

### 0801 - ACCUMULATING, ACCREDITING AND VALIDATING FORMAL LEARNING

#### AN OVERVIEW OF COMPETENCE-BASED QUALIFICATIONS IN THE UK

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) are similar, though the qualifications frameworks in which they are located differ. (See 0201). The purpose of developing NVQs and SVQs was to improve coherence of the national system of qualifications by removing duplicate qualifications, which were similar in aim and function but were expressed in a different form and to allow competence to be recognised independently of the location, duration and/or nature of learning, thus allowing assessment of existing competence in the labour force.

The National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs and SVQs) are a statement of competence clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment, further education and training. Assessment covers:

- Skills to specified standards;
- Relevant knowledge and understanding;
- The ability to use skills and to apply knowledge and understanding to relevant tasks.

More than 750 NVQs are available across the eleven defined areas. They vary by title and level. NVQs cover levels 1-5, which equates approximately to the ISCED levels. A review of vocational qualifications in the UK is currently under way. A new qualifications and credit (QCF) framework is being developed in England as the successor to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The new structure is designed to update and enhance the current system, implementing a flexible and robust unit-based qualifications framework that promotes credit accumulation and transfer. The new framework will be broader and more inclusive, accurately recognising achievement across the full range of quality general, specialist and vocational qualifications.

NVQs are based on national occupational standards that are designed in a unit format. When a key occupational function is described and analysed it is broken down into the smaller functions of an occupation. A function is described in a unit of a standard. Some functions appear in several different occupations and therefore when qualifications are designed the same unit may appear in different qualifications. This creates a unit credit that can be transferred from one qualification to another. Units can also be accumulated from different awarding bodies as NVQ units are based on the same national occupational standard. This is a closed system in as much as only unit credits can be accepted. There is no strong incentive for describing each unit by level nor for ascribing size, because there is a common understanding that a unit represents competence in a named occupational function. The precise function is the only piece of information necessary for employment purposes.

The main institutions involved in regulating and administering NVQs are:

**Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA):** QCA ensures that NVQ qualifications meet particular criteria and are broadly comparable across different sectors and is responsible for developing a new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). QCA accredits (formally recognises) proposals for NVQ awards developed by sector bodies and awarding bodies, and quality assures and audits the activity of awarding bodies<sup>19</sup>.

**Sector bodies:** The Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), overseen by the UKCES identify, define and update employment-based standards of competence for agreed occupations. These are approved against criteria by a group made up of the regulatory

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<sup>19</sup> In 2008, a responsibility for regulation and accreditation of qualifications was taken over from QCA by Ofqual, a new agency

authorities and the UK administrations. National Occupational Standards form the basis for NVQs. NVQs are accredited against NVQ criteria by QCA.

**Awarding bodies:** Awarding bodies have a dual role. With sector bodies, they are jointly responsible for the assessment methods of NVQs based on the assessment strategy of the sector bodies, and they are also responsible for the implementation of individual NVQs. They approve centres that wish to offer assessment for NVQs. Awarding bodies monitor the assessment process and award NVQs and unit certificates. They undertake external verification to ensure that candidates are being assessed fairly and consistently across all centres.

**Assessment centres:** Organise the assessment of people seeking to qualify for an NVQ. Training Providers and Further Education Colleges: Many candidates pursuing the NVQ route to qualifications will gain their qualification at work or through a programme provided by a further education college or some other training provider.

**Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA):** In Scotland the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accredits all Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

## **0802 - ACCUMULATING, ACCREDITING AND VALIDATING NON-FORMAL/INFORMAL LEARNING**

### **VALIDATION AND RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING**

Arrangements for the recognition of non-formal learning are linked to the outcomes-orientation of NVQ qualifications and outcomes-based non-N/SVQ qualifications. Any learner, employed or not, who can provide evidence that meet the demands of the evidence requirements for a qualification can be awarded credit. However, the burden of providing evidence and the practicalities of assessment of non-formal/informal learning are considerable. Examples of good practice do exist but the problems of cost and complexity are widely reported. The importance of non-formal and/or informal learning is clearly acknowledged in employers' increasing use in selection of accounts of experience, rather than formal qualifications, as evidenced in QCA research on trends in the use of qualifications.

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) assists students to gain vocational, academic or continuous professional development recognition or credits for prior learning and experience. APL was strongly promoted in the early 1990s, and became established as a non-traditional entry route to further and higher education, though often not to the most prestigious courses.

