



Engineering Council UK briefing paper

Challenges arising from the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England and Wales (SASE/W)

The QCF was introduced in 2008 with the intention that it will include all qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland other than higher education qualifications and the qualified status granted by professional bodies. It introduces a standard currency for achievement in the form of a framework of levels based on learning outcomes, as well as a system of credit and principles for recognising previous certificated and uncertificated learningⁱ.

Within the same timetable, the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England and Wales (SASE/W) will replace the current apprenticeship 'blueprint' (see Annex A for background).

The engineering profession has lent its support to these projects and, overall, the changes they bring seem likely to be beneficial and welcomed. However, at recent meetings the EC^{UK} has discussed QCF and SASE/W developments and two particular concerns arise:

- **QCF credit calculations:** we need clarification from Ofqual on how credit is being calculated (in terms of credit awarded to learners and, if different, in terms of funding calculations) – is credit being based on learning time regardless of learning mode or the method of assessment used or the qualification(s) to which a unit contributes? Or are learning modes / purposes of qualifications being treated differently?
- **Third party assurance and consistency:** do we now need to be more concerned than we were about the maintenance of quality and consistency in vocational qualifications and apprenticeship frameworks across the breadth of engineering. If so how can members work to support quality and consistency? Or – can we live with inconsistency as long as we are aware of it?

QCF credit calculations

In February this year, DIUS published a Consultation on the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England and Wales (SASE/W). This consultation arose from a commitment in *World Class Apprenticeships (DIUS, 2008)* and parallels clauses in the Apprenticeships, Children, Skills and Learning Bill. The SASE/W will set out the

requirements with which each recognised Apprenticeship framework in England and Wales must comply and will replace the existing non-statutory apprenticeship blueprint.

Of particular concern in the proposed SASE/W was an apparent change in balance of what has traditionally been understood as an apprenticeship within engineering sectors. The proposal was for "knowledge-based" components (such as a technical certificate) to be more heavily weighted than learning achieved through working practice (WBL) (entitled "competence-based"). This was indicated through the proposed credit weightings.

According to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (Ofqual) credit value must be based on:

- one credit for those learning outcomes achievable in 10 hours of learning
- learning time being defined as the time taken by learners at the level of the unit, on average, to complete the learning outcomes of the unit to the standard determined by the assessment criteria
- the credit value of the unit remaining constant regardless of the method of assessment used or the qualification(s) to which it contributes.

QCF implementation has provoked concern about how credit is being calculated and the impact this may have on motivation to achieve competence and in appropriately rewarding those that do. Whilst, in the QCF, credit is supposed to be calculated on grounds of learning time (all the time and effort a qualification takes to complete, including practice, reflection, assessment etc), there are signs that credit calculations may be based on taught hours alone. This may be an impact of using the QCF to formulate funding mechanisms but the situation is not clear.

Under the QCF, emphasises the purposes of qualifications, rather than types of qualifications. The five possible purposes are to:

- Recognise personal growth and engagement in learning
- Prepare for further learning or training and/or develop knowledge and/or skills in a subject area
- Prepare for employment
- Confirm occupational competence and/or 'licence to practice'
- Updating and continuing professional development (CPD)

A recent LSC briefing documentⁱⁱ offers possible insights but fuels concerns. Paragraphs 12 and 14 in the briefing suggest that WBL should attract low credit as it involves few taught hours - and that the purposes of competence and of progression to university do not mix. (Note that here the reference is to guided learning hours (GLH) which are not as extensive as 'learning hours').

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

... there will continue to be full Level 3 qualifications with a wide variation in size in the QCF (as measured by credits that are required either for competence or

progression). For instance where the primary purpose of a qualification is competence, a threshold of 25 credits in the full Level 3 credit value range could be identified. Or where the primary purpose is progression to HE the credit threshold might be set higher in the range up to 70 credits.

However, as in the SASE proposal, the LSC briefing includes a welcome paragraph which encourages integrating what has been NVQ and VRQ learning. However, either/or pathways may lead to dead-ends for some talented engineers:

QCF qualifications can be designed as an integration of both knowledge units and units of competence as appropriate, with the balance varying by sector and/or sub-sector. This integrated approach could become an essential design characteristic, alongside Rules of Combination (RoC), when developing a qualification meeting multiple purposes. The RoC could be used to identify credit value required for specific pathways within a qualification leading to either occupational competence or progression or both.

In support of WBL the LSC briefing notes, "It is important that the size of existing valued NVQs is not simply reduced to hit the PSA target or to attract public funding, and there will be no financial incentives to simply produce smaller qualifications."

