



The QCF Barometer Report

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About Heather Venis

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Heather has worked as a leader, manager, innovator and change agent. Passionate about learning, developing people and organisations, Heather has a track record of successful projects for awarding organisations helping them achieve their strategies and objectives.

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Survey background and acknowledgement

Heather Venis would like to thank all those who took time to complete the survey.

Ofqual is currently consulting on the future shape, nature and regulation of vocational qualifications. The proposals are likely to impact many including learners, employers, and training and education suppliers. There may also be an effect on apprenticeship frameworks. Funding and the work of awarding organisations (AOs) whose role is to design and award qualifications will certainly change as a result.

The QCF (qualifications and credit framework) provides a consistent approach to how qualifications and units (which are the component parts of qualifications) are designed. The QCF provides for uniformity in qualification structures, qualification titles and so on, irrespective of sector or level of qualification. In the current QCF system learners can also 'credit accumulate' towards qualification achievement.

In August Heather Venis circulated a preliminary review of Ofqual's '*Consultation on Withdrawing the Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework*', if you would like a copy of this please contact Heather@awardingfirst.co.uk

Survey comments are verbatim from respondents and do not necessarily represent the views of Heather Venis and Awarding First.



About this survey

The QCF barometer was a short survey that opened on 10/09/2014. Its aim was to take the temperature on current opinion about the QCF and to help identify potential issues and impacts should the QCF be withdrawn, in whole or part by Ofqual.

An invitation to complete the survey was sent to Ofqual regulated Awarding Organisations (AOs) and placed in three separate LinkedIn interest groups to canvass views from assessors, centres, EQAs, learners and others.

There were 22 unique responses, of which 10 were from AOs, 10 from the Trainer/Assessor/Centre/College network, plus 1 EQA and 1 consultant. Whilst not a large sample it provides a good cross section of responses and some rich commentary.

The findings shared below are recorded at 23/09/2014.

The survey was promoted as NOT being an alternative to the consultation being conducted by Ofqual as part of its work. All readers are encouraged to respond separately to the Ofqual consultations at <http://ofqual.gov.uk/> by the close date, 16th October.

Some observations

The sample size of respondents makes it difficult to make any robust recommendations or generalisations. Also the devil is in the detail. Equally the survey and findings were not intended to employ sophisticated research techniques.

What can be said is we all have our own understanding of what is meant by 'uniformity' and 'flexibility'. Of course I was aware of this when the survey was created and hoped that the comments would help throw some light on the numbers. Thankfully they do and for me the comments are the most valuable part of the survey outcomes.

Whilst there seems to be some consensus that there is value in some uniformity for qualification titling and qualification structures, the jury seems to be out on whether uniformity in assessment systems is such a good thing. Support for maintaining credit and credit accumulation principles is more evident.

As for possible impacts, if the QCF is withdrawn, it is worth mentioning the two top scoring items here: that withdrawal of the QCF might challenge the consistency of quality assurance programmes; and bring about some difficulty for learners and employers in choosing between qualifications.

The clean sheet of paper challenge asking about the possible principles or rules for a 'valid' vocational qualification system all seem to point to the need for clarity and simplicity.

Q2 The proposals suggest there may be more flexibility with qualification titling. Do you consider uniformity of qualification titles to be a good thing, or would further flexibility be better?

Uniformity is a good thing	Arguments on both sides	Flexibility is a good thing
12	6	4

Comments:

- Government must stop messing with the UK's Vocational qualifications. All of the recent changes have added little except confusion and cost. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with titles as they are, and the more non-uniformity is brought in, the more confusion and non-standardisation, and therefore, non-acceptance by employers between sectors there will be. Things used to be beautifully standardised and coordinated coordinated in the days of the Joint Awarding Bodies and the guidelines they produced together. Nothing better has been written since the NVQ Code of Practice 2006. The QCF is a good idea, and the Regulatory Guidelines are adequate. Government needs to stop trying to make it perfect, it will never be perfect.
- As long as the employer/employee is able to quickly identify the level and breadth of the qualification.
- It helps with public/employer understanding.
- Employers get confused, keep it simple!
- The original idea of using 'Diploma' to indicate the 'size' of an award leads to confusion and is contrary to previous practice in the industry.
- Some flexibility is good, but not just any old thing. Apart from sizes not being well understood (yet) by the public, there doesn't seem a good argument for a title not including owner, level, size and subject matter. There should be a minimum of other things possible to say something about the significance of the qualification. However, if the certificate is linked to a QR code (quick response bar code reader) more details could be supplied immediately so the title would be unimportant apart from general subject matter.

