeat learning and assessment already undertaken elsewhere. Those who were able to transfer credit would in effect be exempt from undertaking the same or similar learning again.

55. The practice of credit transfer is a feature of other parts of the education system, including in higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) develop their own policies and practices around the process of accepting the credit already achieved by students transferring from one institution to another or from students transferring from one programme of study to another within the same institution. The difference in higher education is that it is up to individual institutions (or even departments within the same institution and subject to meeting the QAA's Quality Code on Assessment of Students and Recognition of Prior Learning) to make a judgement about whether, in the circumstances, it is right to give an individual credit towards a new qualification from a qualification which has been started elsewhere. Within this process there is usually a range of issues to take into account before deciding whether or not to recognise and accept:

   ■   is it right for this learner to recognise his or her credit?

   ■   is the credit that is already awarded relevant to the new qualification?

   ■   is the credit that is already awarded at the right level for the new qualification?

   ■   would it be helpful to this learner to repeat that part of the qualification for which the learner is seeking credit; did the learner grasp the relevant

issues when studying first time around, would it be helpful for the learner to consider the issues and arguments from a different perspective?

The expectation in higher education is that decisions about credit transfer and the recognition of prior learning or achievement should be taken in a fair and transparent way but should be judged on the facts to ensure the best outcome for the learner.

56. One of the most common criticisms of the QCF is that its design was intended to facilitate something that hardly ever happens, that is credit transfer. Almost all of the awarding organisations spoken to as part of this process said that they receive so few requests for credit transfer that they deal with them on a manual basis. In the words of one stakeholder:

> "credit transfer is not just about learning but is also about demographics and socio-economics."

In other words, the reality is that once someone has started a learning process, unless their domestic or employment situation changes, there is very little reason why they would choose to move around from one college to another or one qualification to another. Most stick with the college and qualification they start with. Most of the larger awarding organisations spoken to referred to "one or two" requests for credit transfer each year. One awarding organisation, which said it did receive more frequent requests for credit transfer, has provided some data which is set out in Table 4:

Table 4: Number of unit credit transfers provided by an awarding organisation

Year	Number of unit credit transfers processed	Total number of certifications	%
2010/11	94	240,215	0.04
2011/12	6,641	344,963	1.9
2012/13	3,476	501,208	0.7
TOTAL	10,211	1,086,386	0.93

So even for an organisation which acknowledges it receives some requests for credit transfer, the actual number over a four-year period represents less than 1% of total certifications. One very large awarding organisation said:

> "In all this time we have had one formal request for credit transfer."

Even those who thought there might be a need for a formal way to support credit transfer acknowledged that there was little evidence to suggest it was taking place:

> "if there were no shared units, there would be a need for a protocol to ensure recognition of units awarded by one awarding organisation by other awarding organisations. That said, to what extent is anyone seeking to transfer?"

For most, demand is tiny:

> "Out of 1000 students, maybe 5 would seek credit transfer...."

> "Not only is hardly anyone using credit transfer, it cuts across the requirements for reaccreditation with some qualifications..."

> "Do we really need CAT or the QCF to support credit transfer?"

57. Those who were supportive of the QCF made the point that it was originally anticipated that it would take time to move to a situation where credit transfer was widespread and commonplace. They pointed to a need for a real communications exercise to spread the message about the QCF and the wider benefits of the QCF:

> "the amount [of credit transfer] that has taken place is small...but we expected that the full benefits of credit transfer would only be realised after 10/15 years"

58. Experience elsewhere, particularly in higher education, suggests that even after time requests for credit transfer are the exception rather than the norm. There are all kinds of reasons why, having embarked upon a process of learning, people more often than not choose to stick with what they started with than to switch part way through – jobs, family, the friendships and peer groups formed with the local provider being just some of them. (Note: The Competition and Markets Authority has recently announced a review of the higher education market which will, amongst other things, look at the use, frequency and ease of credit transfer and accreditation of prior learning across the sector). The irony of the QCF is that its structure was intended to drive and support something which in practice has hardly occurred.

