



**Qualifications
& Credit
Framework**

LSIS

**LEARNING
AND SKILLS
IMPROVEMENT
SERVICE**



QCF 'My Development' Learning Resource



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QCF ‘My Development’ Learning Resource

This Continuing Professional Development (CPD) resource is designed for practitioners and curriculum managers to help develop your own understanding of key aspects of the QCF and prepare for delivering responsive provision which meets the needs of employers, learners and communities.

This QCF ‘My Development’ suite covers five themes:

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Also available: [‘My Development’ learning resource for Foundation Learning](#)

Key concepts of the QCF

The information and activities in this theme will help you understand the basic features of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and prepare you for deeper exploration in the subsequent themes.

This theme covers the following topics:

[The Qualifications and Credit Framework \(QCF\)](#)

[Credits, Levels, Units and Qualifications](#)

[The Personal Learning Record](#)

[Implementing the QCF](#)

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

The vocational qualifications system has recently undergone changes to make it more flexible and innovative and more responsive to the demands and needs of both employers and learners. The Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) is one aspect of a wider vocational qualification reform programme and was launched in November 2008 as a new framework for accrediting and awarding vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The framework aims to simplify the complex world of vocational qualifications and to support the increase in work-based learning leading to nationally recognised qualifications.

The QCF:

- provides formal accreditation for a wider range of achievements, many of which were not included in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which the QCF replaced
- uses credit-based units to provide formal recognition of smaller chunks of learning that can build up, step-by-step, towards full qualifications
- provides an organising structure that describes the relationships between all the units and qualifications in the national system
- helps learners achieve skills and qualifications that meet industry needs and their own needs in terms of employment, progression, career and personal development
- provides flexibility for learners and employers.

A qualification is defined as vocational when its primary purpose is to:

- provide learners with knowledge, skills and/or competence directly relevant to work or employment, either within one or more sectors or for specific occupations

and/or

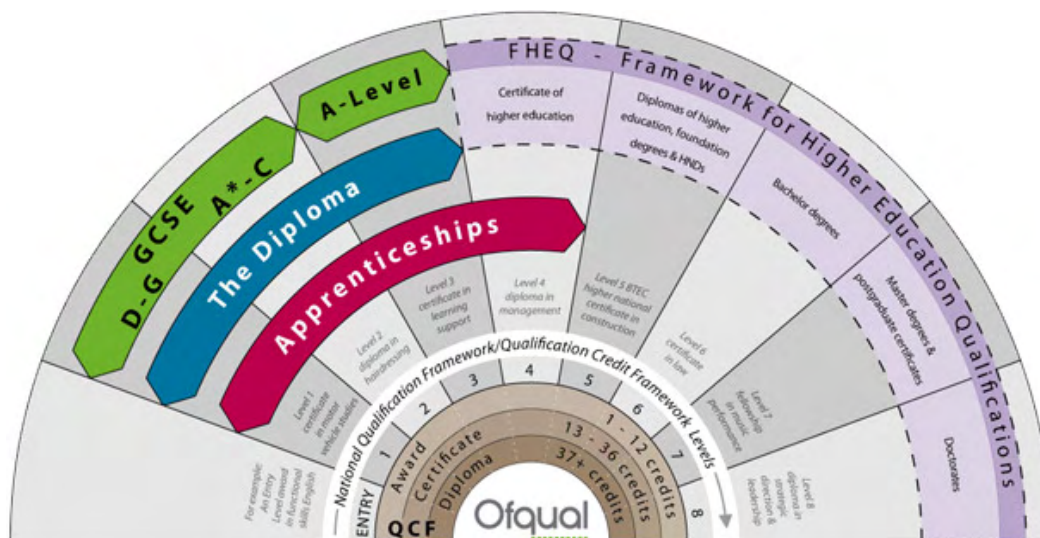
- provide enhanced labour market opportunities for those currently in work or employment.

General benefits of the QCF

- **Easy to understand** – the QCF provides a single, simple and rational structure for all units and qualifications. This single, consistent structure and language make it easier to understand and compare different qualifications
- **Transferability** – the QCF allows learners to transfer their learning achievements, recognised through credit-based units, to different qualifications rather than having to repeat learning and assessment
- **Flexibility** – qualifications built from smaller sets of achievement create greater flexibility. Many qualifications in the QCF include options allowing them to be adapted to suit different learners and employers
- **Quality assured** – *Ofqual*, together with its partner regulators in Wales (DFES) and Northern Ireland (CCEA), is responsible for regulation of the QCF that ensure all units, qualifications and recognised organisations operating in the QCF are quality assured
- **Geared towards progression** – opportunities for progression can be built into the design of qualifications and hence into learning.

The QCF and other frameworks

Click the image to see Ofqual's explanation of the key characteristics of recognised qualifications



www.ofqual.gov.uk/popups/explaining-qualifications/

All UK qualification frameworks are referenced to the European Qualification Framework (EQF). For more information, see www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualification-and-assessment-framework/eqf.

Linking the QCF to the qualification frameworks of other countries has a number of benefits:

- promoting a common understanding of learning and skills that helps increase the status of both the learning and the qualifications completed in different countries
- helping individuals, employers, education providers and research agencies make simpler and more accurate comparisons between different learning and skills systems
- encouraging links to be made between the learning components and qualifications in different countries
- making it easier for individuals to describe their learning and achievements to recruiters in other countries
- enabling individuals to judge the relative value of qualifications internationally
- supporting labour mobility between different countries.

Credits, Levels, Units and Qualifications

Credits

Credits are the basic currency of the QCF. One credit is awarded for 10 hours work or 'learning time'. Learning time is different from 'guided learning hours' because it may include private study or research, on site practice at work, as well as time spent with tutors or other staff. However, this is just a nominal figure and doesn't indicate the number of hours of learning and support to be delivered by providers – it only indicates the average amount of time a learner might need to complete the unit (its size). The amount of learning time required will depend on the individual learner.

Learners can build up and 'bank' credits; this is known as 'credit accumulation'. Sometimes, credits achieved in one qualification can be transferred towards the achievement of another qualification. This is known as credit transfer. The ability to bank and transfer credits means learners don't have to repeat learning and assessment unnecessarily. The process is known as 'credit accumulation and transfer' (CAT) and will be explored further later.

Levels

There are nine levels in the QCF ranging from Entry level to Level 8. Entry level is divided into three further categories: Entry 1, Entry 2, and Entry 3. The level previously known as pre-Entry is incorporated within Entry 1 in the QCF.

There are similarities between NQF and QCF levels. For example, QCF Level 1 can be seen as broadly equivalent to NVQ level 1; QCF level 2 is broadly equivalent to GCSE A*-C grades; QCF level 3 is broadly equivalent to AS/A level. In addition, QCF level 6 is broadly equivalent to an honours degree and Level 8 to a PhD. There is a set of level descriptors for the QCF that enables every QCF unit to be assigned consistently to one of the levels in the framework.

Every unit in the QCF is assigned a level that indicates the relative demand, complexity and/or depth of achievement and/or the autonomy of the learner in demonstrating that achievement.

Every qualification in the QCF is also assigned a level. **However, qualifications may be made up of units at more than one level.** For example, a Level 2 qualification may include units at Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 - but over 50% of the credits **must** be achieved at Level 2 or above.

Units

Units are the basic building blocks for all qualifications in the QCF – every QCF qualification is built up from QCF units. This is a fundamentally different approach from designing whole qualifications and then breaking them down into separate units.

All units in the QCF have the same structure. They all contain:

- **A title:** this appears on a learner's record. Many units appear in more than one qualification so the unit title has to express content clearly
- **Credit value:** showing how much time it takes, on average, to complete the unit (one credit notionally representing 10 hours of 'learning time')
- **Level:** showing the level of challenge for the unit
- **Learning outcomes:** what a learner will know, understand or be able to do as a result of learning
- **Assessment criteria:** the requirements a learner is expected to meet to demonstrate that the learning outcome(s) have been achieved.

There is no partial achievement, so if a unit is worth two credits a learner cannot achieve one credit for achieving half of the learning outcomes.

Units can count towards more than one qualification - another key difference from NQF qualifications. It means that when qualifications are designed, any units already in the QCF that can count towards that qualification can be identified at the start.

As well as counting towards at least one qualification, every unit in the QCF must be capable of being assessed independently, although, in some instances, assessment activities will produce evidence for more than one unit. This means that learners can gain formal recognition for smaller sets of learning achievements and can accumulate these over time building them up towards full qualifications.

Qualifications

There are three sizes of qualifications within the QCF:

- Awards (1 to 12 credits)
- Certificates (13 to 36 credits)
- Diplomas (37 credits or more).

