



Rewarding Learning

Reforming qualifications and promoting learning for the 21st century

A consultation on the development of a new framework for achievement

February 2005

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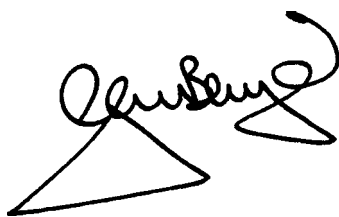
Foreword

Over the past eighteen months CCEA has been working with its partner regulatory authorities in England, Wales and Scotland on the reform of vocational qualifications. From the early stages of this work it has been clear that the application of credit principles would provide greater flexibility and access to qualifications for learners. We now propose to develop a new framework for achievement which is designed to recognise a wider range of achievements in a more flexible and inclusive way than is currently possible with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

This new framework will be developed in close collaboration with England and Wales as we share the same qualifications system. The new arrangements recognise achievement at unit level with each unit being allocated a credit value that indicates the volume and level of the learning.

The proposals take account of policy initiatives being taken forward in Northern Ireland by the Department for Employment and Learning, in particular the Review of Further Education and the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy. The proposed framework supports the aims behind these policy initiatives.

These proposals present a significant challenge for CCEA. At this early stage we wish to consult widely with stakeholders as subsequent development work will require close collaboration. Please give the proposals your careful consideration. A response booklet has been provided to facilitate your response. In addition, we will organise a series of focus group meetings during February and March.



Gavin Boyd
Chief Executive
CCEA

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

Christopher Duff

Chief Executive, Sector Skills Development Agency

■ This consultation contains proposals for a new framework for achievement that will recognise a wide range of achievements in a more flexible and responsive manner than is currently possible using the National Qualification Framework. The proposals set out a radical new structure that recognises achievements through a system of interconnected units. Learners will be able to combine, accumulate and transfer these achievements between qualifications and awarding bodies. These proposals are very much in line with those launched by the public consultation in England that runs parallel to this consultation process.

The Qualification and Curriculum Authority, the Learning and Skills Council and The Sector Skills Development Agency share a long-term vision for the new framework. We would like to see the framework encompass all formally assessed learning outside higher education across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. QCA welcomes this opportunity to work closely with its partner Regulatory Authority in Northern Ireland on the design of a framework that genuinely meets the needs of learners, employers and other users.

Ken Boston AO

Chief Executive, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

The Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) pioneered credit work in Northern Ireland and influenced developments across the United Kingdom. After NICATS submitted its final report (July 2002), CCEA was asked by Government to *'keep under review CAT developments in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and, in the light of these developments, to provide advice on the next phase of credit developments in Northern Ireland'*.

CCEA's advice was forwarded to the Department for Employment and Learning in November 2003. The key recommendation was *'to work towards the development of a unified credit system across England, Wales and Northern Ireland whereby all learning can be formally recognised by jointly agreed credit principles, guidelines and quality assurance processes'*. Over the past year CCEA has been working with its partner Regulatory Authorities, particularly QCA in England and ACCAC in Wales. These proposals are the result of this joint work.

The proposals for the new framework are an important element of the work programme set out across the United Kingdom to reform vocational qualifications. The introduction of credit will support greater flexibility and responsiveness and increase access for learners.

In November 2004, the Department for Employment and Learning launched the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy which supports the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system whereby *'learners will be able to undertake bite-size chunks of learning and will be able to progress at their own pace towards achieving a full qualification. Providers and employers will be able to tailor qualifications and units to meet learners' skills needs. Such a system of credit accumulation and transfer will extend access to and take-up of learning, improve equality of opportunity and promote lifelong learning'*.

The development of the new framework has immediate relevance to vocational qualifications, particularly for adult learners. However, it is important that these reforms encompass all learning, including qualifications taken by 14-19 year olds. CCEA has recently consulted widely on the nature and scope of curriculum and qualifications development for 14 – 19 year olds. In taking forward the 14 -19 reform agenda it is the intention to consider how best credit can facilitate learning and achievement for all.