Rules of combination

59. The regulatory arrangements state that the purpose of the rules of combination is to "specify the credits that need to be achieved, through the completion of

particular units, for a qualification to be awarded. All accredited qualifications within the QCF must have a set of rules for combination." In other words, the rules of combination were drafted to ensure that qualifications which were being built up from units had some sort of internal coherence; the rules of combination were intended to replace what would previously have been a key responsibility of a qualification designer in ensuring that the whole qualification worked in relation to, for example, size, level, challenge, pathways and progression. Despite their existence, for many stakeholders there are too many qualifications which lack coherence and which appear to be no more than a "bundle of units" with no relevance to employers, and which therefore do not benefit learners. As one awarding organisation representative said "it's my job to make sure the qualification hangs together".

Assessment

60. The regulatory arrangements on assessment for the QCF are, not surprisingly, written at the unit rather than qualification level. Amongst other things they require that:

- all learning outcomes are capable of assessment and, in conjunction with the assessment criteria, set a clear assessment standard for the unit;

- all units contain assessment criteria that:

    □ specify the standard a learner is expected to meet; and

    □ are sufficiently detailed to support reliable, valid and consistent judgements that a learning outcome has been achieved.

61. The obvious practical impact of the unitised approach on assessment is that every unit must be assessed and, in accordance with the QCF Regulatory arrangements, achievement of every learning outcome within each unit must be demonstrated through assessment. For some, this approach has had a number of impacts:

> "Because units have to be achieved in isolation, learners do more [assessment] than they need to because each unit is assessed…it forces modular assessment because it's done unit by unit"

> "Units are written around learning outcomes so assessment becomes a box-ticking exercise against the learning outcomes..."

62. The unitised structure of QCF qualifications also works against synoptic assessment and end-point assessment. In this area, as in others, the QCF

imposes an atomised approach where every outcome is assessed within the context of every unit. Aside from the possibility of over-assessment, this is significant given wider thinking which is taking place about the forms of assessment which are appropriate and fit for purpose in assessing someone's competence to enter the workplace or to progress to other stages of education.

> "Synoptic assessment and external assessment are both difficult with the QCF"

> "How can we reconcile the move to synoptic assessment, external assessment and grading with the QCF rules?"

> "The QCF plays against synoptic assessment."

63. Assessment within the QCF is based on the mastery model. This means that the assessment process must confirm that the learner has met (mastered) all of the learning outcomes attached to the unit and that he or she can demonstrate all of the assessment criteria associated with the learning outcomes. It also means that it is not possible to take a compensatory approach (that is considering a learner's overall profile and allowing demonstrable strength in some areas to compensate for weakness in others) to someone's overall performance in a vocational qualification. For competence-based qualifications, and particularly those related to a licence to practise, the mastery model is not only common but many would consider essential. The often-quoted example is of the airline pilot; we all need to have confidence that she can land the plane as well as take-off and fly it. For other types of qualification, and there are many of them on the QCF, the mastery model is not appropriate and again raises issues about the rigidity and inflexibility of the QCF. One of the problems associated with this were identified by Norman Gealy in his 2010 Discussion Paper for the UKCES on the future of the QCF:

> "...the mastery model of learning is not used universally, and its assumption as a general model causes difficulties for awarding organisations whose qualifications are expected to distinguish between different levels of achievement."

Stakeholders spoken to as part of this review have expressed very similar views:

> "Lack of compensation is a good rule for adult, competence-based qualifications but as other qualifications came onto the QCF, lack of compensation became an issue...."

> "No compensation is fine at the unit level but once you start to aggregate it's inevitable, particularly if you're having graded qualifications."

> "Compensation is permitted for GCSE and A level but not on the QCF so is it harder to pass a L1 or L2 qualification?"

64. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* do not impose requirements about the form of assessment, but in reality the mastery model (which is facilitated by the unit template) creates barriers to the use of some forms of assessment. For example, the use of multiple choice tests (MCTs) to test knowledge (especially breadth of knowledge) is widespread across the UK and globally but becomes much more challenging as an assessment tool for a QCF qualification because of the need for the learner to meet all of the learning outcomes. Those awarding organisations which have continued to use MCTs have identified concerns about the pass mark and about manipulating the structure of the assessment to ensure the learner has opportunity to meet all of the learning outcomes:

> "Using MCTs is difficult, even though they are an appropriate form of assessment for some qualifications."

Others have identified the narrow way in which the term 'assessment' has been interpreted within the QCF as being unnecessarily restrictive:

> "[Our] approach to assessment is very different...there's no issue with all learning outcomes being met because they're not all 'assessed' in a formal way....'assessment' can be real assessment, done appropriately."

