



## QCF Readiness Provider Support Programme QCF in action project report

### City of Sunderland College Implications of QCF implementation for City of Sunderland College examinations processes

#### Region

North East

#### Provider profile

City of Sunderland College is one of the largest colleges in the North East and, as well as being the main tertiary sixth form for the city, our delivery includes:

- FE and work-based provision across a wide range of curriculum and sector areas including Skills for Life, Apprenticeships, NVQs and other vocational qualifications.
- Extensive HE programmes across a number of curriculum and sector areas, including work-based HE certificates and Foundation Degrees.
- A Response to Redundancy contract funded by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and have developed a number of routeways as part of this.
- A range of vocational training to groups such as learners who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). We are currently running a NEET project which is funded by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and focuses on getting young people from the NEET category into work or further learning.

- A significant amount of Functional Skills provision (including ICT) both regionally and as part of National Contracts. Another principal area of our business (approximately 40%) is focused on Preparation for Life and Work delivery. We recently received a Grade 1 for this provision in our Ofsted Inspection (January 2010).

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## **Project introduction**

This project aimed to identify the likely impact of the introduction and implementation of the QCF on the examinations processes in a big college.

## **Project objective and intended outcomes**

We wanted to identify the implications of QCF implementation for the Examinations Office for meeting the demands of a curriculum offering a flexible framework of unitised qualifications.

This would provide a clear understanding of the actions required to ensure successful migration to the QCF and full utilisation of the flexibilities offered by this framework. In particular, we wanted to ensure our systems:

- Added value to the learner experience.
- Fully accredited all learners for their skills, knowledge and experience.
- Prevented duplicate learning and assessment.
- Maximised efficiencies within our administrative procedures, potentially reducing costs e.g. avoiding duplicate exam registration fees.

## **Project activities and approach**

We first identified key:

- Functions - IAG, marketing, recruitment, MIS, Exams.
- Contacts - named contacts in each of the above departments.
- Partners - delivery partners, community organisations, 14-19 partnership, Sunderland Learning Partnership.
- Teams - as above, plus a project co-ordinator, QCF champion, school liaison team, transition tutors, Foundation Learning teaching staff, academic registry, curriculum teams.

Subsequently:

- Termly meetings were held throughout the academic year with those functions and roles outlined above together with other key stakeholders, for example, for NEET engagement activities we worked with youth agencies and groups as well as Connexions, local schools and the Youth Justice Board.

Such wide participation at the meetings made it possible to disseminate a standard and consistent message around work in progress, QCF developments, and curriculum changes to all the staff and organisations with an interest in QCF. All partners were also invited to college-based CPD events as appropriate.

- Discussion papers were taken to Sunderland Learning Partnership<sup>1</sup> to ensure that all stakeholders were aware of the curriculum reforms currently shaping the college offer and those which would have a wider impact; for example, on 14-19 provision in schools and sixth forms. Discussion topics centred around curriculum products, learning hours, funding, and targets for engagement and success. By discussing these issues with a wide group of interested parties we were able to ensure that parallel changes were being made by other organisations and institutions offering education and training across the city.
- Walkthroughs of existing curriculum models and timetables occurred during termly curriculum review meetings held with lead staff from each sector skills area (SSA). It was during these meetings that any proposed curriculum changes were discussed, agreed and then endorsed by senior managers.

These activities allowed us to identify the impact of QCF implementation on our key points or processes:

### **Process 1**

#### **Transition point or entry point of learner**

- All staff involved at transition/entry points needed training to be aware of the QCF, its implications, and how it will be implemented within the college provision. Information, advice and guidance (IAG) staff needed training so that they could ensure learner understanding of a credit-based system of qualifications.

Training sessions were provided covering:

- The QCF - What is it?
- Implications of the QCF
- QCF and the wider curriculum reform

To date 88 teaching staff (approximately 30%) have received this training as well as an estimated 60% of support staff (e.g. enrolment staff, call centre staff, IAG Officers).

- Staff within the key functions and teams outlined above have been planning the 2010/2011 curriculum offer since February 2010.
- Marketing and publicity materials will need to make explicit reference to the QCF.

### **Process 2**

#### **Data capture at enrolment**

- Robust initial assessment is already in place.
- Unique learner numbers (ULNs) are now embedded and in routine use although with limited impact, or even relevance at this time given the limitations of the Learning Records Service at the time of writing. Significant further development of this service is required before the ULN can play a useful role in recognising and collating achievement.

