



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
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Rewarding Learning

Evaluating the Qualifications and Credit Framework: Year 1 report

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Preface

We have been delighted with the progress made during the past 12 months on the development of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). This progress has been made in no small part by the hard work and commitment of a very wide range of partners and organisations that have contributed to the tests and trial programme. This kind of collaboration and partnership working will be critical to the future success of the QCF.

It is also important to recognise the excellent secondary research completed by Oxford University and the comprehensive evaluation report of the trials undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). The quality of the recommendations made in this report rests largely upon the findings and conclusions drawn by these two organisations.

The QCF aims to provide greater flexibility and increased access for learners. It supports the thinking set out in the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy and will provide a means of recognising a wide range of achievement in a flexible and responsive manner. In Wales the QCF forms one pillar and supports the overarching credit framework of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales.

We feel confident that the work undertaken this year has laid solid foundations for the continuing development of the QCF and for the reform of the qualifications system vital to achieving the aims of the UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (UKVQRP). Next year the priority will be to evaluate the impact and anticipated benefits that the QCF has for learners and the extent to which the new framework can respond to the needs of employers.

We look forward to another year of progress and to the publication of the final report on QCF development this time next year.

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Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to set out for consideration by ministers the progress made to date in developing the QCF and make recommendations on the priorities for further development in 2007–08.

The report is made approximately midway through a two-year programme of work being taken forward by the regulators that will report in full to ministers in July 2008. The report draws primarily upon evidence generated through 50 separate test and trial projects, but also borrows heavily upon the independent evaluation of the test and trial programme conducted by PwC, and secondary research conducted by Oxford University.

Based upon the findings of the first year of QCF development, the regulators propose a considerable number of recommendations. These are listed in full in Part 5 and are also described and supported by considerable detail throughout the main body of the report. Many of these recommendations relate to specific technical activities. Others make broader recommendations about those aspects of the QCF that should now be secured following the first year of trials, as well as pointing to priorities for future development. The key recommendations made in the report are set out below.

Each set of recommendations is arranged into one of two categories. The first set – key recommendations – includes those recommendations that are clearly supported by evidence from the first year of development of the QCF. The second set – further activity in year 2 – identifies issues that require further testing and trialling before decisions on implementation are made.

Recommendations: The technical features of the QCF

Key recommendations

- The general basis for developing the QCF as a unit-based qualifications framework, underpinned by the award, accumulation and transfer of credits, is reconfirmed as the appropriate model for continued development.
- A standard unit format will be adopted as the building block for all qualifications in the QCF.
- The definition of credit used in the development of the tests and trials will be adopted as the definition of credit for the QCF.
- The new regulatory criteria for the QCF should confirm that awarding body names or brands are not included within the formal listing of qualification titles.
- The terms ‘award’, ‘certificate’ and ‘diploma’ will continue to be used to indicate the relative sizes of qualifications in the QCF.

Further activity in year 2

- The regulators will work with their reform partners in Strands 1 and 3 of the UKVQRP board to develop the capacity of sector bodies, awarding bodies and other organisations to develop units during the remainder of the test and trial programme to meet QCF requirements.
- The regulators will monitor closely the development of both owned and shared units within the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- The regulators will establish a consultative mechanism to consider the rationale and purpose for developing particular types of qualification within the QCF. The outcomes of this process will be reported in July 2008.
- The regulators will continue to engage and work with the higher education sector during the second year of trials. A dedicated communications strategy, tailored to country-specific situations, will be produced and implemented to improve understanding of the QCF amongst higher education institutions.

Recommendations: The key operational processes

Further activity in year 2

- The regulators will review and update existing guidance on the unit development process to improve the overall consistency and quality of units developed through the test and trial programme.
- As part of the updating of guidance, the regulators will produce, in collaboration with Strand 1 partners, additional guidance explicitly aimed at the use of national occupational standards (NOS) in this process.
- The proposals to establish a process for sampling units during the remainder of the test and trial programme to assess their quality will be implemented straightaway.
- The regulators will continue to monitor the comparability and consistency of unit credit values through unit sampling arrangements in order to inform the consultation on new regulatory criteria for the QCF.
- The regulators will continue to monitor closely the use of different assessment methods across shared units to ensure that mutual trust and confidence between awarding bodies is maintained.