65. The critical issue for most is that assessment should be valid and reliable; it is vital that those who are relying on these qualifications – whether to find employment or to progress or to make the decision to offer someone a job – can have confidence that the qualification confirms what someone knows and can do. Unsurprisingly, stakeholders have repeatedly used the term 'fitness for purpose' when talking about assessment of vocational qualifications, and for some the current focus misses the point:

> "The essential thing is to have good QA of the assessment regime and methodology"

66. Some of the difficulties encountered with the QCF approach to assessment have led to a situation in which some stakeholders have decided effectively to opt out of the QCF and have instead decided to "place qualifications on to the national framework". Given that there is no national framework, what this

probably means is that their qualifications are to be considered under the General Conditions of Recognition – which equally apply to QCF qualifications. The most common reason given for this is the assessment arrangements permitted by the General Conditions of Recognition are considered to be more flexible – a compensatory approach to assessment is allowed and there is no requirement for learners to demonstrate competence against all of the learning outcomes and meet all of the assessment criteria. This development is leading to a further blurring of the distinction between the QCF and the 'national framework', that is the qualifications covered by the General Conditions of Recognition. As one stakeholder put it:

> "Is the QCF as mandatory as it was? Is the NQF back? There's a lack of policy clarity."

67. The present situation is unsustainable. There are clear and obvious risks to Ofqual in awarding organisations making decisions about whether or not their qualifications are to be subject to the QCF or NQF, and in a situation in which the QCF is apparently ceasing to be the framework for vocational qualifications by the back door. The *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* support the assessment of competence-based qualifications but are not sufficiently flexible to extend beyond this. Had the QCF been positioned as a framework for adult vocational qualifications, then this might have worked but in the long term, a requirement for a mastery approach to assessment for all qualifications is irreconcilable with their purpose and design. The QCF is in danger of subjugating the function of assessment to its form. In assessment, as in other areas, the rigidity of the QCF is at odds with the flexibility needed to accommodate the range of qualifications which are subject to the QCF regulatory arrangements.

Titling

68. The Regulatory arrangements set out clear requirements about the titles to be used for QCF qualifications. Each qualification must identify the level and size and an outline of the content of the qualification and its size has to be signalled through use of the term Award, Certificate or Diploma.

69. Stakeholders had very mixed views on the titling requirements; for some they are too restrictive:

> "Awards, Certificates and Diplomas have no relevance to [us]"

> "There should be more market reflection [in the title] for well-established qualifications."

Whereas for others, the titling requirements are not sufficient to prevent the use of brand identity which could give a market advantage:

> "the essential thing is comparability; branding and marketing blur the issues"

70. There is a perception amongst some stakeholders that Ofqual has not been consistent in its application of the titling requirements, and some awarding organisations have been allowed to get away with more than others. For some stakeholders, the titling requirements create confusion with other parts of the UK education sector where the use of the title award, certificate or diploma has a direct relationship to the level of the qualification and therefore, of itself, says something about the capability of the learner and what the learner has achieved:

> "the important thing for people to understand is the level"

> "the current matrix of level and size gives an important message – we don't need to change everything"

The three country regulators

71. As stated elsewhere within this review, the QCF was implemented across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Ofqual has regulatory responsibility for the QCF in England and Northern Ireland and works with the Welsh Government and with DEL in Northern Ireland to ensure a joined-up approach to the vocational qualifications sector. Scotland has its own framework, the SCQF (responsibility for which is shared by the SQA, QAA, Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland). Some of the views already reflected within this paper are those of the SQA, DEL and the Welsh Government, but it is worth noting that any changes to the QCF will need clear and careful exploration with the relevant representatives of the devolved assemblies.

Conclusions

72. The QCF was intended as a revolutionary framework with ambitions to bring about an inclusive, responsive, accessible and non-bureaucratic vocational qualifications sector. Judged against its own aims, it has had limited success. There is evidence that it has produced positive benefits for some learners at Entry and Level 1 who as a result of the unitised structure have entered education and worked their way up from units to qualifications. For these

learners it has been inclusive and responsive. For others involved in delivering, taking and relying on vocational qualifications, those same QCF design features which have supported different learners into the sector, have produced some perverse outcomes. There are still good vocational qualifications – but they have not been created by the QCF and, in many cases, it is because those involved in their design and development have successfully argued the reasons why they should be allowed not to meet all of the QCF design strictures. The architects of the QCF hoped that in time, it could be used for all qualifications but sought to achieve this by creating a rigid and inflexible framework which has struggled to accommodate a variety of qualifications. Some of the stakeholders involved in this review have argued for more time to realise the full benefits of the QCF but for many, the unintended consequences which it has brought about have had impacts which mean change is required now.