Typically, a portfolio evidencing the learning is produced, indicating the level and areas of expertise, then the level and content of the learning that will be assessed. APL is most likely to apply to a mature applicant.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has taken a strategic interest in the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in England. Pilots were conducted, for example, to develop ways in which the informal learning at youth centres can be recognised, thus helping social excluded young people on a pathway towards achieving qualifications. Also, in 2004, LSC launched a system for providing informal recognition of the learning outcomes of adult part-time courses that do not of themselves lead to a qualification. Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RAPRA) approach was adopted as one of the new measures of success in LSCs' strategy. RAPRA was accepted as a valid method of recognising and recording learners' achievement in learning where more usual measures (e.g. qualifications) are not appropriate. Since then significant changes were introduced in terms of funding of non-accredited provision, which led to sharp fall in number of adult learners and hence reduced the impact of the approach.

In Scotland national standards-based vocational qualifications are based on pre-determined standards that are publicly available. They focus on what the individual can do and are therefore a means of certificating positive achievement. They do not depend on fixed syllabuses, fixed location or fixed time. Therefore they fit with the development of a flexible and coherent qualifications framework that can give recognition to non-formal/informal learning. The accreditation of prior learning enables individuals to gain recognition and certification based on evidence of what they know and can do, often acquired without the benefit of formal instruction. Recognition of both

formal and informal learning is important to aid progression into both further or higher education and further learning.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has a set of guidelines on recognition of prior learning and experiential learning (APEL), allows credit rating and levelling of learning in terms of core, generic skills rather than subject-specific learning.

### **0803 - IMPACT OF EU POLICY COOPERATION**

The UK has three different qualification frameworks in each of the parts of the UK. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have a three-country framework, known as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which has nine levels, including an entry level. At present, NQF in England includes only full qualifications (not units), which meet statutory requirements and many qualifications are outside the framework. It did not cover HE. Within this, Wales has its own Credit and Qualifications Framework (CQFW). Scotland has a separate own credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), based on 12 levels, which includes access levels. Currently, England, Wales and Northern Ireland are working on the development of a more inclusive unit-based qualifications framework, underpinned by a system of credit accumulation and transfer across the three countries. This framework will be aligned with the Scottish CQF and EQF.

The EQF's focus on learning outcomes is consistent with the development of qualifications frameworks across the UK. Both national and sectoral qualifications in the UK are being matched to the EQF through these national qualifications frameworks. Thus in Scotland, a mapping exercise has been conducted between the SCQF and EQF levels to ascertain the alignment.

Some concerns have been expressed about the lack of clarity in the proposed EQF how lower levels of qualifications such as those for learners with low skill levels would be accommodated. The framework for lifelong learning should be generic and inclusive of all types of learners, in UK's view.

The UK supports the objectives of the proposed ECVET system: increased transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and qualifications are all important to enable greater mobility and ensure that lifelong learning becomes a reality. In particular, the UK strongly supports the emphasis on learning outcomes as the primary means of describing achievement. This is consistent with the development of vocational qualification systems across the UK, and should help move towards a system where individuals are recognised for what they achieve, rather than how long they have studied.

However, the UK is concerned about the potential problems arising from having separate credit systems for higher education (ECTS) and vocational education and training (ECVET). There is a need to break down the artificial barriers between 'vocational' and 'academic' education. The UK have expressed concern that the ECVET proposals may not facilitate the mobility or credit transfer between VET and HE, given ECTS's focus on workload, and ECVET's focus on learning outcomes. Moreover, the presence of two credit systems has the potential to confuse stakeholders. The UK wishes the two systems be evaluated and ways to bring ECTS and ECVET closer together be examined, so that they are compatible, or to create a single credit accumulation and transfer system, which encompasses both academic and vocationally orientated learning.

### **0804 - FACILITATING EU MOBILITY**

The UK support the developments of EQF and ECVET, which both have a potential to help increase transnational mobility of individuals, as well as aid the development of institutional and sectoral partnerships across Europe.

Since June 2007, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) has led on the implementation of the Directive and the draft EC (Recognition of Professional Qualifications) Regulations 2007 ('the DIUS Regulations'), which apply to all 'general systems' professions, i.e. those whose training conditions are not harmonised across the EU. Some of the provisions will apply to the sectoral professions, for example,

doctors, architects, whose training conditions are harmonised in the EU. DIUS have conducted a consultation exercise (May to October 2007) on the draft implementing regulations, as well. The follow-up of the consultations can be found at: <http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations>.

The DIUS have liaised with the sectors' regulatory and professional bodies as well as professionals at large. It will consider feedback from the consultation and recommend any resulting amendments to the draft legislation to Ministers, before laying the regulations before Parliament in the autumn 2007.

Relevant government departments lead on transposing measures relating to different professions. Devolved administrations have different settlement arrangements for different professions and regulations concerning different professions will be made in relation to the whole of the UK or to different countries of the UK.

The UK encourages efforts to exchange best practice in the areas of quality of qualifications by supporting some bilateral initiatives, for example, twinning arrangements between the French colleges and lycées and UK language colleges in collaboration with the Technology College Trust.