Recommendations: The technical infrastructure

Key recommendations

- A clearly identifiable unit databank will be developed to support the QCF. The work to develop a unit bulk upload should continue and be integrated into the development of a databank.
- Use the extensive findings from the trials to review the suitability of the web-based accreditation (WBA) system to support all aspects of the QCF accreditation process and determine whether it can support implementation of the QCF.

Further activity in year 2

- Continue with work to understand how the QCF can support the needs of learners and allow them to make choices in a unit-based credit system.
- Continue to work with the Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) learner registration service to test the viability of the unique learner number (ULN) and work with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSH) and other bodies responsible for the provision of 'fair processing notice' text to ensure the needs of the QCF are met, for example by explicitly stating what data is required to be shared.
- Continue to test the IT system and resolve the issues that it generates in the second year of the trials.
- Evaluate the costs of the IT system.

Recommendations: Longer-term developments

Further activity in year 2

- Priority qualifications identified for development by 10 selected sector skills councils (SSCs), including the six SSCs involved in sector qualifications strategy (SQS) pilots, will be included within the scope of the test and trial programme.
- All qualifications expiring within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) from 1 August 2007 to 31 July 2008 may be replaced by a qualification within the QCF test and trial programme.
- The last date for acceptance of new qualifications for accreditation within the NQF will be agreed and communicated alongside the publication of new regulatory criteria for the QCF.
- The existing deadline of 31 December 2010 for expiry of accreditation for all vocational qualifications in the NQF will be reconfirmed.
- A visual identity and language set will be developed for the QCF. Phase 2 of this work should take place during 2007–8 so that solutions can be implemented in line with the 'fast-track' accreditation proposals.

Introduction

1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to set out the progress made to date in developing the QCF for consideration by ministers and make recommendations on the priorities for further development in 2007–8.
- 1.2. The report fulfils the request to the regulators of external qualifications to test and trial the proposed new system made by ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in November 2005.

2. Background

- 2.1. This report identifies and analyses the outcomes of the initial phase of developing the QCF. This development is one of five strands of work being taken forward through the UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (UKVQRP) and is intended to sit alongside reports from each of these other strands.
- 2.2. This strand (Strand 2) of the UKVQRP is being taken forward by the regulators of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The report is made jointly by the three regulators to the respective ministers in each UK jurisdiction. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the Scottish Executive, two partners in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), maintain a watching brief over the development of the QCF.
- 2.3. The report is made approximately midway through a two-year programme of work being taken forward by the regulators that will report in full to ministers in July 2008. The report draws primarily on the outcomes of this programme in setting out issues and recommendations for consideration by ministers.

3. Scope

- 3.1. The primary sources from which evidence has been drawn to support the recommendations in this report are the reports from the QCF test and trial programme. This programme began in October 2006 and will continue until May 2008. Some 50 separate test and trial projects are now under way, and progress reports have now been received from 48 of these projects.
- 3.2. The regulators have commissioned an independent evaluation of the test and trial programme from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) that summarises key findings from the full range of test and trial projects. This *Qualifications and credit framework evaluation project: Final report* (PwC, Government and Public Sector, June 2007) is referred to here as the independent evaluation report or PwC IER.

- 3.3. In addition to the test and trial programme, the regulators also commissioned a comparative study of similar initiatives in other countries. The study *International evidence on credit frameworks*¹ is intended to supplement evidence from test and trial evaluations, and to locate the development of the QCF in a broader international context. Again, PwC has provided the regulators with its own evaluative summary of this international comparative study.
- 3.4. This report also draws in part on the lessons from developments in the UK that have informed (and continue to inform) the development of the QCF. These developments include both the SCQF and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) as well as credit systems in UK higher education, in access to higher education qualifications, and in the credit systems established outside the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) over the past 25 years across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 3.5. It should be emphasised that this report, made as it is at the halfway stage of the QCF test and trial programme, focuses on the functioning of the new framework, rather than its longer-term impact. In other words it attempts to address the question ‘will it work?’ rather than ‘will it bring benefits?’ and ‘what will it cost?’ The second question will form the primary focus of the report to ministers in July 2008.