73. For Ofqual, its approach to regulation must enable it to meet all of its statutory objectives and particularly those relating to the standard of qualifications and to ensure public confidence. Qualifications must be fit for purpose and assessment within them should be valid and reliable. Those statements could not be made truthfully about all of the qualifications on the QCF.

Recommendations

74. Arising out of this review there are therefore a number of recommendations.

- The range and nature of the changes required to the QCF Regulatory arrangements are extensive. For that reason it is recommended that they are withdrawn. Ofqual should give consideration to how and to what extent the General Conditions of Recognition can be used instead to regulate vocational qualifications and in particular whether they would address the needs of recommendations 2 to 9 below.

- Assessment requirements for vocational qualifications should focus on fitness for purpose – form should follow function – and on validity and reliability. The current 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the assessment of vocational qualifications should be relaxed and awarding organisations should be permitted to use assessments which are appropriate for the qualification and for what is being assessed, provided these meet validity and reliability requirements.

- It should continue to be possible for awarding organisations and others to develop products which can be offered on a unitised basis where they believe there is a demand.

- It should continue to be possible for learners to accumulate credit and to use credit accumulation to work up to full qualifications; given that Ofqual

is currently working on a new approach to GLHs, any new approach to credit accumulation for vocational qualifications should be addressed as part of this wider piece of work to ensure a consistent and joined-up approach.

■ Credit transfer should not be a regulatory requirement and should instead be handled and managed by learners and the awarding organisations. Ofqual should give consideration to whether such an approach would need additional regulatory support, for example in the form of a sector-wide agreement on recognition of prior learning and credit transfer.

■ There should be a clear and formal end to any requirement, actual or implied, to unit share. There should be no restriction on awarding organisations collaborating on the development of quality products provided these otherwise meet the requirements of a valid and reliable qualification.

■ Ofqual should work on a clear definition of 'qualification' which should be incorporated into any regulatory requirements or arrangements for the vocational-qualifications sector.

■ The unit bank should cease to function as part of the RITS and no more units should be placed into it (although Ofqual may want to consider whether any other organisation would want to make the unit bank available as a curriculum resource). Organisations which are currently recognised to submit units or rules of combination would cease to be recognised by Ofqual as such (although they may continue to collaborate with awarding organisations on the development of units and qualifications).

■ The rules of combination should be withdrawn; qualifications which are submitted for accreditation should be required to demonstrate internal coherence.

■ Given the scale and nature of the changes proposed to the QCF, Ofqual should consider what implications this has for a single, descriptive framework which could accommodate all regulated qualifications. This would need to include:

  ▫ the structure of a single framework;

  ▫ features including level descriptors and title descriptors;

  ▫ implications for the status of the National Qualifications Framework;

◻ implications for Wales and Northern Ireland.

Appendix A

Stakeholder meetings

Name of organisation	Date of meeting	Attending
Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)	28.11.13	Andy Wall
ABRSM	2.12.13	Nigel Scaife
Skills Funding Agency	4.12.13	Janet Ryland and Graham Brough
City and Guilds	9.12.13	Kirstie Donnelley, Judith Norrington, David Short, Patrick Craven, Geoff Holden
Department for Business Innovation and Skills	9.12.13	Bobbie McClelland, Paul Steeples
CIEH	9.12.13	Marianne Phillips
NCFE	10.12.13	David Grailey, Suzanne Cant
JCQ Group	11.12.13	Andy Wall, Judith Norrington, Brigid O'Regan, Carole Bishop, Debra Malpass, Geoff Holden, Jim Dobson
Norman Gealy	12.12.13	Norman Gealy
Association of Colleges	16.12.13	Joy Mercer
UK Commission for Employment and Skills	16.12.13	Judith Compton
OCR	17.12.13	Mark Dawe, Paul Steer
NIACE	17.12.13	Joyce Black, Rob Gray
Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland	18.12.13	John McGuigan, Daryll Young, Martin Thompson, Harriet Ferguson
Northern Ireland awarding organisations	18.12.13	Helen Bready (C and G) Paul McGlade (OCR) Fiona Callaghan (Pearson) Malcom Reid (ETCAL) Heather Aiken (ASDAN) Patricia Short (OCN NI) Mark Adrian (CACHE) Marion Wilcox (CCEA)