The diagram below illustrates how there can be an Award at Level 1 or an Award at Level 8 because the qualification type represents the **size** of a qualification, not how challenging it is. In the same way, a Certificate or Diploma at level 1 has the same level of challenge as an Award at level 1 but represents a

larger volume of study and requires the learner to achieve a greater number of credits (13 – 36 for the Certificate and 37+ for the Diploma).



Diagram 1: The architecture of the QCF (Source: Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency)

Some awarding organisations offer an 'extended' award, certificate, or diploma as a 'stepping stone' across a particular sized qualification. For example, OCR offer a 13-credit Entry Level Certificate in Life and Living Skills and a 25-credit Extended Certificate with many common optional units between them.

Further information

For further information, see:

- [SFA's QCF iGuide](#)
- [QCF Frequently Asked Questions \(SFA, July 2011\)](#)

Test your understanding: Key features of the QCF - units, credits and levels

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **Units**, **Credits** or **Levels** as the most appropriate label for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
They specify the key achievements that learners must complete.		
They do not depend on the amount or volume of achievement.		
They can be accumulated towards whole qualifications.		
They have a single level.		
They are a recognition of achievement made to learners.		
There are nine of these in the QCF.		
They indicate the volume of achievement.		
They are the basic building blocks of all QCF qualifications.		
They may be transferred between providers and awarding organisations.		
They are the currency of the QCF.		
They have a credit value that stays constant whatever qualification they are in.		
They represent the level of challenge or difficulty.		
They are based on a consistent set of descriptors.		
They indicate the standards that learners must meet.		
Every QCF unit will have just one of these.		

Pause for thought

1. How could units, credits, and levels and the characteristics of these QCF design features make your provision more responsive to different learners' needs?

Consider:

- Units allow learners to complete smaller steps of learning and have these recognised through the award of credit. It is possible to identify units from a range to match a learner's starting point and intended destination.
- Learners can achieve some units at a higher level than others. For example, a learner studying for a level 2 Diploma in Retail Skills with a part-time job in a DIY store may achieve a minimum of 50% of their units at Level 2 but may have an aptitude, prior experience or a particular opportunity to demonstrate the ability to achieve some units at Level 3 (e.g. customer care or stock-taking). Conversely, a learner with less experience might work to achieve some units at Level 1 (e.g. contribute to food safety in a retail environment). Providing opportunities that reflect an individual learner's profile is motivational and will facilitate progression. Because each unit must be capable of contributing to at least one qualification, no learning is lost.
- Credits can be accumulated over time allowing learners to fit learning into their life and other commitments. If learners move location they shouldn't have to start again or repeat learning and assessment as the credits they have already achieved for a qualification can be transferred.

2. Employment-focused training aims to provide programmes that offer the best foundation for sustainable employment. Some of these programmes may not lead to full qualifications but can focus on personal skills development. Others require a focus on achieving a full level 2 or level 3 qualification, perhaps started during training and completed once the learner gains employment.

Think about employment-focused training from the perspective of both providers and learners. What opportunities can you see for using the features of units, credits, and levels in the QCF to respond in a flexible way? Consider how your organisation could use these features to:

- provide coherent and personalised programmes to cater to specific needs and intended employment destinations. These might include employability skills, personal development skills, using the flexibility of the QCF to provide an occupationally specific qualification or package of units - or any combination of these. Such a programme may include units at different levels.
- select units that are geared towards known (possibly locally) employer needs and opportunities. This may provide a focus on more industry-based or occupationally specific skills, perhaps at particular level(s), to suit local job opportunities but employability skills and softer skills such as team-working and communication are important too.
- ensure that learners claim any credits they have achieved before moving on. Many learners on employment-focused training will be on short courses, and want to take up job opportunities as soon as they occur. Credits can be awarded for smaller episodes of learning where the outcomes in a unit have been met.
- deliver units that can be built up towards full qualifications when a person enters work. This may involve the learner taking units on employability skills alongside some knowledge-based units for a particular sector or job role. A learner may then work towards achieving the additional skills-based units for the job role while they are at work. In some cases, they may be able to complete a small qualification (an Award) and build on this to complete a larger qualification such as a Certificate while at work.

The Personal Learning Record

One of the key distinguishing features of the QCF is the use of credit as a currency of achievement. Learners achieve units of learning that are all assigned a credit value. This credit can be accumulated and transferred by the learner to build over time towards a qualification as governed by the 'rules of combination' which will be explored later.

The **Learning Records Service (LRS)** – which used to be called Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) is designed to support learners at all levels to access, manage and use their own achievement information such as qualifications, awards or training received as they progress through education, training and lifelong learning.

- The LRS provides shared services across the education sector and is built on the principle of *collect once, use many times*. It facilitates the flexibility and potential benefits of the QCF.
- The LRS generates a Unique Learner Number (ULN) for every school leaver aged 14+. The ULN acts as a single common identifier for UK learners and is the learner's passport to their QCF achievement data. Providers and advisors play a critical role in ensuring that a learner is initially assigned a ULN and is supported to identify and verify their ULN throughout their learning career. Awarding organisations will be dependant on providers to assign and/or verify the ULN and include it in data submitted to them.

The **Personal Learning Record (PLR)** is a key component of the LRS and shows the records for a learner gathered from 3 different sources:

- National Pupil Database (NPD)
- Individualised Learning Record (ILR)
- Awarding Organisation Achievement Data.

The PLR has the facility to record all QCF learner achievement (credits and units) and other qualifications such as A' levels, GCSEs, Diploma and Functional Skills (since summer 2008) collected directly from awarding organisations for every learner with a ULN.

- Learners can view their achievement data online and in one place through this lifelong learning record.
- Learners control access to their PLR and they can challenge the data for accuracy. They can also share edited versions of their record with third parties, such as advisors and employers.
- Providers and advisers can use the PLR as part of an information and advice service as it offers a 'find a qualification' feature that allows the user to select a QCF qualification and identify what additional units a learner requires for it; or to select some or all of the units a learner has and identify which achievements they can build toward with those.

Implementing the QCF

Providers are now in a position to realise the opportunities presented by the QCF through the development of personalised learning programmes based on information held in the Personal Learning Record and through collaboration with other providers and partners. Credit accumulation and transfer will start to be put into practice as the application of credit stabilises and gains trust.

'In 2011/2, it is expected that providers will be responding to market need through timely delivery and proactively driving achievement of credit and qualifications within a framework of lifelong learning.'

(Source: Skills Funding Agency policy update 5, 28th July 2010)

Organisations supporting implementation of the QCF

■ **Ofqual** regulates general and vocational qualifications in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. It approves and distributes the criteria that qualifications must meet to be part of the QCF and monitors the performance of recognised organisations and the quality of the units and qualifications they develop. Ofqual's new regulatory model (effective from July 2011) is underpinned by the '*Recognition Criteria*' (Ofsted, May 2011) and the '*General Conditions of Recognition*' (Ofsted, May 2011). For further details, see www.ofqual.gov.uk/for-awarding-organisations.

Ofqual maintains the [Register of Regulated Qualifications](#) which contains details of all recognised awarding organisations and regulated qualifications. The Register replaces the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ).

■ Through the **Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)**, employers have a leading role in vocational qualifications reform, advising on priority qualifications for each sector. Each SSC has developed a Sector Qualification Strategy (SQS) and worked closely with stakeholders such as employers, awarding organisations and regulatory authorities to develop SQS action plans that identify new or revised qualifications to realise their SQS. Copies of the Sector Qualification Strategies can be found on the Sector Qualification Strategies section of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) website.

■ The **Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)** supports colleges and learning providers to implement the QCF and Foundation Learning. Further details can be found at [QCF Support](#) and [Foundation Learning Support](#)

Funding the QCF

The **Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA)** funds 16-19 providers including academies, general FE colleges and sixth form colleges. From April 2012, the YPLA will become the Education Funding Agency (EFA).

The **Skills Funding Agency (SFA)** is responsible for implementing the funding of the QCF across the wider post-19 skills system in England, and supporting the deployment of the Personal Learning Record.

The SFA operates a **QCF Service Desk**:
Email: qcf servicedesk@skillsfundingagency.gov.uk
Telephone: 0870 2670054

The [SFA website](#) provides the latest policy, funding and implementation guidance and includes an [Interactive Guide \(iGuide\)](#) on the QCF, designed to support learning providers, careers advisers and awarding organisations.

Qualifications within the QCF are confirmed for funding for one or more of the SFA's delivery programmes:

- Single Adult Skills Budget
- Offender Learning and Skills Service
- Programmes for the Unemployed.

Apprenticeships are subject to separate arrangements agreed jointly by the SFA, the YPLA and the National Apprenticeships Service (NAS).

As vocational provision is now primarily made up of qualifications from the QCF rather than the NQF, the SFA no longer funds vocational provision from the NQF where:

- there is appropriate QCF provision that has been accredited and confirmed for funding
- the appropriate sector organisation has advised that the NQF qualification no longer meets sector or employer needs and that they do not wish the NQF qualification to continue to be funded
- a NQF qualification has historically low or no enrolments and is not considered a niche qualification or one that is in a vulnerable sector.