#### **1**

Sunderland Learning Partnership brings together a wide range of organisations to focus on the actions necessary to secure increased knowledge and skill levels across all age ranges in Sunderland.

### **Process 3**

#### **Coding**

Codes are the data items within central management information systems (MIS) which identify each course that is run within the college. This identity is made up of a qualification aim, title, awarding organisation information, guided learning hours, student learner number value (SLN), and the funding value of each qualification on offer. These fields map onto the fields within the individual learner record (ILR) to ensure accurate reporting and claiming of funding.

Several areas needed attention:

- Considering a roll-up versus a roll-back model; for example, a learner enrolling on a short course at Level 1 then progressing onto a longer course with elements or units of study at Level 2 versus an initial enrolment on a long course at Level 2 which the learner did not achieve but did achieve a shorter course or collection of units mainly at Level 1 during their course of study.
- Putting a numbering system in place to uniquely identify each unit or collection of units by cross-referencing qualification aim, learning hours, and site of delivery.
- Code management within MIS; how the above two functions would be processed within the college management information system.
- Use of umbrella and nested codes by curriculum teams to allow one code to be used to 'describe' and cross-reference to a subset of associated units which together 'add up' to one qualification.
- Ensuring coding protocols were cognisant of QCF implications i.e. that the codes we use would take account of the modular nature of QCF programmes especially given the weaknesses around unit-based funding and reporting of success at a unit level.

### **Process 4**

#### **Enrolment**

This was reviewed but unchanged at this stage. Existing documentation already captures prior learning, previous qualifications and employer details.

### **Process 5**

#### **Validation of curriculum models**

All programmes go through an internal validation process before being made available to learners. This process ensures the proposed programme is appropriate and suitable for the target group, does not duplicate or conflict with any existing offer, is financially viable, and that the expertise exists within the proposed team to deliver a high quality learning experience. It is at this stage that targets for success, retention and achievement rates are set and break-even numbers identified. The proposed programme is also subject to a stringent impact assessment.

We considered several questions relating to this process:

- Whether LAD/NDAQ<sup>2</sup> requirements are checked and verified at programme and module level i.e. are we delivering the correct combination of units/modules over the correct number of learning hours to an acceptable student cohort?
- What are the funding requirements and viability constraints? How much income will each learner generate and what are the break-even points for class size?
- Can we balance learner choice against learner need (right learner, right course)? There is a necessary balance between what a learner may wish to study (quantum physics, nuclear science) and the qualifications that are needed for that individual to progress to their desired and realistic destination.
- What are the awarding body requirements for assessment and moderation of results, the support available, and the administrative requirements?
- What is the impact of rules of combination and sequencing over the length of the course? Are there any mandatory units which must be completed or are all units optional? Is there any particular order in which units must be achieved?
- How viable is matrix timetabling? Delivering units of study rather than full qualifications potentially allows providers the flexibility to timetable units of study at a time where more than one cohort of learners can access the session. For example, if learners within a Hair and Beauty group and an Engineering group need to take a particular personal and social development unit, can the timetable be made to accommodate both groups attending the same session thus realising greater efficiencies with group sizes and staffing levels?
- How do we manage internal and external requirements for progression? For example, when learners need to achieve maths at Level 2 before being able to progress to certain Level 3 courses.

## Process 6

### Ensuring all learners are properly equipped for progression

- A broad range of QCF accredited and internally validated modules have been identified and made available for use within curriculum programmes. These modules form a viable offer with sufficient degree of appropriate learner choice.
- Assessment outcomes and claiming success at unit and programme level needs careful management to ensure accurate records of success exist for each individual learner. This will impact on every learner's individual record within the Learning Records Service as that service develops:
  - Tracking of learner outcomes.
  - Portability of success; it is important that qualifications are recognised across providers and regions so that learners can 'carry' recognised prior achievement throughout their learning 'career'.
  - Ensuring all achievement of prior learning (APL) is correctly recognised and accredited. We are still investigating the implications of APL across awarding bodies and across frameworks, for example, whether prior NQF success will be recognised as part of a QCF programme.
  - Code management for provider management information systems (see earlier section).