Q3. The proposals suggest that each AO will be able to choose how they design and structure qualifications; also there will be no common units (components) unless AOs choose to work together. Do you view greater flexibility in qualification structures would be a good thing, or would it be better to have some uniformity in qualification structures?

Some uniformity in qualification structures is desirable	Arguments on both sides	More flexible qualification structures would be a good thing
12	1	8

Comments:

- I wasted weeks when QCF was introduced inventing meaningless units, which we managed without in the past. Good to go back to a more real world scenario.
- The moment you offer a different structure you weaken the qualification as a whole. The criteria should always be the same the methodology of achieving should be the flexible aspect of training.
- This is a difficult one – to have uniformity helps people to understand what they are looking at, helps transferability between AOs, helps learners to select the AO they want to work with. Differences in qualifications will make it more complicated. People buy a car understanding that it is a vehicle with 4 wheels, seats, steering wheel, etc. Different companies offer different ‘extras’ to attract customers but the customers understand that it is the basic car with different attributes. If all quals were different ie no basic structure then we would be in a very different ball game and a lot more complex.
- Complete uniformity in qualification structure is essential if these qualifications are to be a nationally recognised set of qualifications accepted by employers and recognised on equal merit between sectors. Government may as well tear up and throw away all the fantastic work that has been done in the area of vocational qualifications in the UK in the last 30 years if they take this step. AOs are commercial organisations with commercial priorities incentivised to behave as they like the excuse that they are doing right by their shareholders – OCR is one of the few exceptions to this but they only offer a paltry section of VQ subject areas. AOs do not behave responsibly – they demonstrated that last year when they were caught out giving schoolteachers answers to questions in upcoming exams. AOs should only do what they do – administrate qualification paperwork, award certificates and do EQA.
- Allows for more fit for purpose design across sectors.
- There might become a lottery as to qualifications in particular geographic areas.
- Uniformity and sharing of units sounds like a good idea, however it’s not practicable. Using exemptions and APEL is the best way to deal with differences in qualifications.
- QCF ROC are currently too restrictive but that does not mean that the basic concept of breaking qualifications into logical units is a bad or restrictive thing in itself. There is no rule that prevents concurrent teaching of units or linear teaching, so a unit structure is not in itself restrictive as long as you allow synoptic assessment across units. In such a scenario a linear taught course is just a special use case of a unit based structure.
- Shared units was a great theory that has not delivered any tangible benefits in practice.

Q4 The possible changes to the system may mean that 'credit' and 'credit accumulation' would be an optional feature and whether it is included would depend on how AOs choose to design their qualifications in the future. Do you support a move away from mandating credit and credit accumulation principles or would this be undesirable?

Maintaining credit and credit accumulation principles is preferable	Arguments on both sides	Including credit and credit accumulation should not be mandated
12	6	4

Comments:

- Credit accumulations and transfer was one of the distinguishing features of QCF. It is abandoning one of the main features if the QCF goes. AOs have never been keen on QCF and this is the result. Adult learning depends on learners being able to take 'bite size' units of learning that can fit around their often untidy lives. This would be impossible without CATS.
- For small AOs with specialist qualifications none of this is needed. People learning a craft are not into accumulating qualifications.
- Credit should be given when someone has done the qualification. It is a motivating factor and encourages progression.
- Absolutely keep it. The OU have been doing it for decades. It works, why change it. I think the only thing wrong with credit accumulation is that lots of short unrelated units amassing credits may give the incorrect impression that a candidate (better term than learner as they have been doing the job competently for 30 years) is either competent or knows something that infact they forgot a year ago.
- There is often a core of units that should always be part of a qualification structure.
- Gaining credits has helped people move towards qualifications, or use prior learning in a meaningful way.
- There is no need to mandate it, but qualifications should still have a credit value. Whether people use it is the part that should be optional. I don't see any real problems with unit credit and an overall credit value for a qualification. GLH will still be used for funding and school league table points so perhaps GLH should replace credit but that would likely cause problems with the value of higher level qualifications self-supported in eg MOOCs (although it is arguable that structured e-learning is guided) and ECVET transfer in Europe.
- This is a tricky one, not least because many markets (especially overseas) there is a lack of understanding of GLH whereas credit is more universally understood (thanks to the British HE sector). So I have some reservations that users/employers may not clearly understand the size of a qualification. In terms of credit accumulation, the QCF has admirable principles in theory but in practice it hasn't changed anyone's approach to RPL much.

Q5. Until recently assessment arrangements required every 'learning outcome' to be assessed. Some flexibility was recently introduced by Ofqual on this matter, emphasising a 'fitness for purpose' approach to assessment. In the future a system where qualifications are less uniform could mean the approach to assessment may become less uniform too. Do you prefer to see uniformity in assessment systems for similar qualifications or that more flexibility in assessment is a better option?

Some uniformity in assessment, where relevant is preferable	Arguments on both sides	More flexibility in assessment is desirable
9	5	8

Comments:

- Final assessment of all aspects is impossible. Selective assessments will measure overall capability.
- All learning outcomes must be assessed or it could end up with flexibility allowing only a person's strong areas to be assessed and thereby weaken the qualification as a whole.
- How would a level playing field be achieved if there was flexibility in assessment. What would stop AOs introducing assessment that was 'easier' for their quals thus capturing the bulk of the market once learners and training organisations understood it was 'easier' to achieve a qual with one organisation rather than another – nightmare. Bring back the NVQ Code of Practice I say – we all knew what we should be doing then.
- These questions and response choice have been poorly put together. Where is the option for me to tick that says 'uniformity in approach to assessment is essential'. Of course assessment has to be standardised. If the assessment process is not standardised, and yet the same qualifications are dished out of course employers could lose faith in the qualifications because some will have been assessed correctly, some over assessed and some under assessed. Who on earth is proposing such a thing? Quality assurance of qualifications will mean nothing if there is no uniformity in approach. Besides which the system as designed and described in the NVQ Code of Practice and every assessment strategy that comes below it, whether from sectors or AOs, allows for guidance and flexibility, and interpretation of the assessment criteria, guided and shaped by IQAs and EQAs. The system already has the flexibility it needs. This proposal smacks of proposed changes by people who have read the assessment strategies once but never got their hands dirty assessing or QAing.
- This would support work based learning delivery.
- There needs to be some uniformity, otherwise some less scrupulous providers will find ways to bypass it altogether.
- I worry that less ethical providers would use this to push people through more quickly without correct assessment.
- The idea that each LO needs to be assessed is fine for the lower level/work based qualifications but at the higher levels, particularly when formal exams are used, this can prove problematic.

- I don't see why we are putting learning outcomes into qualifications if they are never assessed. If they are important enough to go in the spec they should be assessed. This seems a cop out to academics who think everything can be tested in terminal exams where there is no guarantee that a learner will answer all the questions. Paradoxically it's a lowering of standards when some academics are bleating on about raising standards.
- Assessment is about a combination of good technical understanding and good judgement of a learner's ability. The requirement to assess all LOs for every learner often moves the assessor's ability to exercise judgement, in favour of a prescriptive 'tick box' approach.

Q6 What do you see as the potential impacts if the QCF is withdrawn?