While public funding has ceased for new starts, the SFA has not withdrawn funding where a learner has already commenced provision.

Until NQF to QCF transition is complete, the SFA is maintaining a 'live' list of [QCF qualifications confirmed for funding](#) which is updated on a regular basis.

Funding is currently based on guided learning hours (GLH). As a means of capturing performance across qualifications and units so that providers can deliver in a flexible manner, the SFA is working to develop two credit-based QCF success measures to accompany the current qualification success rate:

- a success measure (credit success rate), designed to capture success in achieving units
- a progression measure (credit progression measure), to capture progression towards the learners' ultimate learning aim where this is a qualification.

Further information

For further information, see:

- [Combining knowledge and skills in units of competence-based vocational qualifications in the QCF \(QCDA, 2010\)](#)
- [Evaluation of Flexible Delivery – Unit Funding Trials, 2nd Interim report \(SFA, June 2011\)](#)
- [User Guide to the LRS Portal](#)

Funding guidance:

- [YPLA funding guidance](#)
- [SFA funding guidance](#)

Test your understanding: Personal Learning Record (PLR) and Implementing the QCF

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **True** or **False** as appropriate for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
The Skills Funding Agency is primarily funding vocational qualifications in the NQF.		
Sector Qualification Strategy Action Plans identify new or revised qualifications that are proposed for public funding.		
The SFA and YPLA will be known as the EFA in 2012.		
Advisers have direct access to an individual learner's Personal Learning Record.		
The PLR can help learners identify future QCF learning opportunities.		
QCF achievement data is collected directly from providers and held on the PLR.		
All learners who have a Unique Learner Number (ULN) are automatically provided with a Personal Learning Record.		
All school leavers are automatically provided with a Unique Learner Number.		

Pause for thought

Think about the way your organisation currently manages learner data and its procedures for advice and guidance for learners and how the Personal Learning Record affects these processes.

- Have you established procedures and quality controls for the collection and management of learner achievement data?

To support the accumulation of credit, systems must be capable of tracking achievement of individual units as well as full qualifications and submitting this data promptly to awarding organisations. This is particularly important where learners intend to use credit awarded from one qualification towards that of another.

- Are you providing effective information and guidance throughout all stages in a learner's programme so that learners understand the opportunities offered by the credit-based system?

Your notes:

Rules of combination

This theme will help you understand what is meant by 'rules of combination' (RoC) within the context of the QCF, why they are important, and examples of how they may be applied.

The theme covers the following topics:

[Rules of combination \(RoC\) within the QCF](#)

[Rules of combination and qualification pathways](#)

[Exemptions](#)

[Equivalent units](#)

[Barred units](#)

Rules of combination (RoC) within the QCF

Rules of combination (RoC) establish connections within and between QCF qualifications. They describe the credit accumulation requirements for the achievement of a qualification and are critical to the QCF as they define:

- what a learner is required to do to be awarded a QCF qualification
- the potential for learners to transfer credit between different QCF qualifications and different QCF awarding organisations
- any exemptions from the credit requirements for QCF qualifications.

Rules of combination support credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), where credits can be transferred between qualifications and awarding organisations within the QCF. The rules of combination determine the scope of the credit transfer opportunities and help to ensure that individual qualifications offer a meaningful, challenging and coherent combination of achievements to learners. They also determine, through exemptions, the ways in which achievements accredited outside the QCF can count towards qualifications within it.

It is generally the awarding organisation that determines the rules of combination for a qualification. The rules are then submitted for accreditation by the regulators, usually having also been approved by the appropriate Sector Skills Council (SSC). Where a qualification is based totally on National Occupational Standards, the rules of combination may be developed by the relevant SSC.

As full implementation of the QCF is achieved, it is expected that rules of combination will become more flexible, resulting in an increasing number of opportunities to transfer credit and support the demands for a more flexible workforce in a rapidly changing economy.

Features of rules of combination

All qualifications accredited within the QCF are required to have a set of rules of combination that specify the credits needed, through the completion of particular units, for the qualification to be awarded. The [Regulatory arrangements for the QCF \(Ofqual, Aug 2008\)](#) set out a standard format for rules of combination with the following requirements:

- the qualification title (level, size and description of content) – including any pathways that offer a specialised focus to the qualification
- the credit value of the qualification
- the credits to be achieved at the level of the qualification or above (a minimum of 50% of the credits achieved must be at the level of the qualification or above)
- any mandatory units that must be achieved for the qualification to be awarded
- any optional units that a learner may choose from in order to achieve the required number of units or credits towards the qualification

- any credits allowed from other units and any restrictions (e.g. the units levels that must be achieved, the subject/sector classification and any time constraints)
- any credits allowed from equivalent units from other recognised organisations in place of mandatory or optional units (e.g. credits awarded towards a different qualification, or employer developed units from a work-based training programme)
- any exemptions for mandatory or optional units that learners can claim from certificated achievements outside the QCF
- any limits on the length of time after an award is gained within which it is valid for credit accumulation or exemption processes and still count towards a qualification.

The variety of qualifications within the QCF means that not all of these headings will be relevant to every qualification. For example, some qualifications consist of only mandatory units with no optional units, while others may not specify any mandatory units, and consist of only optional units and/or credit from other units.

Rules of combination and qualification pathways

Some qualifications may offer little or no choice of units through which credits can be achieved and few opportunities for learners to transfer credits from other qualifications. This often occurs when qualifications are a “licence to practice” requiring very specific skills with proof of up-to-date competence.

Other qualifications may have more flexible rules of combination that encourage learner choice and facilitate the transfer of credit between qualifications in the QCF.

In some cases, it is logical to cluster together a group of units or specify particular levels to meet the needs of a particular sector; in others it may be necessary to bar certain combinations of units, for example if they are too similar.

Individual qualifications within the QCF are developed to support a variety of rationales. Rules of combination may be used to support or reinforce these rationales. For example:

- a qualification designed to support a broad introduction to a job role or industry may have a set of less tightly defined rules of combination to allow a greater range of options and wider opportunities for CAT
- a qualification designed to support a specialised role in a highly regulated working environment is likely to have a more tightly prescribed set of rules of combination with fewer options
- a qualification designed to expand the workforce and attract new types of employees to a sector may offer more flexible rules of combination to recognise a learner’s previous skills and knowledge.

Qualification pathways

Rules of combination can support flexibility in the QCF by allowing optional units within a qualification to be clustered together to provide pathways which reflect different specialisms that a learner may focus on. Often, there are units common to each pathway (usually the mandatory element of the qualification) and individual pathways may have different credit values. Where pathways are defined, qualification titles give the pathway name in brackets, for example, a *Level 2 Certificate in Vehicle Body and Paint Operations (Refinishing)*. If a learner completes more than one pathway in a qualification, each is recognised and recorded by the awarding organisation.

Example

City & Guilds offer a Level 2 Certificate with pathways covering cookery from different cultures:

- [600/0855/6: City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate In Hospitality and Catering Principles \(Professional Cookery - Bangladeshi Cuisine\)](#)
- [600/0860/X: City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate In Hospitality and Catering Principles \(Professional Cookery - Chinese Cuisine\)](#)
- [600/0858/1: City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate In Hospitality and Catering Principles \(Professional Cookery - Indian Cuisine\)](#)
- [600/0856/8: City & Guilds Level 2 Certificate In Hospitality and Catering Principles \(Professional Cookery - Thai Cuisine\)](#)

The four qualifications require the learner to complete the same four mandatory units:

- [R/600/0615: Safe, Hygienic and Secure Working Environments in Hospitality](#)
- [Y/600/0616: Effective Teamwork](#)
- [Y/502/8258: Principles of how to maintain, handle and clean knives](#)
- [H/502/0132: Food safety in catering](#)

Depending on the chosen pathway, the learner may have further mandatory units to complete and will choose a number of optional units (many of which are also shared between the pathways).

Exemptions

Exemptions are another mechanism intended to ensure learners avoid duplication in learning and assessment. The [Regulatory arrangements for the QCF \(Ofqual, Aug 2008\)](#) define exemption as:

“The facility for a learner to claim exemption from some of the achievement requirements of a QCF qualification, using evidence of certificated, non-QCF achievement deemed to be of equivalent value.”

Exemptions may be planned by awarding organisations or individually requested by learners:

- Planned exemptions occur when qualification developers anticipate the likely certificated achievements that learners may already have and use rules of combination to list them
- In cases where certificated achievements outside the QCF have not been anticipated, it is possible for learners to request exemptions on an individual basis.

Learners are not awarded credit for exemptions as they come from outside the QCF and this would mean that achievement was rewarded twice. This means that exempted qualifications do not have a credit value that can be banked and transferred to other QCF qualifications.