## 2

LAD: Learning Aims Database;

NDAQ: National Database of Accredited Qualifications

- Learner progress reviews will need to take place at termly intervals, or more often if deemed necessary for an individual learner. This process may take a 'case conference' approach where each individual learner is discussed by the curriculum team and their performance and results taken into account when there is an opportunity for progression to the next level or year of study. It would be during these reviews that any necessary interventions are identified and implemented to ensure success for each learner. These interventions may take the form of extra study, the assignment of a learning mentor or some other support mechanism.
- We are working to ensure assessment protocols are cognisant of QCF implications. Achievement of units can be built up over time into a qualification level of achievement but must take into account the rules of combination which govern which units can be 'added together' and the order in which units must be studied as well as the impact on the proportion of a programme which might be at differing levels of study.

## Evaluation and impact

There was much unexpected learning from this project particularly around the impact on learners and practitioners. This additional understanding developed from a broader context than the original planned focus on the examinations function and resulted from the impossibility of isolating any single function from the rest of the college processes or from the learner experience.

### Impact on learners

- Learner knowledge and perceptions are little changed but there have been new qualifications introduced providing appropriate and relevant learning opportunities particularly at the foundation level of study.
- There has been a deliberate move away from 'stand alone' discrete Entry and Level 1 provision for 16-19 year olds towards a more comprehensive and coherent offer which has meant that there is now a Level 1 option of study across all vocational departments. This ensures that learners with vocational aspirations are better directed much earlier in the engagement and enrolment process.
- Variety of offer, 'joined up' across vocational areas. One such programme is our Entry Level Programme (ELP). This is aimed at 16-19 year olds with low levels of prior attainment who have little or no idea of what area they want to study. The course includes a number of tasters of vocational areas alongside personal and social development (PSD) which encompasses life and work readiness skills. The tasters are delivered by specialists from the appropriate department e.g. construction, catering, engineering, hair and beauty and gives the learners an insight into possible routes for progression. Learners decide which vocational route they wish to follow and are then progressed into the relevant department with links already made with tutors and resources.
- Flexible start dates with multiple entry points throughout the year. Multiple start dates are important for attractive, flexible programmes.

- Successful re-engagement of disenfranchised young people through a destination-led approach meaning learners are much more focused on their 'next steps'. A prime example is our CONNECT programme which is a Level 1 course delivered by partners in the community which enables hard to reach learners engage with learning in familiar surroundings such as a local youth group or community centre, with their peers. By focussing on 'what next?' very early on in the process learners become much more engaged, have their aspirations and ambitions raised and are more likely to successfully progress.
- Excellent progression opportunities for learner with learning difficulties or disabilities (LLDD). The introduction of employability-focused qualifications and a significant investment in college-run social enterprises, along with support from some of the city's big employers have allowed us to significantly increase the number of opportunities for work experience and supported, long term, work placements.

### **Impact on practitioners**

- The number of staff that has been involved in implementing the curriculum reforms has resulted in a widespread understanding of the QCF and the implications of implementation, although there is currently more impact at Foundation Level than at higher levels of study.
- The change in culture or shift in attitude around credit-based learning has been much smaller than anticipated. Curriculum teams in any large college are already very good at reviewing and adapting the curriculum offer to meet current demands whether local, regional or national.
- There is improved communication between vocational departments around 'right learner, right course' and appropriate progression opportunities exist.
- Internal verification workloads have increased as using QCF qualifications sometimes means working with new awarding bodies with all the associated administration that entails.
- The coherence of our curriculum offer has improved particularly at Foundation Level. By collaborating on joint timetabling and curriculum planning, vocational teams working across departments have been able to create a coherent timetable where learners are 'owned' by one team but are supported in a number of different vocational teams. For example, Level 1 Motor Vehicle (MV) learners attend vocational workshops with other MV learners taught by MV staff but have specialist tutorial support from staff who deliver the PSD element of their programme to support the learner in vocational study by improving behaviour management, confidence building and work readiness skills such as timekeeping and self study.
- Teaching staff have proved to be innovative which has led to some excellent instances of sharing best practice. For example, in our Level 1 construction classes, numeracy has been embedded into the vocational teaching with an emphasis on contextualised, relevant maths teaching. Sessions are taught by two members of staff; one vocational and one numeracy specialist. This team teaching means that learners see themselves using maths for calculating materials needed for a 'real' job with the added advantage of having two teachers in the room to help.