1.2 Why develop a new Framework?

At present qualifications taken by learners across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are accredited within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). There are over 4000 qualifications offered by around 100 awarding bodies within the framework. The case for reform is based on

key messages from Government, employers, learning providers and learners themselves. These include the need for a qualifications system that is:

- more responsive - the needs of learners and employers are not always easily met through existing qualifications;
- more inclusive - there are many achievements gained by learners in employment, in community-based learning activities, and in other less formal contexts that are not always recognised through existing qualifications;
- transparent and easily understood - the relative values of different kinds of achievement cannot be represented within the current NQF; and
- less bureaucratic - the administrative burden of accrediting qualifications is still too complex.

These proposals for reform build on many features of the NQF but also take account of characteristics of awards currently offered outside the NQF.

The features to be built on include:

- the experience of developing unitised qualifications which is now well established in most vocational awarding bodies;
- the recent reduction in the time taken by the Regulatory Authorities to accredit qualifications within the NQF;
- the successful partnerships established across sector skills councils (SSCs), awarding and professional bodies, and the Regulatory Authorities in qualifications development;
- providers' experience in developing and offering programmes to adult learners within a credit system; and
- recent technological innovations in the delivery of assessment.

In developing the new framework, CCEA, working with its regulatory partners in England and Wales, will:

- work closely with the Skills for Business (SfB) Network [which brings together the Sector Skills Councils (SSC's) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)], drawing on its responsibility for developing national occupational standards;
- review the NQF's current regulatory arrangements to ensure they are appropriate for the new framework; and
- identify the appropriate level of regulatory intervention that is needed to maintain the stability of the framework.

1.3 What do learners, employers and providers want?

For learners there must be:

- easy access to the framework and opportunities for their achievements to be recognised; and

- effective advice and guidance to help them to undertake coherent programmes that are appropriate to their needs.

For employers the framework must:

- rationalise the number of qualifications;
- be transparent and easily understood;
- provide clear progression routes; and
- be responsive to change.

For providers the framework must support provision that:

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

1.4 Responding to this consultation

Key stakeholders are invited to provide their comments and raise questions in relation to the proposals for the new framework. To help you respond to the questions raised in the consultation a separate response booklet has been produced.

Please respond to as many of the questions as you wish. The deadline for responses is **Friday 29th April 2005**. If you are able to respond before the deadline an early response would be greatly appreciated. If you have any queries regarding the completion of the response booklet please contact Caroline Egerton by email at cegerton@ccea.org.uk or by telephone at 028 9026 1452.

This document, the consultation response booklet and the equality impact assessment document can be accessed on the CCEA website:
www.rewardinglearning.com/development/qualifications/qualifications.html

Please send completed responses to:

Research and Statistics Unit
CCEA
29 Clarendon Road
Clarendon Dock
Belfast
BT1 3BG

2

Features and benefits

2.1 Features of the new framework

2.1.1 Less complex

The new framework will simplify processes for developing units and qualifications. Collaboration will be encouraged across awarding bodies, sector skills councils (SSCs) and others in developing units, and arrangements will be made for units to be shared across qualifications and awarding bodies.

Our current system has led to the development of a very large number of qualifications, both inside and outside the NQF. As a result there has been duplication, and it has become increasingly difficult for people to understand how the system operates. A more rational framework is proposed with the number of qualifications considerably reduced.

The key proposals for the new framework are:

- the use of a standard template for the development of all units;
- collaboration across different users of the framework in developing units and qualifications;
- a comprehensive database of units;
- the use of credit value to indicate the relative size of achievements;
- the development of a credit transcript within which all individual achievements will be recorded and recognised; and
- establishment of a standard format for all qualification titles.

These features will help users to understand the relative values of different achievements within the framework. It will clarify progression opportunities for individual learners and will simplify decision-making.

