

Explaining Qualifications



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Explaining qualifications: An Introduction

A qualification is intended to show employers, teachers and learners what someone has learnt and can do as a result of that achievement. There are a large number of qualifications and the way they are described and marketed can be confusing. This document explains the key characteristics of recognised qualifications and how these can best be understood.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) set out the levels against which a qualification can be recognised in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These frameworks help learners to make informed decisions about the qualifications they need, and help employers and providers assess what qualifications a candidate has. The NQF and QCF are comprised of nine levels, and set out the basis on which qualifications are approved, so that everyone can have confidence in the standards of qualifications and the consistency between these qualifications in terms of levels, size, content, use of titles, etc.

Qualifications are best understood by their **level** of difficulty, **size** and, of course, their **content**. Each accredited qualification has a level according to the qualifications framework it is on. **Levels** are a standard way of comparing how challenging a qualification is and what learners should be able to do once they have successfully completed it. Qualifications which are not accredited are not nationally recognised. Defining the **size** of a qualification is dependent, in part, by the framework to which it is accredited. All accredited qualifications can be found on the [National Database of Accredited Qualifications](#), where you can also view the level and a basic outline of the **content** of a qualification and the units it contains.

Qualifications Frameworks: The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

In England qualifications have traditionally been defined by the **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)**, which included all general and vocational qualifications accredited from 1997. The NQF consists of Entry level to level 8, describing the difficulty of qualifications at each level. Many qualifications are being transferred to the [Qualifications & Credit Framework \(QCF\)](#), which uses a credit based system to recognise qualification size and gives a more flexible approach to learners' needs. The levels for the NQF and QCF are consistent and range from Entry level to level 8. A level 3 NQF qualification therefore represents the same difficulty as a level 3 QCF qualification.

Qualifications Frameworks: The Qualifications and Credit Framework

Working closely with employers and learners, the QCF has been developed to make it easier to understand qualifications, to make qualifications more flexible and accessible to learners, and to allow more work-based training to be included and recognised. Initially vocational qualifications will be accredited onto the QCF. The [Qualification and Curriculum Authority's \(QCA\)](#) vision is to see one framework (the QCF) for all regulated qualifications.

All qualifications on the QCF have titles which consistently describe what is in the qualification (its content), how challenging it is (its level) and how much work it involves (its size). On the QCF the **size** of the qualification is indicated by its title and **credit value**. QCF qualifications have three sizes: **award**, **certificate**, and **diploma**. Awards consist of 1-12 credits, certificates 13-36 credits, and diplomas 37 credits and above. A credit represents ten notional learning hours, and credits therefore describe how long a qualification takes to complete.

Please note that where **on the QCF** the terms **award**, **certificate** and **diploma** refer to the credit value of the qualification. **On the NQF** these terms do not represent a standard qualification size, and are more descriptive. The **new Diploma**, for 14-19 learners, refers to a different structure of qualification: please see [the Diploma's webpage](#).

Qualifications Frameworks: The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been developed and published by the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#). It describes the level of achievement and attributes represented by higher education qualifications such as Certificates of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, Bachelor's degrees (with and without honours), Master's degrees and Doctorates and other academic awards. The FHEQ covers academic qualifications from Level 4 to Level 8, and is broadly comparable to the NQF and QCF which cover qualifications from Entry Level to Level 8. The FHEQ is available at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08>

Qualifications Across Borders: Qualifications in the UK and Ireland

The owners of the respective qualifications frameworks in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland have produced a table demonstrating broad comparisons of their qualification frameworks. Although this does not represent direct equivalence it is a very useful guide for referencing different stages of education and the levels which represent them across the countries' frameworks. You can find the table [here](#).

Work is currently being undertaken to reference UK qualifications to the new European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which will bring a wider understanding of how qualifications compare between a range of countries.

Qualification Equivalence: A guide

Please follow the link provided for a more detailed explanation of how to compare qualifications: [Qualification Equivalence Guide](#)

14-19 Learning: GCSEs and 'A' Levels - 'The Traditional Route'

A-levels and GCSEs are taken by more than one million young people each year and are being revised to ensure that they continue to provide them with relevant knowledge and skills. The questions give learners the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding and their ability to make links between different areas of a subject. New GCSEs in most subjects will start in 2009 and new GCSEs in English, maths and ICT will start in 2010, at the same time as the revised secondary curriculum for key stage 4. An A* grade is being introduced to A-levels to recognise and reward exceptional performance. The revised A-levels that started in 2008 are designed to be more challenging and motivating for learners. A-levels now include a broad range of question types to assess a wide range of skills. GCSEs graded D-G are at level 1 on the NQF, GCSEs graded A*-C are at level 2.

14-19 Learning: The Diploma

The Diploma, a new composite qualification for 14- to 19-year-olds, is made up of individual freestanding qualifications combined in a specific way. The Diploma provides a new choice for young people by offering a different type of learning, greater flexibility and enabling progression into further education, higher education, apprenticeships or skilled employment with training. Studying for a Diploma mixes practical and theoretical learning - with an emphasis on 'applied learning' - delivered through a programme of study which combines the development of knowledge, skills and understanding that are specific to the learner's chosen area of study with a core platform of transferable skills. More information can be found on the [Diploma section of the QCA website](#).