4. The aims of the QCF

- 4.1. The following four aims have been identified in developing the QCF. It should:
- ensure that a wider range of achievements can be recognised within a more inclusive qualifications framework
 - establish a qualifications system that is more responsive to individual and employer needs
 - establish a simpler qualifications framework that is easier for all users to understand
 - reduce the burden of bureaucracy in the accreditation and assessment of qualifications.
- 4.2. As the report is produced approximately halfway through the initial phase of framework development, no final outcomes can yet be reported against any of these four aims. Nevertheless the report seeks to demonstrate that, on the basis of available evidence, the QCF has the future potential to realise these aims.

5. The structure of the report

- 5.1. The evidence from the development of the QCF to date is sufficient in some instances to establish ‘proof of concept’ and therefore to make clear recommendations on further action. In other instances, the evidence is inconclusive at this juncture. The structure of the recommendations that follow each section of the report reflects these differences in the current evidence base.

¹ Hayward, G., *International evidence on credit frameworks*, SKOPE, Oxford University, March 2007.

- 5.2. **Part 1** of the report focuses on the technical features of the QCF. A significant amount of evidence now exists about the application of these technical features, both through the QCF test and trial programme and more widely, and their usefulness in supporting the aims of the framework.
- 5.3. **Part 2** of the report relates to the operational processes that the QCF is designed to support. Here the evidence base is narrower and this is reflected in the nature of the recommendations related to this section, which identifies priorities for further development activity, rather than firm conclusions about how these processes should operate in the future.
- 5.4. **Part 3** focuses on the technical infrastructure that is being developed to support the QCF. Here there are some clear messages from the test and trial programme, as well as time-based imperatives that lead to some firm recommendations for future action, as well as identifying priorities for further evaluation through the test and trial programme.
- 5.5. **Part 4** of the report looks forward to the remainder of the test and trial programme and summarises key areas for continuing work during 2007–8. This section looks beyond the immediate lessons from tests and trials to indicate how work on other areas of the UKVQRP is being supported through the development of the QCF.
- 5.6. **Part 5** lists all the recommendations made in the report. These key recommendations are collated in the **Executive summary** to the report.
- 5.7. The final part of the report includes **annexes** and **references** that support the information contained in the main body of the report.

6. The QCF in the wider context of UK qualifications reform

- 6.1. The report attempts to consider the interdependencies between the different strands of the UKVQRP, and to locate the development of the QCF within this wider context of reform. In particular, the report seeks to ensure that its recommendations take due account of both the sector qualifications reform (SQR) programme (Strand 1 of the UKVQRP) and the funding arrangements that will support these reforms (Strand 3).
- 6.2. In so doing it seeks to balance the UK-wide focus of the SQR programme, with the England, Wales and Northern Ireland remit of the QCF and the four separate funding approaches of each UK jurisdiction. Where a particular feature of the QCF has resonance in (for example) Northern Ireland, the report refers explicitly to this ‘sub-UK’ context.
- 6.3. The need to accommodate the outcomes of the SQR programme and the moves towards an increased involvement of sector bodies in qualifications development and approval emphasise the importance of the QCF as a framework based on key design features, rather than on the specification of qualification content.
- 6.4. In this context the importance of securing the technical features of the QCF at the earliest possible opportunity becomes apparent. The more certain we can be about the specifications of the framework, the better the QCF will be able to support the work of Strands 1 and 3 in the UKVQRP. As the timetables for development on both SQR and on

demand-led funding models (in England) will move forward significantly during 2007–8, the further development of the QCF needs to take account of these interdependencies.

- 6.5. With this wider context in mind, the report highlights how the technical features of the QCF are able to support not only the aims of the framework itself, but the wider aims of reform in these other strands of the UKVQRP.