2.1.2 More responsive

Some aspects of the existing NQF make it difficult to offer flexible individualised learning opportunities that lead to recognised achievements. In designing the new framework these concerns have been taken into account and it is proposed that:

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

These features will help individuals, employers and providers to plan programmes of learning that lead to frequent and fit-for-purpose recognition of individual achievements. The framework will support

personal and career development as well as progression to further learning opportunities.

2.1.3 More inclusive

A significant number of awards are not currently accredited within the NQF. While the new framework will be more inclusive, clear limits to its scope will need to be established.

- It is a framework for recognising achievement not a framework for defining all learning.
- Some achievements are not appropriate to include within the framework, such as those that are not formally assessed.
- Only achievements that are specified within the requirements of the framework can be recognised.
- Some achievements will be too small to be recognised.
- Only achievements that are subject to the agreed quality-assurance procedures operated by recognised bodies can lead to awards within the framework.
- The development of units and qualifications within the framework will be led by demand. The SfB network will have an important role in identifying need.

Within these limitations, and taking account of the need to develop a simpler framework, it is proposed:

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

The new framework will be designed to support an increase in the number of people gaining recognition of their achievements and will realise the objectives of both the recently published skills strategy for Northern Ireland (November 2004) and the current work being undertaken nationally to reform vocational qualifications.

2.1.4 Less bureaucratic

To develop a less bureaucratic framework the following new features will be built in:

- approval of bodies to make awards based on fit-for-purpose requirements, supported by monitoring of quality assurance processes that take a risk management approach;
- robust quality assurance processes agreed with awarding bodies in order that units can be placed with confidence within a national databank; and

- a requirement for awarding bodies to submit to the Regulatory Authorities the minimum amount of information necessary to accredit a qualification.

2.1.5 More diverse

The framework must recognise diversity both in terms of what it offers and how people use it. Therefore, in establishing the new framework and developing its operational systems, the following potential barriers must be considered.

- The existing powers of the Regulatory Authorities may not be fit for purpose for a wider and more diverse range of achievements.
- The range of organisations approved to develop and award qualifications within the NQF may be too narrow for the intended purposes of a more diverse framework.
- The current design of qualifications within the NQF may be too narrow to accommodate the diversity of achievements that could be recognised within the new framework.
- The current links between accreditation of qualifications and funding may be too restrictive.
- The links between qualifications achievement and Government targets may need to be redefined.

Do you agree or disagree with the features of the new framework



2.2 Benefits of the new framework

2.2.1 To Learners

- The opportunity to earn credit within the framework and accumulate credits towards an appropriate qualification.
- Those who leave their chosen programme of study, for whatever reason, will be able to earn credits for the units completed and use these credits, where relevant, towards an alternative qualification on their return to learning.
- If learners change their mind about their initial target qualification, they may transfer relevant credits to a different qualification without undue costs or bureaucracy.
- Present a record of their achievements that is easily accessible, simple to understand and comparable with all other achievements within the framework.

2.2.2 To employers and employees

- Provide more relevant qualifications and assessment which meet the specific needs of employers and employees.

- There will be an increased range of recognised achievements that are relevant to employers and employees.
- The ability to offer employer-based training programmes which are widely recognised.
- Improved staff retention and fulfilment of career development strategies.
- More informed decisions can be taken when recruiting staff.

2.2.3 To providers

- Develop innovative learning opportunities that meet individual and group needs.
- Plan provision on the basis of learner needs rather than qualification aims, enabling individual routes to achievement to be better managed.
- Make efficient use of e-learning, workshop and other specialised facilities by encouraging the clustering of learning opportunities around units shared between several progression routes.
- Improve retention and progression rates by recognising smaller steps of achievement.
- Reduce the bureaucratic burden of centre approval and learner registration.
- Make use of more learner-centred assessments leading to the award of credit.