Exemption can only be given for whole units.

Where an exemption is granted and where the unit is part of shared rules of combination then the exemption must be recognised by all awarding organisations that award the unit. This is because an exemption effectively creates an equivalent value between a unit within a QCF qualification and one in a qualification outside the QCF.

Example

- [501/1676/9: City & Guilds Level 3 Award in Assessing Competence in the Work Environment \(QCF\)](#) offers the following exemption:

‘Current holders of the existing Assessor Awards or the previous D units may be exempt from some or all of the units within some of the qualifications in this suite’.

Equivalent units

Equivalent units are units from a different qualification or submitted by another recognised organisation that are deemed to be of equivalent value and so can count towards a qualification in place of designated mandatory or optional unit/s from it. The format for rules of combination allow awarding bodies to identify 'equivalent credits' – credits achieved through a unit that the awarding body itself cannot offer – that a learner may transfer towards that qualification if they wish. This feature can be particularly useful when units in the QCF are restricted in their use to a single awarding body, or group of awarding bodies as credits gained through such 'restricted' units may still count towards a qualification offered by another awarding body. This helps support the transfer of achievement for learners and reduce the assessment burden on them.

Barred units

Barred units are units that cannot be counted together as part of a rule of combination for a qualification. This prevents credit being awarded more than once for similar learning from other units/qualifications.

Example

The rules of combination for [500/6759/X: City & Guilds Level 1 Certificate for IT Users - ITQ \(QCF\)](#) are that qualification achievement requires a minimum of 13 credits from Group Q1 with minimum of 3 Credits from Group A (a single mandatory unit) plus a minimum of 10 credits from Group Q2 (optional units).

Group Q2 is further subdivided into Group B (Level 1 optional units), Group C (Level 2 optional units), Group D (Level 3 optional units) and Group E (Entry level 3 optional units – with a constraint that a maximum of 3 credits only can be taken from this group).

The rules of combination for this qualification:

- provide varying exemptions credits for different Skills for Life, Key Skills and Essential Skills qualifications
- bar the combination of the "Improving Productivity Using IT" units at Levels 1, 2 or 3.

Note: When viewing a qualification, click on a unit group label (in this case Q1, Q2, B, C, D, E) to expand the rules of combination details attached to the group.

Further information

For further information, see:

- [Interactive video on developing rules of combination \(QCDA, 2010\)](#)
- [Guidance for developing rules of combination for the QCF v4 \(QCDA, 2010, section 3: p19 – 31\)](#)
- [Exemptions in the Qualifications and Credit Framework \(QCDA, 2009\),](#)
- [Register of Regulated Qualifications.](#)

Test your understanding: Rules of Combination (RoC)

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **True** or **False** as appropriate for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
Rules of combination describe the credit accumulation requirements for the achievement of a qualification.		
A minimum of 50% of the credits achieved must be at the level of the qualification or above.		
Where a qualification is based totally on NOS, the rules of combination for a qualification may be developed by the relevant SSC rather than an awarding organisation.		
A qualification designed to provide an introduction to a job role or industry is likely to have a set of tightly defined rules of combination.		
Units may be clustered together to form a group to meet the needs of a particular sector.		
When qualifications are required as a “licence to practice”, the rules of combination may offer little or no choice of units and therefore fewer opportunities for credit transfer.		
Where qualification pathways are defined, all pathways leading to that qualification must have the same credit value.		
Exempted qualifications have a credit value that can be banked and transferred to other QCF qualifications.		

Test your understanding: Rules of Combination and Qualification Pathways

Exercise 1

Look at [500/7562/7: EDEXCEL Level 2 Diploma in Retail Skills \(QCF\)](#).

What limitations do the rules of combination confer on unit choices within the qualification?

Answer

- 37 credits are required to achieve the qualification
- Any combination of units must include a minimum of 22 credits at Level 2.
- A minimum of 14 credits must come from group E. A maximum of 15 credits may be taken from the Level 1 specialist units (Group G) or the Level 3 optional units (Groups I and J), but not both.
- Only one Institute of Customer Service unit (Groups D and I) may be taken.
- There are barred combinations of units that must be considered – these are common where qualifications offer a wide range of options.

Exercise 2

Consider the example below:

Qualification title: Level 2 Award in Health and Fitness

Credit value: 12

Minimum credit to be achieved at, or above, the level of the qualification: 9

Mandatory units (credit value 6)

Title	Credits	Level
Health and safety in sports and fitness activities	6	2

Optional units (credit value 6)

Title	Credits	Level
Maintenance of sports equipment	3	2
Badminton for beginners	3	1
An introduction to nutrition for sports fitness	3	2
Setting up a training circuit	3	2
Life saving for beginners	3	2
Basic telephone skills	3	1

Look at the various combinations of Mandatory and Optional units that a learner can choose to meet the requirement of 12 credits for the Level 2 qualification. Are there any combinations which meet the requirement of 12 credits but do not meet the other credit requirement of the qualification?

Answer

A learner may want to select the two Level 1 optional units together with the mandatory unit to achieve the required total of 12 credits.

However, the qualification's rules of combination specify a minimum requirement of 9 credits at the level of the qualification, so only one level 1 unit is allowed.

Exercise 3

One of the ways that QCF qualifications can offer flexibility is by providing a broad range of options to suit a number of career choices. Another way is by clustering optional units together within qualifications to provide pathways through qualifications (in such cases, the qualification title is endorsed with the pathway name in brackets as in the example below).

Consider the pathways below:

Qualification title: Level 4 Certificate in careers advice

Pathway 1: Level 4 Certificate in careers advice (young people) **Credit value:** 24 credits

Pathway 2: Level 4 Certificate in careers advice (adults) **Credit value:** 21 credits

Minimum credit to be achieved at, or above, the level of the qualification: 18

Mandatory units for both pathways (credit value 18)

Title	Credits	Level
Careers advice and guidance	6	4
The role of the careers service in education and training	6	4
Communications skills for careers advice workers	6	4

Optional units for pathway 1 (credit value 6)

Title	Credits	Level
Using technology to support careers advice	3	3
14 – 19 Diplomas	3	3
Using labour market intelligence	3	4
Confidentiality and client privilege	3	3
Supporting work experience for young people	3	3

Optional units for pathway 2 (credit value 6)

Title	Credits	Level
Using technology to support careers advice	3	3
Using labour market intelligence	3	4
Confidentiality and client privilege	3	3
How adults learn	3	4

Note that while both pathways are Certificates at the same level with the same number of minimum credits to be achieved at the same level or above, and the same mandatory units, the optional units vary for each pathway and each pathway has a different total number of credits.

What are the advantages of bringing together in this way what otherwise would have been two qualifications?

Answer

- It increases flexibility in the workforce by creating overlapping of two different employment roles, making movement between the roles more straightforward for people working in the sector.
- It simplifies the development and accreditation for both the awarding organisations involved and the regulators.
- It increases the potential size of the cohort working towards the qualification, creating more viable programme numbers for providers and reducing the costs of delivery.
- It facilitates the opportunity for people to become qualified in both specialisms without having to complete two separate qualifications.

Pause for thought

Are QCF rules of combination being used to support personalised and flexible learning programmes within your subject/ curriculum area?

- Perhaps some of the qualifications that you offer accept credit from other units in their rules of combination and this feature could be used to encourage take up of provision and support retention and progression?
- Is there effective guidance available to both learners and employers on the opportunities offered by rules of combination, exemptions, and recognition of prior learning?

Your notes:

Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)

This theme builds on the previous themes exploring credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) in the QCF and looks at the benefits for learners and providers.

This theme covers the following topics:

[Benefits of credit accumulation and transfer](#)

[Points to consider when working with credit accumulation and transfer](#)

Benefits of credit accumulation and transfer

Credit is the currency of achievement in the QCF. All qualifications in the QCF are achieved by collecting credit, known as 'credit accumulation'. The pathways through which learners can collect credit towards a particular qualification are set out in each qualification's rules of combination.

Learners can transfer credit from one QCF qualification and awarding organisation to another, subject to the rules of combination which are determined by the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and awarding organisations. Every awarding organisation in the QCF must support 'credit transfer' by recognising credits from all other QCF awarding organisations.