Part 1: The technical features of the QCF

7. The purpose of the framework

- 7.1. It should be emphasised that the QCF has a very particular purpose, which is to support the operation of a regulated, unit-based qualifications system underpinned by the award, accumulation and transfer of credits. In this sense it is very different in concept from the existing NQF, which is based on a range of criteria, codes of practice and guidance that have no single purpose relating to the design of units and qualifications.
- 7.2. The technical features of the QCF are simple and minimal. The design of the QCF is based on the principle that the fewer organisational constraints that are designed into the framework, the more responsive and inclusive will be the systems that operate within it. This combination of minimum specifications for the framework and maximum flexibility in operational systems is designed explicitly to deliver on the aims of the framework, as set out in Section 4.1 above.
- 7.3. This approach requires these minimum specifications to be robust and stable. These specifications are critically important to the effective functioning of the systems that will operate within the framework. By identifying through this report those design features of the QCF that are sufficiently stable and robust to support the kind of qualifications system we seek to develop, we can ensure that the further development of the QCF can support the other strands of activity in the reform programme.
- 7.4. Evidence from the test and trial programme to date, and from the PwC IER (see page v, executive summary), suggests that the purpose of the QCF is well understood and widely supported. PwC reports that 94 per cent of the trialists welcome the development of a credit-based qualifications system.

Recommendation 1

The general basis for developing the QCF as a unit-based qualifications framework, underpinned by the award, accumulation and transfer of credits, is reconfirmed as the appropriate model for continued development.

8. The working specification

- 8.1. The main technical features of the QCF are set out in the *Working specification for framework tests and trials*. As its name implies, this document, plus associated guidance, is currently being used by all test and trial projects. One of the purposes of the test and trial programme is to evaluate the relevance and usefulness of the working specification to the development and assessment of units and qualifications within the QCF.

- 8.2. The intention is that, by August 2008, an updated specification of the QCF will be incorporated into a comprehensive set of regulatory criteria and related guidance appropriate to the new framework. The timescale for developing these regulatory criteria for the QCF is set out in Annex B.
- 8.3. The existing working specification will continue to be used by those projects already active in the test and trial programme. There are some elements of the specification that can be revised on the basis of feedback from tests and trials to date. It is proposed that these revised specifications should be used for all new projects in the remainder of the test and trial programme, and to inform the development of regulatory criteria for the QCF.

Recommendation 2

- **The *Working specification for framework tests and trials* will be updated, based on feedback from test and trial projects.**
- **This updated specification will be used for the remainder of the test and trial programme.**
- **The updated specification will form part of the consultation on proposed regulatory criteria for the QCF.**

9. Units

- 9.1. The remit to the qualifications regulators in taking forward Strand 2 of the UKVQRP is to develop the QCF as a regulated unit-based framework, underpinned by a system of credit accumulation and transfer. Clearly the unit specification for the framework is critical to the delivery of the regulators' commitment to the reform process.
- 9.2. Within the working specification a unit is clearly defined as a unit of assessment:
'a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and related assessment criteria, with a title, credit value and level'.
- 9.3. It is important to note the distinction between this definition and the current specification of a unit within the NQF:
'the smallest part of a qualification that is capable of certification in its own right'.
- 9.4. Within the NQF a unit is defined as a sub-set of a qualification. In the QCF units are the building blocks of qualifications and so qualifications are unit-based. Within the NQF qualifications are broken down into units. Within the QCF qualifications are built up from units.

10. A standard unit format

- 10.1. For units to sustain this role as building blocks in the new framework, they need to be designed to a common set of standards. A shared set of unit design features is therefore an essential pre-requisite for a unit-based framework.
- 10.2. Evidence from other international examples suggests that the establishing of a standard design format for units will bring explicit advantages to the development of the QCF. Not only will it make the framework simpler and more accessible to users, it will support the rationalisation of qualifications through facilitating the easy exchange and reuse of units across qualifications.
- 10.3. Equally important is the importance of a standard unit format in supporting the development of consistent and stable credit values, which itself is a pre-requisite for the development of the system of credit accumulation and transfer that will underpin the QCF. Evidence from other credit systems confirms the importance of a standard unit specification in supporting this critical feature of the QCF.
- 10.4. Previous consultation on the development of the framework confirms the importance of this standard unit format, and evidence from the PwC IER confirms that some 80 per cent of projects understand and support the benefits of using a standard unit format (see page vi, executive summary).

Recommendation 3

A standard unit format will be adopted as the building block for all qualifications in the QCF.