CCEA	18.12.13	Cathy Heathwood, Terri McComiskey, Caroline Egerton
OCNER	19.12.13	Neil Cruickshank, Carol Snape
Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB), CACHE, ILM, Laser, AAT, ABC, VTCT	19.12.13	Jill Lanning (FAB) Ailin O' Cathain (FAB) Nick Cutland (CACHE) David Pardey (ILM) Jessica Lober Newsome (Laser) Pauline Sparkes (AAT) Paul Eeles (ABC) Ashley Barnes (VTCT)
Quality Assurance Agency	7.1.14	Kate Dentith, Sarah Butler, Jane Mitchell and Melinda Charlie
Northbrook College	9.1.14	Sue Dare
Welsh Government	10.1.14	Kim Ebrahim and Julie Spargo
WJEC	10.1.14	Brigid O'Regan
AQA	13.1.14	Carole Bishop, Phill Bryant, Bernie Fishpool, Dean O'Donoghue, Marie Tilt, Adrienne Nichols, Debra Malpas
Scottish Qualifications Authority	17.1.14	Janet Brown and George Brown
Department for Education	20.1.14	Jay Hunt and Sarah Reid
CITB	20.1.14	Ben Hallett and Mike Peters
Pearson	6.2.14	Jim Dobson, Tom Lee, Karen Hughes, Derek Richardson, Robin Ford, Sian Owen, Rod Smith.
Accrington and Rossendale College	18.2.14	Wendy Higgins

Appendix B

Reference material

FAB, The Regulation of Vocational Qualifications, An overview of issues and concerns, meeting notes and July 2013

FAB, Review of the external landscape, June 2013

Discussion Paper for UKCES on the future of the Qualifications and Credit Framework, Norman Gealy, November 2010

Leitch Review of Skills, Prosperity for all in the Global Economy, Lord Leitch, December 2006

Towards a new VET, Tim Oates, Cambridge Assessment, January 2013

Ofqual, Brief Introduction to the QCF, October 2013

Ofqual, 2009 Evaluation of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) regulation, January 2010

Ofqual, 2010 Evaluation of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) regulation, 2011

Ofqual, General Conditions of Recognition, September 2013

Ofqual, Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework, August 2008

Qualifications and Credit Framework, Cost-benefit analysis, PWC and others, March 2008

Qualifications and Credit Framework, Final Business Case, PWC and others

The Richard Review of Apprenticeships, Doug Richard, November 2012

The Sir Richard Sykes Review

The Qualifications and Credit Framework, Current Issues in Lifelong Learning Seminar, Tony Tait, September 2009

Review of Adult Vocational Qualifications in England, Nigel Whitehead, November 2013

Review of Vocational Education, Alison Wolf, March 2011

Appendix C

QCF Review – planning document

The table below considers each of the recommendations arising from the QCF Review and sets out the practical, structural, commercial and legal issues these raise, which will need to be considered and addressed prior to implementation of the recommendation together with suggested timings. The outcomes of this review will need to feed into Ofqual's work on its vocational qualification and regulatory strategy and so the timings are provisional as this is just one of the strands in that wider piece of work.

There are some wider issues which will also need to be addressed in relation to all of the proposed QCF changes.

- What are the RITS implications of each of these proposed changes.

- Where a change is proposed to the QCF, what implications does it have for the *General Conditions of Recognition*?

- How will Ofqual deal with those awarding organisations which are accredited only for QCF qualifications? Will they need to go through some sort of new accreditation process or will it be sufficient to rely on consideration of the validity arguments which they put forward for their qualifications?

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
1. The range and nature of the changes required to the QCF Regulatory arrangements are extensive. For that reason it is recommended that they are withdrawn. Ofqual should give consideration to how and to what extent the General Conditions of	Ofqual will need to be clear about what arrangements are in place to regulate vocational qualifications during the period of consultation and beyond. Ofqual will need to take steps to minimise the risk of perverse behaviour, for example, awarding organisations and	The QCF Regulatory arrangements will remain in force during consultation and up to the point of replacement. Qualifications which are submitted for accreditation during this period must be considered against the QCF Regulatory arrangements **and** against the *General Conditions of Recognition* (critical external and internal message). The *General*	May 2014 – consult on withdrawal of QCF Regulatory arrangements as part of the wider VQ consultation. Consultation to run for 12 weeks.

| Recognition can be used instead to regulate vocational qualifications and in particular whether they would address the needs of recommendations 2 to 9. | others flooding the market with poor-quality units and qualifications before any fundamental changes are introduced. | *Conditions of Recognition* requires, e.g. all qualifications to be fit for purpose, valid and reliable, to include a concise indication of content and an endorsement – see Sections C, D, E and G of the *General Conditions of Recognition*.