CAT is one of the key features of the QCF; it offers learners increased flexibility and choice in their learning and enhances opportunities for progression. It offers a range of potential benefits for learners:

- Learners can complete units at a pace that fits around their lives, building up credit towards qualifications over time, or completing qualifications more quickly by taking more units in one go.
- Unit-based learning means that learners are not locked into one qualification choice and can decide whether to progress further with particular learning or to change direction and put the learning to a new use; possibly to reflect changes in employment circumstances or revised career decisions.
- No learning is lost – if a learner changes direction, credits achieved as part of the previous qualification can be transferred to the new qualification (subject to the rules of combination) so the learner doesn't repeat what they have already learned and avoids duplication of assessment.
- Completing QCF qualifications that include units at different levels enables learners to carry forward appropriate credits already achieved when they progress to higher-level qualifications.
- Learners can add credits to an Award to achieve a larger QCF Certificate or Diploma. This concept of units in smaller qualifications sitting inside larger qualifications is called 'nesting'. The qualifications do not have to have identical units: a Certificate will often include the same units as the Award but with many additional units offered. It is also possible to 'nest' Awards, Certificates and Diplomas in this way. The nesting of units within qualifications allows for different lengths of programmes as well as flexible delivery over varying time periods according to the needs of learners and providers.

There are also benefits for providers:

- An increased facility to offer more personalised and responsive provision for learners and employers, facilitating opportunities for reskilling and upskilling and enabling the transfer of credits within and across sectors.
- Flexibility in the pace of learning can help to attract and retain learners: evidence suggests that more frequent, incremental recognition of achievement through the award of credit is motivational, improves retention and achievement rates and encourages learners to progress to further learning.
- Planning teaching and learning around individual units, or clusters of units applicable to more than one qualification can provide efficiencies in delivery and can enable providers to sustain a broader curriculum offer in a cost effective way. For example, the level 3 unit [Y/601/5875: Monitor procedures to safely control work operations](#) is owned by City and Guilds but associated with 39 different qualifications in Hairdressing, Barbering and Beauty Therapy, and the level 2 unit [J/502/4402: Computerised Accounting Software](#) owned by e-skills UK is associated with 83 qualifications in IT and Accounting.

Example

Both the Award and Certificate below are part of a suite of land based qualifications progressing from Entry Level 2 to Level 3. Flexibility and progression allow learners to build up their qualifications in bite size chunks of learning.

- [500/9740/4: ABC Level 2 Award in Practical Environmental and Conservation Skills](#)
- [500/9766/0: ABC Level 2 Certificate in Practical Environmental and Conservation Skills](#)

The purpose of both the Award and the Certificate are identical: 'Prepare for further learning or training and/or develop knowledge and/or skills in a subject area'; the subject area being Environmental Conservation.

The units available for use for the Award and Certificate are identical – it is the number of credits that need to be achieved that varies along with the requirement that one of the optional units in the Award (M/501/4883 – Team work in environmental studies) becomes a mandatory unit in the Certificate. This means that the Award is entirely 'nested' within the Certificate, facilitating credit transfer.

Learners could initially register for the Level 2 Award and go on to complete the Level 2 Certificate at a later date, transferring any credits already achieved when they register for the Certificate.

Alternatively, learners who had registered for the Certificate but who could not complete the qualification could claim the Award if they had successfully completed the required number and combinations of units. They may have achieved more than the minimum number and combination of credits required and be well on the way to completing their Certificate at a later date.

Some of the units are common to other qualifications opening up possibilities to transfer credit gained from completed units to other qualifications (subject to rules of combination). For example:

- Unit L/502/1520 – *Maintain equipment and machines* is common to 18 qualifications covering game and wildlife management, the environment and conservation, horticulture and agriculture.
- Unit T/502/1690 – *Establish and maintain effective working relationships with others* is common to 27 qualifications covering floristry, animal care, horticulture, land-based engineering, the environment and conservation, and agriculture.

Both the Award and the Certificate provide the opportunity to achieve credits at the level above the qualification. This potentially provides the opportunity for learners to transfer their credit towards a Level 3 qualification as outlined in the progression information on the qualification details.

The Level 3 Diploma [500/8706/X: ABC Level 3 Diploma in Work-Based Environmental Conservation](#) has two qualification pathways: *Environmental Conservation* and *Access and Recreation*. There are additional opportunities for credit transfer which would benefit learners. 16 of the units in the *Environmental Conservation* pathway are the same as for the above Level 2 Award and Certificate and 7 units are the same in the *Access and Recreation* pathway. This provides an opportunity and incentive for learners to progress as credit gained from the Level 2 qualifications may be used towards the Level 3 Diploma (subject to rules of combination). The Level 3 Diploma also includes one unit at Level 4, providing a further progression opportunity.

A case study from [Leicester College](#) shows how one provider has redesigned their curriculum offer for fashion and footwear to offer flexibility and choice and to plan for progression.

Points to consider when working with credit accumulation and transfer

Whilst credit accumulation and transfer is a key feature of the QCF, there are some important considerations to bear in mind:

- A **restricted unit** is one that a recognised awarding organisation places in the unit databank that is only available for use to specified recognised awarding organisations. Such units cannot appear in a rule of combination for a qualification offered by a non-specified awarding organisation. This limits the opportunity to accumulate and transfer credit between different awarding organisations.

Some units may be technically classified as restricted but are available to all awarding organisations operating within a sector/sub-sector. In this situation, choice and opportunities for credit accumulation transfer will be less restricted but still limited to qualifications offered by the awarding organisations entitled to share the unit.

- A **shared unit** may appear in rules of combination for qualifications across differing sectors and a range of awarding organisations. Learners and providers will be able to readily utilise opportunities to transfer credit.

- **Units with a large credit value** may restrict opportunities for credit accumulation and transfer.

Credit can only be awarded for the successful completion of a whole unit, so to gain the credits a learner must achieve all the designated learning outcomes of a unit. For example, learners studying a unit with a credit value of 15 would need to achieve all the learning outcomes for that unit before credit could be awarded, representing a considerable investment of time and effort. If a learner did not complete the unit, any partial achievements would receive no formal recognition and could not be part of credit accumulation and transfer. Smaller units recognise smaller steps of learning and enable learners to accumulate credits to build up qualifications bit by bit.

Further information

For further information, see:

- [SFA's QCF iGuide](#)
- [QCF Frequently Asked Questions \(SFA, July 2011\)](#)

Identify CAT opportunities by comparing qualifications and progression options through the [Register of Regulated Qualifications](#) or contact awarding organisations for their help.

Test your understanding: Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **True** or **False** as appropriate for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
The opportunities for credit transfer within a qualification are governed by rules of combination determined by the Sector Skills Councils and awarding organisations.		
The QCF credit accumulation and transfer processes are designed to recognise achievement gained outside of the QCF.		
Once credit has been used towards a QCF qualification, it cannot be used towards any other qualification.		
'Nesting' is the term used to describe smaller qualifications sitting inside larger qualifications.		
The flexibilities of CAT particularly support learning built up over time and fitted around other commitments.		
A restricted unit is more likely to limit opportunities for credit accumulation and transfer than a shared unit.		
Awarding organisations do not have to recognise credits of the other QCF awarding organisations.		
The QCF supports progression by allowing learners to take some units at higher levels than the qualification they are seeking and later use these credits towards higher level qualifications.		
Units with lower credit value offer fewer opportunities for credit accumulation.		
Credit accumulation supports lifelong learning by recognising smaller chunks of learning that can build up to a whole qualification over a period of time.		

Test your understanding: Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)

Consider the information on the three qualifications below. What opportunities for CAT do they offer and how might these benefit learners?

Qualification title: Level 2 Award in Employability **Credit value:** 6

Mandatory units: none

Optional units: 6 credits

Title	Credits	Level
1. Applying for Work	2	2
2. Customer Care	2	2
3. Communication at work	2	2
4. Communication at Work	2	3
5. Interview Skills	2	2
6. Interview Skills	2	3
7. Responsible Work Practices	2	2
8. Presentation Skills	2	2
9. Presentation Skills	2	3
10. Setting your Work Objectives	2	2
11. Setting your Work Objectives	2	3
12. Time Management	2	2

Units 3 and 4, 5 and 6, 8 and 9, and 10 and 11 are barred combinations.

Qualification title: Level 2 Certificate in Employability **Credit value:** 13

Mandatory units: none

Optional units: 13 credits; same unit choice as above

Qualification title: Level 3 Certificate in Employability **Credit value:** 14 (9 credits at Level 3)

Mandatory units: 5 credits

Title	Credits	Level
Business and Customer Awareness	3	3
Working in a Team	2	3

Optional units: 9 credits; same options as above

Click for answer

The Level 2 Award is fully 'nested' within the Level 2 Certificate which means that learners could register initially for the Award and go on to complete the Certificate at a later date, transferring any credits already achieved when they register for the Certificate. Alternatively, learners who had registered for the Certificate but who were unable to complete it could claim the Award if they had achieved at least 6 credits; going on to complete the Certificate at a later date.

Both the Level 2 Award and Certificate allow learners to achieve credits at Level 3, improving opportunities for transferring credit towards another qualification at Level 3.

The Level 3 Certificate allows learners to achieve five of their optional unit credits at Level 2 which also facilitates lower-achieving learners to progress to this qualification directly from either the Level 2 Award or Level 2 Certificate.