14-19 Learning: Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a form of vocational training that enable learners to gain skills necessary to succeed in their chosen career and earn money at the same time. They involve a combination of on and off the job training - apprentices work alongside experienced staff to gain job-specific skills and receive training. An Apprenticeship is not a qualification in itself, but a framework that contains separately certified elements, including an appropriate work-based qualification such as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at either level 2 or level 3, key skills and in some cases a relevant knowledge based qualification such as a BTEC. Apprenticeships have been developed by employers and tailored to meet the needs of specific employment sectors. Apprenticeships are open to anyone over 16 years who wants to gain new skills and qualifications. More information can be found on [the Apprenticeships website](#).

Vocational Learning and Professional Development

An Introduction

A wide range of vocational qualifications are accredited onto the NQF and QCF. These provide opportunities for learners at all levels and ages to recognise and develop their skills and understanding, covering almost every industry sector and level, and ranging from broad-based qualifications to specialist qualifications designed for a particular sector or occupation. In many cases suites of qualifications are available, offering progression through the levels of the NQF. Vocational qualifications serve a range of purposes in different sectors and at different levels, so they vary in size, level and assessment procedures.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are work related, competence-based qualifications. They reflect the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to do a given job, and show that a candidate is competent in the area of work the NVQ represents. The standards for NVQs are designed and set by the relevant sector body, ensuring expertise in determining the skills that are gained when undertaking an NVQ.

The requirements for NVQs under the NQF are outlined in [The NVQ Code of Practice 2006](#). On the QCF NVQs operate under [The Regulatory Arrangements for the QCF](#) in tandem with the document [Operating rules for using the term 'NVQ' in a QCF qualification title](#). These documents can be downloaded from the Ofqual website using the hyperlinks provided. NVQs under the QCF have been designed to operate within the QCF regulatory framework while retaining the standard and key of features NVQs which have developed over the years.

Qualifications table: Qualification levels with examples

You can see examples of where these and some other qualifications sit in relation to the NQF and QCF on the table provided below. There are thousands of qualifications accredited to the NQF and QCF and the examples below give only a small sample of qualifications provided.

Level	NQF Qualifications Examples	QCF Qualifications Examples
Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry level certificates • Skills for Life at Entry level 	<p>Entry level VQs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry level awards, certificates and diplomas • Foundation Learning Tier pathways • Functional Skills at Entry level
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GCSEs graded D-G • NVQs at level 1 • Key Skills level 1 • Skills for Life • Foundation Diploma 	<p>Level 1 VQs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTEC awards, certificates and diplomas at level 1 • Functional Skills level 1 • OCR Nationals • Foundation Learning Tier pathways
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GCSEs graded A*-C • NVQs at level 2 • Level 2 VQs • Key Skills level 2 • Skills for Life • Higher Diploma 	<p>Level 2 VQs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTEC awards, certificates and diplomas at level 2 • Functional Skills level 2
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AS/A levels • Advanced Extension Awards • International Baccalaureate • Key Skills level 3 • NVQs at level 3 • Cambridge International Awards • Advanced and Progression Diploma 	<p>Level 3 VQs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTEC awards, certificates and diplomas at level 3 • BTEC Nationals • OCR Nationals

Level	NQF Qualifications Examples	QCF Qualifications Examples		Framework for Higher Education (Maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency) Examples
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVQs at level 4 • Key Skills level 4 • Certificates of higher education 	Original NQF Level 4*	Level 4 VQs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTEC Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certificates of higher education
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher national diplomas • Other higher diplomas • NVQs at level 4* 		Level 5 VQs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HNCs and HNDs • BTEC Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomas of higher education and further education, foundation degrees and higher national diplomas
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Diploma in Professional Production Skills • NVQs at level 4* 		Level 6 VQs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BTEC Advanced Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor degrees, graduate certificates and diplomas
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postgraduate certificates and diplomas • BTEC advanced professional awards, certificates and diplomas • Fellowships and fellowship diplomas • Diploma in Translation • NVQs at level 5* 	Original NQF Level 5*	Level 7 VQs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced professional awards, certificates and diplomas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and diplomas
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NVQs at level 5* 		Level 8 VQs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Award, certificate and diploma in strategic direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctorates

***Changes to the NQF**

The NQF has existed in its current format since September 2004. Prior to this, the NQF consisted of 6 levels (Entry level to level 5), with levels 4 and 5 being described as broadly comparable to 'higher education qualifications'. However, at this time, it was not possible to specify to which higher education qualifications they were comparable. The NQF was therefore revised to allow us to provide a broader indication on how qualifications at these levels compare to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions. Entry level to level 3 on the original NQF did not change. However, qualifications at levels 4 and 5 were assigned more precise levels (levels 4-8). Level 4 qualifications on the original NQF were divided into the revised levels 4, 5 and 6, and level 5 qualifications on the original NQF were divided into the revised levels 7 and 8. Revised levels were not given to NVQs at levels 4 and 5, partially to maintain comparability with the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). It is therefore only possible to give a very broad indication of how these compare to current NQF levels and higher education qualifications. An NVQ at level 4 is therefore broadly comparable to levels 4-6 on the NQF.

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