- We provided college-wide staff development encompassing awareness-raising for all frontline staff and curriculum development for all delivery units. Supportive management has driven our investment in professional development and ranges from external bodies acting as consultants (e.g. LSIS, LSN and awarding organisations presenting product and/or curriculum information) and staff working across teams where they act as 'champions' or 'key contacts' in other departments.
- Our curriculum modelling takes into account the need to fit with national priorities; there has been much greater involvement of vocational departments in cross-cutting themes such as literacy and numeracy. Closer working practices between vocational and Skills for Life staff ensures literacy and numeracy are at the core of all programmes of study.

Outstanding cross-college management of literacy and numeracy programmes (recognised by Ofsted with a Grade 1 in January 2010) has had a positive impact on other areas of the curriculum (increased Value-Added, improved success rates).

### **Impact on MIS and supporting systems**

- We have a well-understood coding system encompassing a 'roll-up' model showing progression from award - certificate - diploma where appropriate.
- We have made some progress with ULNs and use of the Learning Records Service but the MIS software is not currently capable of reporting performance at unit level.
- There is real risk of claiming double-funding if unit tracking is not accurate. Similar potential issues exist for transition between schools and further education. It is not clear what mechanism would ensure that there would be no repetition or duplication undertaken.

### **Impact on stakeholders and partners**

- At the time of writing, there has been little interest from employers. They seem to view this type of change as the mechanics behind the service and see little relevance in discussions. Instead, their primary focus is the qualification their employee will achieve, how long it will take, and what it will cost!
- To date, there has been little opportunity for joint working with local authorities and the 14-19 partnership. As local authorities become more involved in educational policy change at 16+ and commissioning of 16+ work, there will be a need for closer links with schools and 14-19 partnerships to avoid potential problems at learner transition points.

### **Barriers and areas still to be resolved**

- The QCF still has little meaning for learners, parents, employers and some other stakeholders, e.g. HE institutions. Its advantages need to be better understood by these groups.
- There has been a lack of practical guidance to support providers in their implementation process.
- There needs to be a greater recognition and adaptation of good NQF provision which offers potential for unit accreditation and the creation of tailored programmes, e.g. NOCN Progression Award, and there is a danger that we may 'throw the baby out with the bath water' if these are lost.
- The lack of timely information with regard to the funding and availability of QCF qualifications has caused a problem due to the significant lead-in time required for internal marketing, prospectus production etc. As much of this is printed a year in advance, there is little scope for late or last-minute changes to the information.



- Learner perceptions of their own destinations/aspirations/ambitions are sometimes unrealistic and sometimes very low. To be truly destination-led, learners need to have a clear idea of where they want to go, what they must achieve to get there and be realistic about progression into related jobs and careers.

A lot of these barriers have yet to be overcome and significant development work is yet to be completed particularly around the underpinning processes which are necessary to allow the full scope of the QCF to be realised e.g. the Learning Records Service, credit-based funding and the recording of credit-based achievement.

### **Next steps, ensuring sustainability**

We intend to:

- Provide further staff development.
- Implement joint planning and curriculum modelling across vocational areas to facilitate the potential for learner transition across departments.
- Ensure all Foundation Level programmes include a core of employability and work readiness skills.

### **Conclusions**

The introduction of the QCF has not been the major change it was anticipated to be and is not likely to be seen as such until such a time as credit-based funding and success rates are introduced.

Any big college - like City of Sunderland College - is well versed in rapid and significant change and is able to be reactive to ongoing changes and reforms of processes and systems. In that context, it was felt that any required changes to our systems could be efficiently managed and subsumed into our normal day-to-day business processes.

### **Key messages for other providers**

- Lead from the top and drive change through from the executive level down. The involvement of a named and accessible senior manager from very early in the development process has helped drive change through - although it helps to have enthusiastic and adaptable staff!
- Engage with change in a controlled manner - do not be tempted to dive in too deeply or too early in the developmental process.
- Having lots of relevant staff training is important, starting with general awareness-raising then building up to practitioner-level delivery detail.
- Provide sufficient information and/or branding to ensure public understanding of the curriculum choices on offer.

### **Useful websites**

Excellence Gateway - a good source of reference and training materials.

Awarding body websites - we have used City and Guilds and NCFE materials to good effect.