The alternative is for qualifications to be accredited against the General Conditions of Recognition alone.

No new rules pending consultation but there needs to be internal and external clarity on the approach which will be taken to accrediting qualifications pending the outcome of the consultation. | |

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
2. Assessment requirements for vocational qualifications should focus on fitness for purpose – form should follow function – and on validity and reliability. The	There is some degree of confusion about Ofqual's current approach to assessment requirements for vocational qualifications. This needs to be clarified.	As above, the QCF Regulatory arrangements remain in force during consultation and so any new qualifications submitted for accreditation must meet both the QCF Regulatory arrangements and the General Conditions of Recognition.	May 2014 – consult on withdrawal of QCF Regulatory arrangements as part of the wider VQ consultation. Consultation to

current 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the assessment of vocational qualifications should be relaxed and awarding organisations should be permitted to use assessments which are appropriate for the qualification and for what is being assessed, provided these meet validity and reliability requirements.	There is confusion about the extent to which the NQF is functioning and could and should be used at present for vocational qualifications. Work on the validity argument for vocational qualifications is underway. The outcomes of that work should determine the new approach to assessment requirements for vocational qualifications.	Awarding organisations wishing to avoid the operation of the QCF approach to assessment – 'mastery' and non-compensatory approach – could submit their qualifications for accreditation just against the General Conditions of Recognition. No new rules pending consultation but there needs to be internal and external clarity on the approach which will be taken to accrediting qualifications pending the outcome of the consultation. One option would be to issue some assessment guidance which gives more flexibility on assessment – this is preferable to creating more confusion about the current status of the NQF. Communicate with awarding organisations about assessments which may have been distorted to meet the *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* but which may be fit for purpose under the General Conditions of Recognition. Work up assessment	run for 12 weeks.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
		guidance in preparation for May 2014.	
3. It should continue to be possible for awarding organisations and others to develop products which can be offered on a unitised basis where they believe there is a demand	The unitised offer has support with some stakeholders; it appears to have delivered benefits for some learners and for some employers. Implications for funding. There needs to be clarity about the difference between a unit and a qualification – how should this be specified (and see work on definition of a qualification)? This can then be linked to work on validity and content and an assessment methodology.	Units can still be developed and placed in the unit bank. Clear message to awarding organisations and unit submitters about requirements and responsibilities. Units will need to conform to the unit template. There's a need for full discussions with BIS and SFA about the funding implications. Work with NIACE and awarding organisations.	Consultation in May 2014. Engagement with BIS and SFA to commence immediately.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
4. It should continue to be possible for learners to accumulate credit and to use credit accumulation to work up to full qualifications; given Ofqual's current work on a new approach to GLH, any new approach to credit accumulation for vocational qualifications should be addressed as part of this wider piece of work to ensure a consistent and joined-up approach.	Can Ofqual continue to use credit for sizing purposes for some or all qualifications? What should be the role of the awarding organisations in attributing credit? Proposed consultation on use of GLH for sizing – any work on credit for vocational qualifications needs to be informed by this.	QCF Regulatory arrangements remain in place pending consultation. Is there a need for a special condition to enable recognition of credit-bearing qualifications under the *General Conditions of Recognition* for those qualifications which are submitted for accreditation solely under the *General Conditions of Recognition*?	Consultation May 2014.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
5. Credit transfer should not be a regulatory requirement and should instead be handled and managed by learners and the awarding organisations. Ofqual should give consideration to whether such an approach would need additional regulatory support, e.g. in the form of a sector-wide agreement on recognition of prior learning and credit transfer.	Does Ofqual need to develop its own CT/APL rules or principles – conditions and guidance? Clarity about the difference between CT and APL Does Ofqual need to encourage another body to develop and own these principles? If Ofqual, at what point in regulatory cycle is compliance monitored/checked? Awarding organisations' responses? Will awarding organisations be required to have a policy in place to address this? Market impact (and see developing work on this by CMA in relation to the higher-education sector)	The QCF Regulatory arrangements remain in force for the time being. No replacement or new provisions are required. Work with stakeholders to develop clear separation of their role and responsibility for credit transfer and Ofqual's role.	Consult May 2014. May 2014 onwards – work with stakeholders to develop separation. May 2014 onwards – work on CT/APL guidance.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