2.2.4 To awarding bodies

Awarding bodies have been critical of the current accreditation process. Much of this criticism has already been addressed through the changes to regulation procedures for the current NQF. It is intended to build on these changes in developing the new framework. Within the new system there will be:

- a reduction in the paperwork and time required to admit individual units and accredit qualifications within the framework;
- access to a shared resource that will increase the efficiency and speed with which new qualifications can be developed. (The resource will be a unit databank; for more detail on this see 'The unit databank' at section 3.2.4 on page 15);
- the ability to develop units and qualifications that can meet the needs of individuals and employers;
- greater control over the design of assessment; and
- the continuing development of partnerships across awarding bodies, SSCs and Regulatory Authorities based on a shared interest in the stability of the framework and the successes of learners within it.

Do you agree or disagree with the benefits of the new framework



2.3 Summary

The reforms proposed are radical. If successful they will lead to the development of a framework relevant to the needs of the 21st century. They are necessary because the current arrangements for the NQF are not sustainable over the next ten to twenty years.

The reforms proposed are ambitious. They will lead to an elimination of the current distinctions between achievements gained inside and outside the NQF and will enable all learners to gain credit for their achievements.

The reforms proposed are achievable. They build on the important development work that was pioneered in Northern Ireland by NICATS and examples of good practice identified in different parts of the UK.

3 Structural issues

3.1 The scope of the framework

The new framework will be more inclusive than the NQF. For example, there is the potential for learning that takes place in community-based provision, employer-based training, e-learning programmes and commercial-training organisations to be recognised within the framework. The intention is that the new framework will encompass all formally-assessed achievements, outside higher education, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI). To this end, CCEA will work closely in the development work with QCA in England and ACCAC in Wales.

As Scotland has a different system of qualifications, its framework will remain distinct from that of EWNI. However we would want to look at ways for learners who achieve credits within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to be able to transfer their credits towards qualifications within the new framework, and vice-versa.

We will work to align the higher levels of the new framework with the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ). Our aim is that all learners will have the opportunity to gain credit at the higher levels of the new framework and transfer these credits towards qualifications within the FHEQ, and vice-versa.

We will also work with European partners to ensure that the general principles on which the new framework is constructed are consistent with the vision of a European system of credit accumulation and transfer.

3.2 The design and development of units

3.2.1 Unit specification

To create coherent and frequent opportunities for achievement within the new framework, all achievements will be structured as units. It is important to note that units are independent entities – not simply ‘parts’ of a qualification. Qualifications are ‘made up of’, not ‘broken down into,’ units and, hence, units will be the building blocks for all qualifications within the new framework.

A standard electronic template will be established for units. This will be available to all users and will include the following features:

- title
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- level
- credit value
- a unique identifying code

(For definitions of these terms see the Glossary at page 27)

All units within the framework will be identified at one of nine levels (from Entry Level to Level Eight). In determining the level of a unit it is intended to build upon the well established NICATS level descriptors.

The following definitions for credit and credit value are widely agreed.

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

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

Within the new framework achievement will be recognised through the award of credit.

3.2.2 Developing and submitting units

To support responsiveness and flexibility within the new framework, the process of unit development can proceed independent of qualifications development.

The new framework will make a clear distinction between:

- the process of developing and submitting units to the framework; and
- the assessment of units leading to the award of credit (the assessment and award of credit will be the responsibility of recognised awarding bodies).

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

The Regulatory Authorities will quality-assure all units admitted to the framework. If the organisation submitting units is a recognised awarding body, the Regulatory Authorities will apply agreed quality-assurance and monitoring procedures. However, if the organisation submitting units is not a recognised body, then the Regulatory Authorities will establish a committee to decide whether the units should be admitted to the framework.

3.2.4 The unit databank

Units admitted to the framework will be held in a national databank. Only

units developed and approved within the standard unit template (see section 3.2.1 on page 14) will be admitted to the databank.

The information on units in the databank will be available to any organisation including providers such as colleges, advice and guidance staff and employers.