Third party assurance and consistency

Expansion of Awarding Organisation status is already happening under the new Ofqual licensing process. Ofqual, operates through a licensing and quality assurance of awarding organisations' procedures. It is no longer scrutinising newly designed vocational qualifications so an aspect of third party assurance of individual qualifications has been removed. It did once seem that SSCs would have an enhanced role in approving qualifications but current discussions indicate that an SSC will have to approve awarding bodies' new qualifications without seeing the content or assessment model.

There will be no external approvals process for Apprenticeship frameworks. However, SEMTA is leading the development of apprenticeship systems on behalf of the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) (<http://www.sscalliance.org/>). Under the new apprenticeship arrangements employers, training providers, colleges etc. (with the help of an SSC) can design and introduce a framework, which conforms to the SASE/W requirements. The Alliance of SSCs has commissioned SEMTA to develop a web-based apprenticeship development and issuing system to enable this. The system should be fully operational by August/September 2010 and SEMTA will be building a 'reference library' of frameworks within the website for companies to access. A core principle, as in the QCF, is to avoid duplication so if a framework is in the library it cannot be duplicated but anyone can use a framework once it is in the library. Meanwhile SEMTA, on behalf of the Alliance of SSCs, is continuing to quality assure the networks' apprenticeship frameworks against the existing blueprint process and may continue to do this for a while when the SASE/W has been introduced.

Under the QCF, adherence to third party assurance such as the current NVQ Code of Practice (CoP) and common assessment strategy is no longer required although SEMTA is retaining its adherence to a SEMTA-devised CoP and assessment strategy. However a number of SSCs will not be following suit, although (NVQ) will be in the title of their qualifications.

Responses to the SASE/W consultation from engineering sectors indicated that Level 3 Functional/Key Skills might be necessary to enable progression (no dead-ends) in the discipline (currently, generally, a Level 2 requirement). Within apprenticeship frameworks, it is likely that not all sectors within the wider engineering footprint will seek the same level of Functional/Key Skills. The variation in the occupational learning required by apprenticeship frameworks across sectors may also be substantial.

The Apprenticeships, Children, Skills and Learning Bill set out to clearly distinguish programme-led apprenticeships (off-the-job; not employed or necessarily even paid – Ofsted 2008) from apprenticeships proper. This was a widely welcomed move. However there appears to be some backtracking of this intention because of a need to retain some programmes which are seen as exemplary. These involve an off-the-job period – perhaps a year – before moving into employed apprentice status. It should be borne in mind however that some Advanced Apprenticeships are only around 2 years in duration whilst others may take up to four years.

The Bill also seeks to ensure that young people in schools receive information, advice and guidance about vocational training opportunities. This proposal (clause 35) had been that all pupils would receive such advice but the clause has been weakened.

ⁱ QCDA: *Final report on the referencing of the QCF to the EQF*: <http://www.qcda.gov.uk/25207.aspx>

ⁱⁱ LSC (2009). *Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) Interim Definition of Full Level 3 Qualifications Briefing Note June 2009*. <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=228413>

Annex A - Apprenticeships – further background

The development of apprenticeships in recent years stems from the Cassells Report in 2001, followed by documents such as *The Business Case for Apprenticeships* (Apprenticeships Task Force, 2005); *Apprenticeship: a key route to skill* (House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee) in 2007 and follow-up report in July 2008; and *World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (DIUS/DCSF, January 2008).

The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) has already taken on responsibility for the apprenticeship programme employer and learner services. It will become one of the services of the Skills Funding Agency from April 2010 and is accountable to BIS and DCSF. The NAS 'end-to-end' responsibilities include:

- operating the National Apprenticeship Vacancy Matching Service (recently re-named AVOL - Apprenticeship Vacancies On-Line) for employers and would-be Apprentices.
- ensure there are sufficient places available for learners wanting to take up an Apprenticeship, particularly 16- to 18-year olds;
- co-ordinate and lead a national and regional information and marketing scheme to drive up demand for Apprenticeships.

Recent figures indicate that 100,000 people have registered their expression of interest in obtaining an apprenticeship. Driving up employer interest may prove a much harder task – although vacancy opportunities appear to be increasing.

The Apprenticeships, Children, Skills and Learning Bill

In July 2008 DIUS published a consultation on a draft Apprenticeships Bill and, later, a report on the consultation.

The Apprenticeships, Children, Skills and Learning Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in February 2009. Parts 1 and 4 of the Bill deal with apprenticeship matters. The Bill incorporates proposals from the Draft Bill and supports the Government's plans for the expansion of the Apprenticeship programme. The proposals seek to place the Apprenticeships programme on a statutory footing, and to guarantee that all suitably qualified young people will be entitled to an apprenticeship place. The Bill is expected to receive Royal Assent this autumn but is currently in a House of Lords Committee Stage which does not resume debate until 12 October.