11. The unit format for the QCF tests and trials

- 11.1. The unit format for the QCF is not particular to the new framework. The specification was first formally proposed as a national unit specification in 1992 and has subsequently formed the basic building block of most UK credit systems over the past decade.
- 11.2. The unit specification used in the QCF tests and trials is the same as that defined in the CQFW handbook and in the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS). It is the same unit format used by the Quality Assurance Agency's Access to HE Diplomas, and by the England, Wales and Northern Ireland Inter Country Credit Consortium.
- 11.3. In adopting the unit format for the QCF tests and trials, the qualifications regulators deliberately chose to build on a tried and tested format, familiar to many awarding bodies, practitioners and learners across the UK.
- 11.4. According to the PwC IER, slightly less than 20 per cent of test and trial projects have reported difficulty in using the QCF unit format (see page vii, executive summary). These

difficulties have arisen in all cases through difficulties in expressing current national occupational standards (NOS) in the QCF unit format.

- 11.5. In other instances, test and trial projects have developed new units within the QCF format, based on NOS, and have reported no difficulties in using the standard format. Indeed, over 80 per cent (see pages vi–vii, executive summary, PwC IER) of test and trial projects report no difficulties in using the unit format, not least because in a number of instances it has been in use long before the QCF test and trial programme.
- 11.6. To date, some 1,191 units have been developed and submitted to the unit databank by a wide range of awarding bodies and/or sector bodies. These units have been developed across the first six levels of the framework.
- 11.7. As 80 per cent of test and trial projects are comfortable with the unit format, it can therefore be secured prior to consultation on new regulatory criteria. The proposed minor adjustments to the format are set out below.

Recommendation 4

The unit format being used in the test and trial programme should be adopted, with some minor adjustments,* for the QCF.

* These minor adjustments are set out in the following recommendations.

12. Adjusting the unit specification and related guidance

- 12.1. Based on feedback from the test and trial programme, and from an investigation of practice in other credit systems, the regulators of external qualifications now propose the following adjustments to the unit format:
- an adjustment to the introductory statements that precede all learning outcomes and assessment criteria
 - a change from ‘assessment requirements’ in the additional unit information to ‘assessment requirements or guidance’
 - a change in the ‘endorsement’ section of the format to reflect the developing role of sector bodies in ‘approval’ of units and qualifications.
- 12.2. In addition to these adjustments to the specifications, the existing *Guidelines for writing units of assessment for the QCF tests and trials* will be revised and supplemented to provide clearer and more explicit guidance to the process of unit development during the second year of the test and trial programme. This revised guidance will be published with the updated specification for the QCF tests and trials, prior to publication of the consultation on new regulatory criteria in November 2007.

Introductory statements

- 12.3. Several test and trial projects have commented on the restrictions placed on the development of learning outcomes by the use of the phrase ‘the learner will’ before each set of outcomes. The use of the phrase ‘the learner can’ before all assessment criteria has similarly been questioned.
- 12.4. The intention of these statements in the units is to establish a standard grammatical approach to the development of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that require unit developers to relate the content of units directly to learners, and to focus on what learners know, understand or can do. Providing these intentions are maintained, a wider range of introductory statements in the unit format could be accommodated.
- 12.5. It is proposed to adjust the unit format to encompass this wider range of statements. The terms ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘assessment criteria’ will be retained, as the PwC IER identifies no concerns with these terms (see pages 16–18). The UK government’s recent endorsement of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) also commits it explicitly to the development of learning outcomes in the QCF.

Assessment requirements

- 12.6. Although the current unit pro forma asks sector bodies to identify any additional ‘assessment requirements’ for a unit, several sector bodies have included statements in this section of the unit pro forma that constitute ‘guidance’ or ‘advice’ to assessors or centres, rather than stipulate a requirement. Of course, in other instances sector bodies have set very clear requirements for assessment, as anticipated.
- 12.7. It is therefore proposed to replace the term ‘requirement’ in this section of the unit pro forma, with the ‘requirement or guidance’. It will then be for the sector body to make clear in completing this section of the unit pro forma the exact status of its communication to assessors and/or centres.
- 12.8. It should be emphasised here that the information that may appear in this section of the unit may be (and in many instances will need to be) supplemented by more detailed guidance produced by an awarding body to support the effective application of assessment arrangements through centres.