The Regulatory Authorities will discuss with stakeholders the most appropriate model for developing this databank. The existing OpenQuals platform will be built upon to hold the data, but it may be appropriate to share the concept of 'ownership' of the databank with a broader constituency. This will be discussed further with stakeholders.

The databank will be an important tool for awarding bodies in the process of developing individual qualifications. It will also help reduce unnecessary duplication of units and make the new framework easier to use. This process of rationalisation will operate through:

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

Two mechanisms will ensure that the databank contains an appropriate range of units. The first is a requirement for organisations to undertake a needs analysis before submitting units to the databank. The Regulatory Authorities will want to ensure that unnecessary duplication of units is avoided.

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

The Regulatory Authorities would want to ensure that units within the new framework can be shared across different qualifications and awarding bodies. Discussions will be held with key stakeholders as to how the database will be maintained and organised. It will be important to establish and maintain, where appropriate, connections between this databank and SSSA's databank of National Occupational Standards.

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for the design and development of units



3.3 The design and development of qualifications

3.3.1 Rules of combination

Within the framework achievements will be recognised through the award of credit at unit and qualification level. Since qualifications are made up of units the credit awarded for qualifications will be determined by defined rules of combination.

Rules of combination set the credits that must be achieved and the units that must be completed in order to achieve a qualification. In some instances, rules of combination will also include grading criteria for the qualification (grading is discussed further at section 4.4 on page 21).

Some qualifications, for example occupational qualifications, will have rules of combination which are tightly specified while others will have more open rules that permit a wide selection of units. The degree of flexibility within any set of rules of combination will be determined primarily by the purpose of the qualification. In many instances these rules will be constructed by explicit reference to the relevant sector qualifications strategy.

Any credit awarded to a learner for achievement of a unit must be linked by the rules of combination to at least one qualification. However, learners may earn credits without seeking to combine them towards a qualification, and providers may offer programmes that lead to the award of credit(s) rather than to a whole qualification.

More detailed guidance will be provided by the Regulatory Authorities on the development of rules of combination. This is an area which will require further discussion, particularly with SSCs.

3.3.2 Developing qualifications through rules of combination

The rules of combination will form the cornerstone for the development of all qualifications. It is proposed that qualifications for accreditation within the framework can only be submitted by recognised awarding bodies. Awarding bodies submitting qualifications for accreditation within the framework must ensure that these rules of combination are fit for purpose, manageable and responsive to the needs of individual learners.

Awarding bodies will have final responsibility for submitting rules of combination for accreditation within the framework. In some instances, however, the combination rules will need to be consistent with the requirements of other stakeholders, such as professional bodies. Sector qualifications strategies will shape rules of combination for qualifications that have an employment-related purpose.

Within these rules of combination, units may be:

- developed specifically for a proposed qualification; or
- drawn from the unit databank.

Where units are related to occupational standards, sector qualifications strategies will guide the development of qualifications.

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

3.3.3 Core, optional and elective units

Building on established practice within many qualifications already accredited within the NQF, we propose that the rules of combination for qualifications should be built around the concept of core, optional and elective units.

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

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

The rules of combination for a qualification may set criteria on the choice of elective units within any qualification. For example, the choice of elective units may be restricted by level, by subject area, by size, or by a combination of two or more of these parameters. There will be no requirement to include elective units in rules of combination.

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

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

3.3.4 Qualification titles

It is proposed to establish a standard format for all qualification titles. The level of a qualification will be included within its title. This follows from current practice within the NQF.

It is also proposed to identify the relative size of a qualification by linking the terms 'award', 'certificate' and 'diploma' to the credit value of the qualification. We will consult further on the appropriate range of credit

values to be associated with these terms. At this stage we seek views on the general use of these terms to indicate qualification size, as set out in the table below.