Pause for thought

Review your organisation's readiness to ensure learners can benefit from CAT against the statements below. Where you identify weaknesses, consider how you might improve matters.

	Your Notes:
1. Our curriculum offer exploits opportunities for credit transfer within and beyond our organisation (e.g. with partner organisations) to actively encourage progression into and from programmes.	
2. We have identified opportunities that exist for CAT across different areas of teaching and learning within our organisation.	
3. We have a process for identifying common units across programmes / areas and we have considered the implications for unit curriculum delivery.	
4. We have processes to review assessment requirements and guidance from different awarding organisations for QCF units including recognition of prior learning (RPL).	
5. Systems are in place to ensure that learners understand the opportunities for recognition of their achievements through the QCF including RPL and CAT.	
6. Opportunities for CAT are included in ongoing progress reviews with learners.	
7. We have systems in place to allow learners to claim credits if they leave early or change direction so that they get the full benefit of opportunities to achieve CAT.	

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

This theme explains the role of recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the QCF. It includes an overview of the concept of RPL and provides examples of how the process applies in practice.

This theme covers the following topics:

[Understanding RPL within the QCF](#)

[The 5 principles of RPL](#)

[Considerations when working with RPL](#)

[The RPL process](#)

[Preparing for RPL](#)

Understanding RPL within the QCF

One of the key features of the QCF is the concept of no learning being lost. Learners in the QCF should not be required to re-learn something that they already know, understand or can do. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) enables learners to avoid duplication of learning and assessment and is the term used to describe the process of recognising an individual's previous achievements.

The [Regulatory arrangements for the QCF \(Ofqual, Aug 2008\)](#) defines RPL as:

'A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning.'
(Source: Ofqual/08/3726)

RPL is therefore an assessment method for that allows individuals to claim credit for achievements that have not previously been certificated.

RPL differs from, and should not be confused with:

- **exemption** – the facility for a learner to claim exemption from some of the achievement requirements of a QCF qualification using evidence of certificated achievement gained outside of the QCF that is deemed to be of an equivalent value
- **credit transfer** – the transfer of credit from one qualification and awarding organisation within the QCF to another, subject to the rules of combination.

It is anticipated that, through RPL, a broader range of opportunities will develop for the recognition of individuals' prior achievements that are more responsive to their needs. Awarding organisations and their recognised centres have primary responsibility for establishing effective RPL processes in the QCF:

- all QCF awarding organisations must offer opportunities for assessment through RPL where it is deemed appropriate
- all providers must have in place arrangements that allow for recognition of prior learning and enable them to request this approach from the relevant awarding organisation.

The five principles of RPL

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) developed the following five principles of RPL specifically for the QCF based on examples of good practice developed in the UK and internationally.

The five principles are:

1. RPL is a valid method of enabling individuals to claim credit for units in the QCF, irrespective of how their learning took place. There is no difference between the achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a unit through prior learning and through a formal programme of study.
2. RPL policies, processes, procedures, practices and decisions should be transparent, rigorous, reliable, fair and accessible to individuals and stakeholders to ensure that users can be confident of the decisions and outcomes of RPL.
3. RPL is a learner-centred, voluntary process. The individual should be offered advice on the nature and range of evidence considered appropriate to support a claim for credit through RPL, and be given guidance and support to make a claim.
4. The process of assessment for RPL is subject to the same quality assurance and monitoring standards as any other form of assessment. The award of credit through RPL will not be distinguished from any other credits awarded in the QCF.
5. Assessment methods for RPL must be of equal rigour as other assessment methods, be fit for purpose and relate to the evidence of learning. Credit may be claimed for any unit in the QCF through RPL unless the assessment requirements of the unit do not allow this, based on a rationale consistent with the aims and regulations of the framework.

Source: QCDA/10/4726 (2010)

Benefits of RPL

In a labour market where employees change jobs with increasing frequency RPL offers several benefits to the individual learner. The opportunity to assess and award credit for skills and competencies that have not previously been accredited means that individuals:

- do not have to participate in learning programmes for things they already know and for which they can provide suitable evidence
- may find it easier to progress in their chosen job or career – for example, where progression is dependent on achieving a qualification
- have improved employment prospects and a boost to self-esteem – this could be particularly beneficial for those who are disengaged from learning or returning to work.

RPL provides a clear framework for continuous skills development that enables employers to show a commitment towards workforce development; raising the visibility of the skills and competencies of the staff visible and improving staff retention. Other benefits for employers include:

- the opportunity to validate learning and training that happens in the workplace as part of a nationally recognised qualification
- a potential reduction in training costs and more efficient use of the training budget by avoiding duplication of learning and concentrating on areas of greatest need and the filling of skills shortages.

For providers, RPL offers:

- the ability to offer greater flexibility and more inclusive provision through individualised learning pathways
- improved retention and success rates of learners as they build up credits based on prior learning and experience
- opportunities to attract new learners who may not consider a longer period of study
- the ability to tailor training packages more closely to the needs of local employers.

Considerations when working with RPL

All qualifications in the QCF are achieved through a process of credit accumulation subject to adherence to the designated rules of combination. All learning outcomes of a unit must be achieved for credit to be awarded and there can be no partial achievement of a unit.

Whilst the QCF regulations do not prescribe any particular method of assessment, a Sector Skills Council or regulatory body may set specific assessment requirements in the unit specification.

Any unit within the QCF can be assessed through an RPL process and the opportunity to be awarded credit through RPL is a universal entitlement for all individuals in the QCF with the exceptions identified below.

RPL is an alternative route to achievement and not a shortcut. RPL must therefore be an integral part of robust assessment and moderation procedures which clearly indicate how to identify and assess prior learning or learning from experience in a consistently reliable, valid, quality-assured way.

Learners must accompany their evidence of experience with reliable and valid evidence of the standard of the learning outcomes that they achieved. In the context of the QCF, the definition of RPL is quite specific and relates to summative rather than formative assessment.

This can be done effectively in either of the following ways:

- standardised assessment methods that apply to a cohort of learners, where individuals who did not participate in a formal programme of learning participate in the assessment
- an individually tailored process of providing evidence adapted to the needs of a learner.

Individuals following either route will be awarded credit when they have successfully demonstrated that they meet the learning outcomes to the standard of the assessment criteria of a QCF unit.

Quality assurance of RPL processes

RPL should be governed by the same internal and external quality assurance procedures as the assessment of learning through more traditional routes:

- Acceptability – Is there an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the assessment criteria? Is the evidence valid and reliable?
- Sufficiency – Is there sufficient evidence to demonstrate fully the achievement of all learning outcomes in the unit claimed?
- Authenticity – Is the evidence clearly a result of the applicant's own efforts and achievements?
- Currency – Does the evidence relate to current learning? Does it meet any time limits for the currency of evidence, certification, or demonstration of learning specified by sector bodies/awarding organisations?

Exceptions

Only in exceptional instances, for which a rationale must be given, may an awarding organisation place restrictions on the award of credits through RPL. The organisation must specify these limits in the assessment requirements for the unit. Such exceptions are:

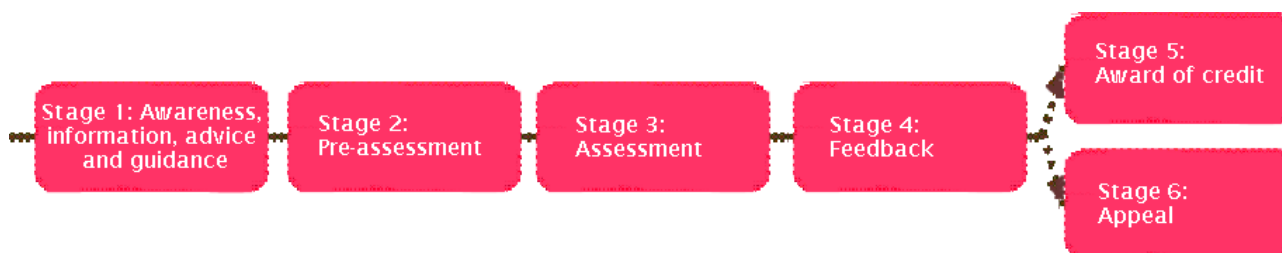
- explicit requirements for a 'licence to practise'
- health and safety requirements
- a condition of admission to a regulated profession
- where a unit requires that assessment takes place in a given setting and/or at a given time.

Credits gained through RPL are treated the same as other credits, although in some cases, an awarding organisation may set limits on the number of credits that may be counted towards a qualification through RPL.

Further opportunities for RPL are likely to develop as learners and employers become more familiar with its potential and make demands on the system.

The RPL process

Because RPL is determined on an individual basis providers should have systems and processes designed to support individuals through all the stages from initial awareness to the evidence gathering stage, assessment, feedback and finally the awarding of credit or an appeal process.