Endorsement and approval

- 12.9. The current unit format makes reference to ‘endorsement’ of the unit by a sector body. In order to reflect more accurately the enhanced role of sector bodies in approving the content of qualifications, it is proposed to change ‘endorsement’ to ‘approval’ in a revised unit format.

Guidance on unit development

- 12.10. The regulators propose to commission a review and updating of the current guidelines for writing units as a result of the evaluation of the QCF tests and trials to date. In developing revised guidelines the regulators propose that the following adjustments should be made:
- a revision of the examples used in the current guidelines to eliminate questionable practice and encompass a broader range of subject/sector areas
 - more detail on the relationship between the unit writing process and the use of NOS as the basis for unit development
 - more guidance on effective processes for unit development (based in part on an analysis of reported practice – both good and not-so-good – in the test and trial projects).
- 12.11. The regulators will produce a revised unit pro forma and associated guidance by November 2007, prior to publication of the formal consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF. These revised documents will also be linked to the development of the unit databank within a revised IT infrastructure for the QCF, as set out in Part 3 below.
- 12.12. In addition, the regulators will, in collaboration with their reform partners, seek to develop further the capacity of sector bodies, awarding bodies and other organisations to develop units during the remainder of the test and trial programme that more effectively meet QCF requirements.

Recommendation 5

The following adjustments will be made to the unit format used in the test and trial programme:

- **include a broader range of introductory statements before learning outcomes and assessment criteria**
- **substitute ‘assessment requirements’ with ‘assessment requirements or guidance’**
- **substitute ‘sector endorsement’ with ‘sector approval’**
- **the current *Guidelines for writing units of assessment for the QCF tests and trials* will be reviewed and updated based on feedback from test and trial projects**
- **the capacity of sector bodies, awarding bodies and other organisations to develop units during the remainder of the test and trial programme will be further developed to meet QCF requirements.**

13. Shared and owned units

- 13.1. During the test and trial programme a 'mixed economy' of units is being evaluated. Unit developers may identify one of three forms of 'ownership' of units:
- available only to the submitting awarding body
 - available to named awarding bodies
 - available to any awarding body.
- 13.2. The first of these three options is available only to awarding bodies. Where another body (such as a sector body) submits a unit to the QCF unit databank, it is required (as it is not an awarding body) to select either the second or third options. Of course awarding bodies may also select these second and third options if they choose.
- 13.3. Feedback from test and trial project reports suggests that a majority of the units that are being submitted to the databank are being made available to named awarding bodies (such as all awarding bodies in a particular sector) or to all awarding bodies. Three sector bodies encourage all units in their sector to be shared. One awarding body has decided that all the units it submits to the databank will be shared.
- 13.4. At this juncture there is no recommendation that this 'mixed economy' of units should be changed. The regulators will continue to monitor closely the implications of unit ownership on the development of the QCF during the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 13.5. There is also a clear need to work more closely with Strand 1 of the UKVQRP to ensure that the implications of unit ownership, and its impact on the development of qualifications, is understood in the context of the SQR. Section 18 below on rules of combination (RoC) picks up some of the further implications of unit ownership.

Recommendation 6

- **The development of both owned and shared units within the remainder of the test and trial programme will be closely monitored.**
- **Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together to ensure that the future development of units within the QCF supports the aims of SQR.**

14. Unit submission pilot

- 14.1. The regulators took the decision in autumn 2006 that in order to fully test the framework, we needed to consider whether and how other bodies, for example sector bodies and providers, could contribute units directly to the unit bank and the quality assurance mechanisms that would be needed to support this. Discussions with key stakeholders demonstrated that to ensure buy-in to this process it needed to be supported by a robust quality assurance process for the organisations involved.