Title	award	certificate	diploma
Size	small	medium	large

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

3.3.5 Qualification groups

It is proposed that the new framework will have groups of qualifications, each group having a shared purpose. Occupational qualifications are an example of a group of qualifications with a shared purpose. It is possible that other groups of qualifications (for example entry level qualifications) may be identified in the future.

Within the new framework it is proposed that occupational qualifications will have a wider range of purposes and design features than NVQs and will describe qualifications that:

- have a clear employment-related purpose;
- are based on national occupational standards; and
- are identified within sector qualifications strategies as making a clear contribution to workforce development.

Occupational qualifications will need to meet specific requirements in order to be accredited within the new framework. These include the development of rules of combination consistent with the relevant sector qualifications strategy. Awarding bodies will have to ensure that units within these qualifications are based on relevant occupational standards and reflect workforce development needs.

It is proposed that these qualifications will be identified possibly using a kite mark to signal the significance of their relationship to occupational standards. The nature of this identification will need to be discussed further with the SfB network.

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for the design and development of qualifications



4 Operational issues

4.1 Credit accumulation and transfer

Mutual recognition within a credit framework refers not only to the sharing of units in the design of qualifications, but also the mutual recognition of units achieved by learners.

In the new framework credits will be a currency of achievement that can be accumulated and transferred. For example, a learner will be able to use the credit achieved towards a qualification awarded by one body for the achievement requirements of a relevant qualification awarded by another body.

Mutual recognition places a collective obligation on all awarding bodies to recognise and accept the credits awarded by all other awarding bodies within the framework. The framework's quality-assurance processes should foster mutual trust across awarding bodies. Credit accumulation and transfer will have an impact on the way awarding bodies operate. This will be discussed further with awarding bodies.

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for credit accumulation and transfer



4.2 The credit transcript

To enable credit accumulation and transfer to operate there needs to be an electronic record of learner achievement developed. Awarding bodies will need to be able to enter and retrieve accurate and reliable data to learners' records. Learners will be able to access their record and present it as evidence of their achievement; they will not be able to amend their record. It is proposed that this record is called a 'credit transcript'. An essential feature of the system will be a 'unique learner identifier'. This will be shared by all bodies awarding credit. Learners will access their transcript through a code based on this identifier; they will also be able to print a paper version of their transcript. All bodies operating within the new framework must be able to exchange data about the credit achievements of learners through the transcript.

The details of this development will be discussed further with key stakeholders before agreeing a technical specification for the transcript. The current development work being undertaken by CCEA on the progress file will be taken into account when developing the transcript.

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for the credit transcript



4.3 Assessment

Flexible and responsive assessment arrangements will be introduced for use within the new framework. All units within the new framework must be capable of being assessed so that learners can be awarded credit for their achievement. Requiring all awarding bodies to develop arrangements for unit-based assessment may create additional burdens and bureaucratic costs. Therefore, measures to reduce the overall burdens and costs will be introduced. For example, information about the method of assessment will be excluded from the unit specification, encouraging awarding bodies to develop assessment arrangements that are particularly suited to learners and providers. The unit specification will also enable awarding bodies to develop assessment guidance that can be applied to units of a similar type. Awarding bodies will be able to produce assessment guidance for centres that covers a number of different units, reducing the bureaucracy of assessment for centres.

The standard unit format will allow electronic assessment as an option and support the business case for developing e-assessment products through the sharing of units between qualifications and awarding bodies. We also propose to allow awarding bodies to decide the most appropriate form of assessment within the context of accredited qualifications. The Regulatory Authorities will not specify the type of assessment arrangements to be used for individual units. In some instances, however, these may be specified within sector qualifications strategies, or by other industry regulators.

The Regulatory Authorities will ensure that all recognised awarding bodies have quality assured assessment in place. They will establish procedures for recognising and monitoring these systems. This will ensure that the outcomes of the assessment are credible with all key stakeholders. The detailed quality assurance proposed is outlined in section 4.5 on page 22).