Stage 1: Awareness, information, advice and guidance

The possibility of claiming credit for prior learning should be raised with the individual as part of the initial guidance process when choosing and registering for a qualification. If the individual is interested in the offer of RPL they will need information on the process of claiming credit, the support and guidance available, the administrative processes, timelines, processes for appeal and any fees payable.

Stage 2: Pre-assessment

During this stage, it is important that any individual seeking RPL is fully aware of the RPL processes, has access to sufficient support to make a viable claim and is aware of the implications before making the decision to seek RPL. Once an individual decides to make a claim, they will need the support of their employer/provider/organisation as well as access to specialist advice and support about the claiming credit process, the timeframe and the different steps. Appropriately trained staff from within learning provider organisations should give specialist advice of this type. The candidate will begin to gather evidence and prepare for assessment. An assessment plan may be prepared to support the candidate through this stage and to ensure that the evidence required for the award of credit meets the assessment standard of the units as described in the learning outcomes and assessment criteria along with any additional assessment requirements detailed in the unit specification.

Stage 3: Assessment

During this stage assessors will be reviewing the evidence presented by the candidate and making judgements about an individual's prior learning and experience in relation to the unit standards. The assessment process for RPL must be subject to the same quality assurance procedures as any other assessment process.

Stage 4: Feedback

The assessor will provide feedback wherever possible to the candidate, discuss the results and give support and guidance on the options available. The assessor will advise the candidate on whether or not a recommendation for the award of credit(s) will be made. Once the assessment process is complete the standard procedures for reporting results leading to the award of credit should be followed.

Stage 5: Awarding credit

Awarding organisations are responsible for awarding credit which will then be recorded on the candidate's personal learning record.

Stage 6: Appeal

The standard appeals procedures set by the learning provider and awarding organisations should be followed by any candidate wishing to appeal against an assessment decision in relation to a claim for credit.

Preparing for RPL

Most providers already have well established procedures and practices in place to assess and validate prior learning, particularly in the context of competence-based qualifications. These will provide a strong foundation for extending the offer of RPL under the QCF. Adopting a whole organisation approach to RPL increases the likelihood of a provider establishing a robust and sustainable model for extending RPL and helps to ensure the full benefits of RPL within the QCF are realised.

Advisers should be familiar with opportunities and procedures for maximising CAT, exemptions, and RPL. The basic concept of RPL is one that many staff will already be familiar with. It is worth reviewing the currency of their skills and knowledge in the light of the changes to vocational qualifications.

A Level 3 unit [J/501/4243: Assessment and support for the recognition of prior learning through the accreditation of learning outcomes](#) is available which offers the opportunity for teachers and trainers to demonstrate that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to support an effective RPL process within their workplace.

Useful approaches for effective staff development might be:

Promoting RPL to learners and employers

It is important to ensure that learners and employers are aware of the opportunities for RPL, the processes and any implications and costs involved. Providers can promote the offer of RPL in their promotional literature and through their IAG services.

Learners will want to know:

- how long the RPL process will take
- how much it will cost
- the kind of evidence they might be able to use
- how the evidence should be presented
- the support available to help them through the RPL process
- further opportunities to identify potential for RPL throughout their learning programme.

Employers will be interested in finding out about:

- the benefits of RPL for their organisation
- the time commitment needed by employees following the RPL route
- the extent to which their in-house training will contribute to the process
- any costs involved.

Further information

Further information on RPL processes is available in the following publications:

- [Claiming credit – guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework v2 \(QCDA, 2010\)](#)
- [European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#)

Test your understanding: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **True** or **False** as appropriate for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
RPL is a method of enabling individuals to claim credit for units in the QCF, irrespective of how their learning took place.		
The award of credit through RPL will be distinguishable from other credits awarded in the QCF.		
Apart from exceptional cases, any unit within the QCF is capable of being assessed through an RPL process.		
Learners must demonstrate that they meet the learning outcomes of a QCF unit to the standard of the assessment criteria before credit is awarded.		
RPL can only be offered at the start of a programme of learning.		
An awarding organisation can award credit via RPL for the partial completion of a unit.		
Awarding organisations can set limits on the number of credits that may be counted towards a qualification through RPL.		
The process of assessment via RPL is subject to the same quality assurance and monitoring standards as other forms of assessment.		
Sector bodies and awarding organisations are responsible for providing clear operational advice and guidance on their RPL policies and procedures.		

Pause for thought

How ready is your curriculum area / organisation to implement an effective RPL offer? Consider your readiness against the statements below. Where you identify weaknesses, consider how you might improve matters.

	Your notes:
1. We have developed clear, cohesive policies and procedures to ensure that good practice in the conduct of the RPL process is applied consistently across the organisation.	
2. We have assessed the implications for other business systems such as examinations and MIS, including the development of staff in those areas.	
3. We have determined whether external requirements relating to RPL (such as from a professional body or due to workplace arrangements) influence RPL across the areas of our provision.	
4. We have ensured that staff responsible for RPL processes are well informed and have the appropriate knowledge and skills to support the RPL process.	
5. We identify and signpost opportunities for RPL throughout every individual's learning programme (not just at the outset).	
6. Our information, advice and guidance (IAG) for learners and employers clarifies RPL opportunities and IAG staff are well informed and able to offer appropriate advice.	
7. Our partner organisations are aware of our organisation's approach to RPL and the opportunities we are able to offer learners.	

Assessment and the QCF

The way assessment operates in the QCF differs from the way it has worked within the National Qualification Framework (NQF) with the unit-based approach offering greater flexibility for learners and greater choice of assessment method. From a provider's point of view, the increased flexibility of the QCF should be welcomed as a chance to find and use units that allow you to access and/or use assessment methods most appropriate to the needs of your learners.

This theme provides an overview of how assessment operates within the QCF looking at different methods of assessment and the implications for qualification choice.

This theme covers the following topics:

[Key features of assessment in the QCF](#)

[Assessment methods](#)

[Shared and restricted units](#)

[Considerations when planning for assessment in the QCF](#)

Key features of assessment in the QCF

All QCF units are **units of assessment**. Each unit is a coherent set of learning outcomes with associated assessment criteria independent of all other units which make up a qualification.

All units must be capable of being assessed independently of any other unit. However, whilst a unit can be assessed individually, it does not necessarily mean that a unit should be assessed individually. It is possible, and perhaps even desirable, for a number of units to be assessed together, and awarding organisations may develop assessment arrangements that enable evidence from more than one unit to be generated and presented through a single process.

The QCF allows for cross-referencing of evidence, so that work can be assessed for more than one unit, as appropriate. This feature of the QCF supports credit accumulation and transfer (CAT).

The role of awarding organisations

Awarding organisations must ensure that they meet the current regulatory requirements for the QCF in relation to assessment. Awarding organisations are responsible for:

- ensuring assessment decisions are valid, reliable and consistent and that assessment methods are manageable, cost effective and accessible to learners
- developing assessment arrangements for units and qualifications
- submitting qualifications based on agreed rules of combination for accreditation
- assessing learner achievement reliably, validly and consistently
- awarding credits to learners for the achievement of units
- making qualification awards within overarching arrangements for credit transfer and exemption and supporting a system of credit accumulation and transfer
- accurately recording each learner's achievements in their personal learning record (PLR).

Unit learning outcomes and assessment criteria

All units must contain learning outcomes that set out what a learner is expected to know, understand or be able to do. The learning outcomes must be clear and coherent and expressed in language that is understandable by the learners for whom the unit is intended (or by a helper or adviser where the learners themselves are not able to understand the learning outcomes).

Each learning outcome has a set of associated assessment criteria which specify the standard a learner must meet. There must be at least one assessment criterion for each learning outcome and there is no upper limit on the number of assessment criteria for each learning outcome.

The assessment methods are the instruments/mechanisms used to provide evidence that the standard has been met. A Sector Skills Council (SSC), Standard Setting Body (SSB) or an awarding organisation can specify the assessment requirements and provide assessment guidance in the additional information they provide about a unit. However, units that appear in more than one qualification and across awarding organisations may be assessed using a different assessment approach in each case.

Qualification types

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) included distinct qualification types where the methods of assessment were specified (e.g. GCSE, GCE, NVQ).

The QCF does not currently include any qualification types that are separately regulated (Source: [Identifying purposes for qualifications in the Qualifications and Credit Framework \(Ofqual, 2009\)](#)). This means that the SSC or awarding organisation who developed the qualification and/or constituent units is responsible for determining the assessment approach taken, allowing for a wide range of different approaches to be adopted.

Note that some qualifications include the acronym NVQ in the title, see [Guidance on qualification titles within the QCF \(Ofqual, Sept 2009\)](#) and the [supplementary updated guidance sheet \(Ofqual, July 2010\)](#).