- 14.2. A process was subsequently put in place towards the end of 2006, requiring participating organisations to provide information on their arrangements and processes for unit development, including organisational structure, development of rationale and content, and internal approval procedures. The process is based on the requirements used to recognise awarding bodies. It was also agreed that the review of this information would be carried out through a combination of desk-based reviews and audit visits to allow the regulators to form as comprehensive a picture as possible.
- 14.3. Sector bodies and providers leading tests and trials were invited to express an interest in participating in a pilot of the above process in early 2007, and five expressions of interest were received from sector bodies. All these organisations were briefed on the process in spring 2007 and as a result the regulators received four applications for access to the unit databank. Subsequently, two organisations have been granted provisional access to the unit databank and it is anticipated that this will be fully confirmed shortly based on the outcomes of audit activity. The other two applications are in progress as the project timelines for the sector bodies concerned allowed more flexibility.
- 14.4. This process is still at an early stage and so it is difficult to identify concrete findings. Nevertheless, emerging feedback from the organisations concerned suggests that they perceive having direct access to the unit databank as a major benefit. From the perspective of the regulators too, the pilot process has been positive with the sector bodies involved demonstrating a clear sense of what is required in terms of unit development.
- 14.5. The main weakness to date has been the lack of documented processes, however there is nothing to suggest that this is in any way a more significant issue for sector bodies than for other organisations. There is of course the need to follow through the pilot process by including units submitted by these organisations in the planned unit sampling exercise in order to make judgements about quality and consistency, but again there is nothing to suggest so far that the issues will be of a different nature to those arising from the sampling process as a whole.
- 14.6. Given the above, there is likely to be scope for expanding the pilot to include other types of organisation, potentially covering providers and employers. This would need to be carefully planned and managed to ensure applications can be handled within specified timescales and to reflect feedback emerging from the pilot as it progresses.

Recommendation 7

The scope of unit submission pilot will be extended to include a range of other organisations within the second year of tests and trials.

15. Levels

- 15.1. One of the important features of a unit-based system is that all units should be located at a particular level of the QCF. In order to do this, level descriptors are needed so that an appropriate level for each unit can be determined. These descriptors are set out in *Level descriptors for positioning units in the QCF tests and trials* that forms part of the support pack for the tests and trials.
- 15.2. The QCF level descriptors were developed by the regulators through a project prior to the start of tests and trials. The level descriptors draw on the existing level descriptors for the NQF, as well as those developed through NICATS and currently used within CQFW. The level descriptors also made reference to the emerging descriptors of the EQF.
- 15.3. As part of the test and trial programme, projects were asked to use the level descriptors in determining the level of units, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the descriptors in guiding unit developers towards a clear and consistent representation of the level of learner achievement within the QCF.
- 15.4. Feedback from test and trial projects suggests that in most instances the level descriptors have proved to be both useful and sufficient to establish clear and consistent levels for units in the QCF. The PwC IER confirms that, at lower levels of the framework, the level descriptors are sufficiently robust to sustain the unit development process, though some difficulties have been reported in using level 3 and 4 descriptors (see page vi and pages 11–15, PwC IER).
- 15.5. Insufficient evidence currently exists to substantiate a similar position for levels 5 and above, or for units at entry 1 or 2. However, the acceleration of unit and qualification development to support progression pathways for foundation learning during the second year of tests and trials will produce valuable data to secure the stability of the entry level descriptors.
- 15.6. Feedback from some projects, again detailed in the PwC IER, suggests the need for a further review of some of the language of the level descriptors to ensure they are sufficiently broad and robust to support the future determination of unit levels across all areas of the framework (see page 15, PwC IER).
- 15.7. The PwC IER also recommends that further guidance should be produced by the regulators on the application of level descriptors within the process of unit development (see page 15). The regulators propose that the Level Descriptors Advisory Group should consider amendments to the existing level descriptors prior to consultation on the regulatory criteria for the QCF. The updating of the guidelines for unit writing also needs to reflect any proposed changes.