6. There should be a clear and formal end to any requirement, actual or implied, to unit share. There should be no restrictions on awarding organisations collaborating on the development of quality products provided these otherwise meet the requirements of valid and reliable qualifications.	awarding organisations currently making use of shared units are using these under an implied licence. Ofqual does not have power to formally give these shared units to the using organisations. Post-consultation, these organisations will therefore need to be issued with a reasonable period of notice (six months) that their use of shared units must be brought to an end (unless the unit developer agrees that it can continue to be shared). There is a large number of awarding organisations making use of shared units within their qualifications.	Communicate clear message (internally and externally) on regulatory position on unit sharing. Begin to work with awarding organisations whose qualifications comprise shared units, so that we understand and anticipate impacts. Identify expiry dates of shared units within current qualifications.	May 2014, 12-week consultation. August and September 2014 – consider responses and formulate new rules. October 2014 – serve six months' notice on awarding organisations whose qualifications offer includes shared units. March 2015 – notice period comes to an end. By this date awarding organisations must either have replaced shared units with their own or withdrawn the qualification.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timings
7. Ofqual should work on a clear definition of 'qualification', which should be incorporated into any regulatory requirements or arrangements for the vocational-qualifications sector.	This is crucial to indentifying what it is that Ofqual should be regulating and also to the approach to units (and to funding of units).	There is a definition but this has yet to be operationalised.	Consult on definition in May 2014.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
8. The unit bank should cease to function as part of the RITS and no more units should be placed into it (although Ofqual may want to consider whether any other organisation would want to make the unit bank available as a curriculum resource). Organisations which are currently recognised to submit units or rules of combination would cease to be recognised by Ofqual as such (although they may continue to collaborate with awarding organisations on the development of units and qualifications).	The unit bank will need to remain operational during consultation and pending the final outcome of the consultation process. There is no Ofqual quality check on units which are placed into the unit bank, and so there is an ongoing risk that poor-quality products will be developed and made available for sharing. In the past there have been different approaches to acknowledging the role of the unit submitter which is not also an awarding organisation, and Ofqual has varied its relationship with this group. This is significant for engagement and communication purposes.	See proposed solution on assessments at 2 above; if awarding organisations are aware and understand the accreditation process for qualifications submitted during the consultation process, this should minimise the risk of poor units being selected for inclusion. No interim or new rules required pending the outcome of the consultation. Work with awarding organisations to encourage removal of old and unadopted units. Work with unit submitters to encourage removal of old and unadopted units. Clear communications strategy with awarding organisations about basis on which qualifications will be considered for accreditation. Following consultation, give notice of 'closure' of the unit bank.	See timeline for 6 above.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
9. The rules of combination should be withdrawn; qualifications which are submitted for accreditation should be required to demonstrate internal coherence.	In the absence of a unit bank, are the rules of combination required – could an awarding organisation retain if they wanted to and use for current and new qualifications? Any decision on the rules of combination needs to be linked to the developing work on the validity argument. Any decision on the rules of combination needs to be linked to work on a new unit or qualification template.	Pending the outcome of the consultation, qualifications submitted for accreditation must still comply with the QCF Regulatory arrangements and/or the *General Conditions of Recognition* (see Section E of the *General Conditions of Recognition*). Link to work on the validity argument.	Consultation May 2014.

QCF review – recommendation	Issues	Solution – remove rules / new rules required / new process required?	Timing
10. Given the scale and nature of the changes proposed to the QCF, Ofqual should consider what implications this has for a single, descriptive framework which could accommodate all regulated qualifications. This would need to include: ■ the structure of a single framework ■ features including level descriptors and title descriptors ■ implications for the status of the NQF ■ implications for Wales and Northern Ireland.	This is a significant piece of work which needs to begin as soon as possible, e.g. the QCF Regulatory arrangements currently include the only definitions of levels and so work on this is a priority to ensure there is clarity about levels at the point when the Arrangements are withdrawn.		Consult May 2014.

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