Grading of qualifications

Although most units of assessment are graded pass or fail, some qualifications in the QCF are graded. An awarding organisation, in consultation with the relevant Sector Skills Council, may identify criteria for the award of higher grades. The specification for the qualification will include details of how the grading will operate, and the criteria on which grades will be awarded. However, grading will always be over and above the requirement of the minimum requirement of the assessment criteria for the unit. Further guidance on grading is included in the [Regulatory arrangements for the QCF \(Ofqual, Aug 2008, pages 16-17\)](#).

Assessors

The QCF does not demand particular qualifications or criteria for assessors although, occasionally, the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC) or awarding body might choose to do so and will specify this in the qualification or unit details.

More information about the new qualifications for assessing and assuring the quality of assessment (which replace the assessor and verifier qualifications) can be found in the [fact sheet \(LLUK, July 2010\)](#) or the [Assessing and assuring the quality of assessment \(LLUK, March 2010\)](#).

Note: The functions of LLUK were transferred to [LSIS - Qualification and Skills](#) on 1st April 2011. An [archived version of the LLUK website](#) is available from the National Archives.

Assessment methods

The choice of assessment method for a qualification (or contributory unit) reflects the nature of the achievement and the purpose of that qualification. A qualification or unit specification may identify the assessment method, any assessment requirements stipulated by the sector or regulatory bodies and any other requirements that need to be satisfied before the qualification can be awarded.

Examples

- [100/4099/7: EDEXCEL Level 1 BTEC Award in Interactive Use of Media](#), and all its contributing units, specify *Portfolio of evidence* as the assessment method.
- [100/5072/3: EDEXCEL Level 2 BTEC First Certificate in Health and Social Care](#) specifies *Multiple Choice Examination, Portfolio of Evidence* as the assessment method.
Looking at the assessment methods for the qualification's units, both mandatory units specify these same two assessment methods whereas the four optional units only specify *Portfolio of Evidence*.
- The unit specification for [F/502/3300: Providing Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy-Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards](#) provides quite detailed assessment guidance.

It must be noted that the many qualification / unit specifications do not provide any assessment information on their entry in the Register of Regulated Qualifications. Providers are always advised to obtain guidance from the appropriate awarding body.

Rarely, requirements other than the award of credit must be met before the achievement can be recognised.

Example

- The Entry Level unit [Y/501/5655: Measure, Shape and Space](#) states '*The 10 Stage Achievement Continuum and accompanying Unit Transcript/template should be used in all assessment in relation to this unit and the group of 16 common units at Entry 1 prior to the award of credit towards either the Award in Personal Progress or Certificate sized qualifications*'.

There may also be additional assessment requirements specified by the sector or regulatory bodies.

Example

- Unit [A/601/1429: Engage in personal development in health, social care or children's and young people's settings](#) states '*Assessment of this unit must adhere to the requirements of Skills for Care and Development /Skills for Health assessment strategy*'.

Shared and restricted units

The way in which the QCF is designed means that units developed and owned by one organisation can be made available to all awarding organisations to use. These are known as **shared units**. Units that are only available to a number of specified awarding organisation(s) are known as **restricted units**. The general expectation of the qualifications regulators is that units within the QCF will be shared unless compelling reasons are put forward by awarding organisations as to why a unit should be restricted.

The use of shared units maximises opportunities credit transfer and simplifies the credit accumulation and transfer process.

Examples

- The [500/4379/1: EDI Level 2 Award in the Prevention and Control of Infection \(QCF\)](#) lists 3 mandatory units for this qualification. If you click on any of them you will see that although this is an EDI Award the unit owner for each unit is ASCENTIS, a national awarding body.
- The [500/4718/8: EDEXCEL Level 2 BTEC Award in the Prevention and Control of Infection \(QCF\)](#) is exactly the same size and level of qualification and is made up of the same 3 ASCENTIS Mandatory units.

Note: When looking at a unit specification on the Register of Regulated Qualifications, you can see what qualifications a unit contributes to by clicking on the link 'View Unit's Qualifications'.

When a unit is shared, different awarding organisations may offer different assessment methods for the same unit. As this detail is often not available via the Register of Regulated Qualifications, providers should contact the awarding bodies for the relevant qualifications and review any difference in assessment approaches to identify the approach that best meets the needs of their particular learners and that is most manageable for their organisation.

Example

Explore the qualification [501/0476/7: CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Specialist Support for Teaching and Learning in Schools \(QCF\)](#) as it demonstrates a variety of QCF features that have been explored throughout this document:

- Exemption
- Barred unit
- Unit combinations
- Shared units – units from different awarding bodies
- Assessment guidance.

Considerations when planning for assessment in the QCF

The increased flexibility that the QCF offers means more choice for learners and providers. In addition, the choices available in the QCF will be more transparent than before and will allow learners, providers, and employers to compare offers from different awarding organisations.

Providers will already have assessment systems in place but should review them to ensure they meet the requirements of the QCF and to consider the implications for teaching and learning as well as the impact on the organisation and on quality assurance systems and processes that support assessment.

Often there is no (or only outline) information on assessment methodology available on the Register of Regulated Qualifications so it will be necessary for providers to contact awarding organisations for more detailed information on a particular qualification. Awarding organisations can often provide sample materials or copies of assessment tools to help you decide whether the assessment instruments are likely to be suitable for your learners and your organisation.

Test your understanding: Assessment and the QCF

For each statement, click on the drop-down arrow to select **True** or **False** as appropriate for each statement.

Statement	Your answer	Feedback
All units in the QCF must be capable of assessment independently of any other unit.		
Each learning outcome must have more than one assessment criterion.		
Assessment criteria set out the assessment methods that must be used.		
In the QCF, knowledge and skills are always assessed separately.		
The choice of assessment method for a given unit reflects the nature of the achievement and the purpose of the qualification the unit contributes to.		
The assessment method specified for a shared unit is fixed and will be the same regardless of which awarding organisation is offering the unit.		
Sector or regulatory bodies may set additional assessment requirements for qualifications and units.		
There is no grading in the QCF and qualifications will only be graded 'Pass' or 'Fail'.		
The QCF does not require a particular qualification of assessors.		
Ofqual's Register of Regulated Qualifications replaces the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ).		

Test your understanding: Assessment in the QCF

During an initial assessment process, four learners on a pre-employment training programme have presented evidence of learning and achievement. Look at the description of evidence of learning and achievement from each learner and identify which of the following route(s) they might take to gain recognition of their achievements in the QCF. Note that there may be more than one right answer:

- Planned exemption
- Individually requested exemption
- Recognition of prior learning
- Credit transfer

Learner 1

A now redundant experienced general construction worker, with no formal qualifications but lots of skills and knowledge across traditional building trades in carpentry, plumbing and bricklaying.

Click for answer

Recognition of prior learning

Without qualifications or certification either inside or outside the QCF, the only possible option is recognition of their skills and knowledge through recognition of prior learning (RPL).

Learner 2

A young adult who began a qualification while working in food manufacture and thinks they might have achieved a certificate in food safety in 2006.

Click for answer

Planned exemption OR individually requested exemption

As this person achieved their certificate in food safety in 2006 (before the QCF was in place), there is no scope for credit accumulation or transfer. However, their certificate may be listed as exempting them from having to achieve a unit in the QCF food manufacturing qualification. If the food safety certificate is not listed for exemption, the second possibility is to follow the awarding organisation guidance on claiming individual exemption.

Learner 3

A worker with a QCF occupational qualification for the security industry looking to qualify in managing stewards at public events.

Click for answer

Credit transfer

As this qualification was achieved inside the QCF, both forms of exemption are irrelevant. If some of the units the learner has already achieved are included in qualifications in managing stewards at public events then that credit can count directly towards the new qualification through credit transfer.

Learner 4

A person with a qualification from another member country of the European Union that attests to their competence in engineering construction.

Click for answer

Planned exemption OR Individually requested exemption.

As the qualification was achieved outside the QCF, there are two possibilities: planned exemption (if the rules of combination list this qualification as exempting a learner from having to achieve certain units) or individually requested exemption (if the learner's qualification is not listed, then an individual claim could be made for exemption following the awarding organisation's guidance).

Pause for thought

It is possible to use assessment considerations to adapt your curriculum offer so that it more fully meets the needs of your learners.

Use the [Register of Regulated Qualifications](#) to look up details on the qualifications and units that you deliver (or are considering delivering).

- If differing awarding organisations offer similar qualifications or the same units, are there differences in the assessment requirements which may benefit your learners? You may need to contact the relevant awarding bodies to get this information.
- Could a single assessment instrument assess achievement across units and/or a whole qualification?
- Do your systems allow you to collate evidence of each learner's achievement of both learning outcomes and units throughout their learning journey so that learners who do not go on to complete a full qualification while enrolled with you are able to claim the credit for unit(s) they have achieved?

Your Notes:

LSIS is the sector-owned improvement body
dedicated to the development of the FE and skills sector.

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