Qualification design costs could increase which may ultimately impact fees	9
There could be an effect on time to market for qualifications, as the qualification design and testing process may become more time consuming	8
Greater flexibility in the system would challenge consistency of quality assurance programmes	14
More diversity in qualifications would make it more difficult for learners or employers to choose easily between them	14
Funding that can currently be drawn down for units and credits would go	10
Qualifications would be better designed as they would not have to follow the QCF model	8
Assessment could be made more flexible to meet qualification requirements	12
More diversity in assessment could prove challenging in the generic centre/college/employer delivery systems	9
It could be more challenging to share good practice as AO qualifications and requirements will become more varied	12

Comments:

- That there are faults with QCF cannot be denied. But these could be resolved without abandoning the principles of QCF outlined in my earlier Q4 comments. Taken as a whole QCF has supported and encouraged adult learning more than any other policy initiative in the last 20 years.
- Please let's not weaken the quality of training. NVQ proved a disastrous paper wasting exercise whereby a qualification gained with lies, lies and more lies.
- As I said before it would be a nightmare.
- Assessment already is flexible and allows perfectly well for variations in work environments and employment situations. Anyone who says it doesn't does not understand how the present guidelines should be applied, and have been applied, for many, many years.
- All serious AOs should be designing and testing their quals anyway and so will be no change to the system. Underlying principles of 'fit for purpose' assessment will remain the same and when regulated will retain consistency.
- The focus should always be on the needs of the learner/employer rather than how easily it suits the provider to deliver a particular batch of units within the QCF.
- Overall the impact of withdrawal would be positive.
- 'Qualifications could be better designed as they would not have to follow the QCF model'. This might be true but so is the opposite greater opportunities to do it worse. More flexibility by definition of the word flexibility means more diverse in outcomes and therefore consistency. So it could be good or bad.

Q7 If you were given a clean sheet to design any principles or rules for a 'valid' vocational qualification system what would they be?

- Must be fit for specific purpose, not designed to a one-size fits all concept.
- All based on the same learning outcomes, to maintain, as much as possible, a level that all employers/learners can feel confident when choosing between them. The choice should really be about the quality of the training provider and not the subject area.
- Something along the lines of the old NVQ Code of Practice which I believed in and which I found helpful in both practice and in training.
- For some sectors, there needs to be a separate but related set of Master Craftsman qualifications. NVQ/QCF levels, in vocational terms, do not adequately reflect craft skill excellence. For example a level 3 tiler is not necessarily any better than a level 2 tiler. The key difference is that they understand more about supervision and management. We must learn from Germany and Switzerland, both countries where, for decades, vocational achievement has been recognised as equal in status to academic achievement.
- What job role and what is required to do the job and not including any units that are not relevant the job role.
- Assessment strategy function should dictate the form.
- Accurate and effective auditing of the evidence is critical for the success of any qualifications. Unfortunately there are providers completing worksheets for learners and not enough rigorous checks are made. Also all English and maths qualifications should be done online and in a neutral setting with neutral invigilators!
- Keep it simple and consult employers.
- Well written criteria with clear and consistent quality standards between awarding bodies.
- Leave as they are!
- Not sure! Even the term 'vocational' means different things to different people eg in its broadest sense most degrees and post grad qualifications are 'vocational' since they contain knowledge and skills for the workplace and can enhance career prospects etc
- Why 'vocational'? Any principles should apply to all qualifications. Assessment should reflect the use to which the qualification is put. If it is for filtering students eg to a limited number of university places it should have grading. If it is primarily to decide competence it should have competence checking in realistic contexts. If the purpose of the qualification is both it should have a competence element and a graded element. Whether a qualification is academic or vocational is a moot point. A qualification is a means of recognising learning in some way that is useful to the learner and other stakeholders. The emphasis should be on that use not what label is put on the qualification, especially when there are many that span the academic and vocational. Where qualifications are graded the uncertainty in the grades should be calculated and the grading should only be as fine as the uncertainties calculated indicate is valid ie if the uncertainties in the measurement is plus or minus 5% grade intervals should be at least 10% otherwise the measurement is meaningless.



- 1- Clear descriptors/benchmark statements. 2- Clear (but not prescriptive) statements relating to GLH/credits to qualification size. 3- Flexibility in assessment coupled with external (regulatory) quality assurance systems that measure standards/performance. 4- One framework for all VQs – if it is to include different types with different subset rules (as with current NQF), then these need to be much more clearly defined and explicit.
- Consistency across qualifications.