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for assessment



4.4 Grading

Grading is the ability to differentiate between individual achievement for a unit or qualification at a specified level. The framework will allow some

qualifications and units to have a grading system. A range of different grading systems may be required in the new framework. We propose that grading should be a feature of individual qualifications rather than of the framework itself.

As credits are awarded on the basis of completion of a unit, any grading criteria applied must be above and beyond the assessment criteria within the unit and cannot compromise an awarding body's responsibility to award credit to learners. Detailed arrangements for grading will be discussed with stakeholders.

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for grading



4.5 Quality assurance

4.5.1 The recognition of bodies to award credits and qualifications

If mutual recognition of credits within the framework is to work, all awarding bodies must have confidence in the agreed quality-assurance processes. As part of the recognition process for bodies making awards within the framework, the Regulatory Authorities will make sure that each recognised body has quality-assured systems in place for the following processes:

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

The Regulatory Authorities will establish requirements and procedures that authorise bodies to operate within the new framework. All awarding bodies recognised to offer qualifications within the new framework will need to meet the quality assurance requirements.

The monitoring of awarding body systems will be based on an extension of the principles of risk management already being developed for use within the NQF. Failure of the credit system to meet robust quality assurance

would be extremely damaging. The Regulatory Authorities will, therefore, pay particular attention to this risk in its early monitoring of awarding bodies.

4.5.2 The accreditation of qualifications

In accrediting qualifications within the framework, the documentation required by the Regulatory Authorities for individual qualifications will be reduced significantly. Although awarding bodies will be expected to provide comprehensive and detailed information about individual qualifications to approved centres, assessors, verifiers and learners themselves, this information will not need to be submitted to the Regulatory Authorities for accreditation. The key feature of a qualification within the framework will be its rules of combination. In general, only these rules of combination will need to be accredited in order to include a qualification within the new framework. In some circumstances, other organisations may impose additional criteria for the accreditation of certain qualifications. For example:

- the rules of combination for accredited qualifications relating to occupational standards must conform to the qualifications strategy of the relevant sector;
- some sector qualifications strategies may require particular forms of assessment to be used in occupational qualifications or in components of these qualifications; and
- some industry regulators may influence or determine rules of combination.

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

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

Do you agree or disagree with the proposals for quality assurance



5 Roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders

The implementation of the new framework will require key stakeholders to review their roles and responsibilities. Detailed discussions will be required with the Regulatory Authorities in order that a coherent system can be put in place. The following suggestions for roles and responsibilities indicate the nature of the changes required for key stakeholders.

5.1 Regulatory Authorities

The suggested roles and responsibilities for the Regulatory Authorities within the new framework are as follows:

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

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

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

5.2 Recognised awarding bodies

The suggested roles and responsibilities for recognised awarding bodies within the new framework are as follows:

- establishing effective Management Information Systems (MIS) to track, record, and recognise learner achievements within the proposed credit transcript, manage more frequent assessments of achievement and more frequent certification for learners;

- developing the capacity to manage the new operational requirements of the framework particularly in relation to risk management;
- enhancing the support role for centres;
- having a central role in unit development along with relevant partners;
- submitting units to the unit database;
- agreeing rules of combination for qualifications;
- awarding credit to learners on achievement of units and qualifications;
- accepting the principle of 'mutual recognition' in relation to units and credits within the rules of combination;
- working with Regulatory Authorities to implement the principle of 'single validation' in the recognition of centres; and
- having in place arrangements for awarding qualifications based on completion of the rules of combination for that qualification for registered learners. Regardless of which awarding body (or bodies) has awarded credits to a learner, the awarding body with whom the learner is registered when he or she completes the rules of combination leading to that qualification will be responsible for awarding it.

5.3 The Skills for Business (SfB) network

The suggested roles and responsibilities for the SfB network within the new framework are as follows:

- identifying the knowledge, understanding, and skills people need to meet the requirements of employers in different sectors;
- developing, maintaining and updating occupational standards;
- developing sector qualifications strategies;
- ensuring that qualifications included in the framework relating to occupational standards conform to sector skills qualifications strategies;
- in partnership with awarding bodies, developing units which relate to occupational standards;
- ensuring that the national occupational standards directory is linked to the unit databank so that units related to occupational standards can be clearly identified by individuals, employers and providers; and
- promoting occupational qualifications and helping employers to understand the framework.

Do you agree or disagree with the suggested roles and responsibilities for key stakeholders



5.4 The transition to the new framework

CCEA believes that the new framework for achievement should be seen as a development in the nature and scope of the current National Qualifications

Framework (NQF). The Regulatory Authorities will work to ensure a smooth transition from the NQF to the new framework. To this end it is intended to consult with key stakeholders before a time-scale for transition is finalised.

Glossary of terms

Term	Definition	Comment
Assessment criteria	Descriptions of the requirements a learner is expected to meet to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved	Assessment criteria are grouped into sets that are related to each learning outcome in a unit
Award	A certificate issued to an individual that recognises an achievement	There are two types of award – credits and qualifications
Awarding body	A body recognised to award credits or qualifications	A body is recognised once it meets the regulatory authorities' requirements
Core units	Units in a set of rules of combination that must be achieved for the qualification to be awarded	Although most rules of combination will identify core units, it will be possible for qualifications to be constructed of core units or optional units
Credit	An award made to a learner in recognition of the quality-assured achievement of designated learning outcomes at a particular level	One credit is awarded for achievement of those learning outcomes in a unit that a learner is expected to achieve in 10 learning hours
Credit accumulation	The process of putting together a combination of credits to meet the achievement requirements of a qualification	Although learners may record the achievement of any number of credits in their credit transcript, credit accumulation refers to the process of combining credits for the purpose of achieving a qualification

Term	Definition	Comment
Credit framework	A set of interlocking technical specifications that collectively provide the basis for supporting a system of credit accumulation and transfer	The new framework for achievement goes beyond a credit system by combining the features of credit with qualifications
Credit transcript	The electronic document in which all credits awarded to a learner are recorded and stored	The credit transcript is owned by an individual learner, but credits are recorded in the transcript by approved awarding bodies
Credit transfer	The process of using a credit or credits awarded in the context of one qualification towards the achievement requirements of another qualification	The facility to transfer credits is governed by the rules of combination for qualifications
Credit value	The number of credits that may be awarded to a learner for the successful achievement of the learning outcomes of a unit	The credit value of a unit is an integral part of the unit specification. The credit value of a qualification is determined by aggregating the credit values of all units required to achieve it
Elective units	Units in a set of rules of combination that are not named individually	Credits gained through elective units may be part of a qualification, but are not an essential part
Learning outcome	A statement of what a learner can be expected to know, understand or do	Learning outcomes are grouped into a coherent and explicit unit

Term	Definition	Comment
Level	An indication of the relative demand, complexity and/or depth of achievement, and of the autonomy of the learner in demonstrating that achievement	The level of a qualification is determined by the level of the majority of units for that qualification
Named units	Core and/or optional units in rules of combination	Named units are listed in the rules of combination for a qualification
Optional units	Units in rules of combination from which a designated number of credits must be achieved and which offer some choice to individual learners	A qualification may include some optional units alongside core units or may be made up solely of optional units
Qualification	A specified combination of units offered to a learner	'qualification' is something offered to a learner as well as something a learner achieves
Rules of combination	A description of the requirements for credit accumulation for the achievement of a named qualification	The new framework for achievement does not support the development of rules of combination outside the context of a qualification
Sector qualifications strategy	A specification of the current and future needs of a sector, with a timeline and implementation plan	These strategies are developed by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) in partnership with the Regulatory Authorities
Unit	A coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, having a title, credit value and level	These specifications for a unit, together with its unique identifier, are complete and may not be supplemented with additional information in a unit

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