Recommendation 8

- **The existing level descriptors will be reviewed and adjusted (if necessary) as part of the updated specification for the QCF. This review will take particular note of the distinctions between levels 3 and 4.**
- **The descriptors for levels 5 to 8, and for entry 1 and 2, will be kept under review during the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

16. Credit

- 16.1. The remit to the regulators requires the QCF to be developed as a unit-based framework, underpinned by a system of credit accumulation and transfer. In order for this underpinning system to function effectively, credits must be capable of transfer between all qualifications and all awarding bodies, subject to RoC.
- 16.2. The functioning of this system of credit accumulation and transfer has not yet been subject to tests and trials. However, it is possible to identify some essential preconditions for the effective future functioning of this credit system, and to evaluate some of the outcomes of the tests and trials to date in relation to these preconditions. One of these preconditions is that the credit values of units should represent consistent and comparable valuations of learner achievements across all parts of the QCF.
- 16.3. One of the issues raised in the PwC IER is that the working specification and related guidance contains insufficient information about credits (see pages ix–x executive summary and pages 59–60). There is, in fact, no explicit definition of ‘credit’ in the working specification, although one does appear in the associated guidance. This has led to confusion in a small number of projects about the application of the concept of ‘credit value’ in the process of unit development. This needs to be addressed in the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 16.4. The definition of credit in itself is not problematic for 80 per cent of test and trial projects. No proposals are put forward in this report to change the definition of credit used in the test and trial programme, but greater clarity in defining credit is needed in any revised specification for the QCF as the range of the test and trial programme continues to expand.
- 16.5. The definition of credit is only part of the process of developing consistency in the application of the working specification for the tests and trials. Other aspects of this process are considered in Section 27 below.

Recommendation 9

- **The definition of credit used in the development of the tests and trials will be adopted as the definition of credit for the QCF.**
- **The guidance for the remainder of the test and trial programme will be updated to include more information about the definition of credit and its application to unit development.**

17. Qualifications

- 17.1. To date, 53 qualifications have been submitted for accreditation in the QCF, with a further 60 in preparation for submission. This is not unexpected, as a number of test and trial projects are planning submissions for accreditation in July and August 2007, while other projects are continuing with unit and qualifications development prior to submission for accreditation.
- 17.2. Even at this early stage of development for many projects, the evaluation of the test and trial programme to date reveals some interesting issues emerging from current practice in relation to the development of qualifications in the QCF.
- 17.3. Feedback from test and trial reports have identified the following kinds of questions in relation to qualifications design:
- is it better to develop separate pathways within a single qualification rather than separate qualifications?
 - how can qualifications be developed that will enable future updating without the need for full re-accreditation?
 - how far can qualifications be shared between awarding bodies?
 - what is an appropriate level of involvement by sector bodies in the process of designing and developing qualifications?
- 17.4. Most of these focus on the use of RoC in the design of qualifications. As the QCF trials are testing the use of a standard template for qualification RoC, an assessment of the usefulness and value of this RoC template forms the primary focus for considering the technical features of qualifications at this juncture.

18. RoC

- 18.1. Within the QCF all qualifications are based on a set of RoC, which set out the requirements for achieving credits through particular combinations of units in order to fulfil the requirements for award of the qualification.

- 18.2. RoC form the critical information about a qualification that will be submitted to the regulators for accreditation. They also set out the structure within which learners accumulate and (possibly) transfer credits to achieve the qualification.
- 18.3. All RoC within the QCF are required to be set out in a standard template. One of the challenges for the RoC template is to be able to accommodate a comprehensive set of rules for the accumulation and transfer of credits towards qualifications of all sizes within the QCF. To date, the RoC template has proved capable of supporting all the flexibility that qualifications designers require in the QCF tests and trials. This includes some examples of quite complex rules.
- 18.4. Based on feedback from the test and trial projects themselves, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the RoC template for the QCF is fit for purpose and so no adjustments to the template are proposed in this report. The remainder of the test and trial programme provides an opportunity to keep the RoC template under review.
- 18.5. Having said this, many test and trial projects are highly critical of the process through which information about RoC is entered into the current WBA system. The PwC IER reports that some 60 per cent of projects have experienced difficulties in entering RoC in the current test and trial IT system (see page x executive summary and pages 67–68). Any revision of the RoC template would clearly need to be integrated into a review of the current WBA system and, as Part 3 below clearly indicates, this is a high priority for the future development of the QCF.
- 18.6. In taking forward their work on the IT infrastructure to support the QCF, the regulators of external qualifications will continue to monitor the existing structure of the RoC template to ascertain whether future adjustments may be necessary to support the wider development of the QCF. There is no evidence to date to suggest that the template itself needs adjustment.

Recommendation 10

- **The RoC template developed for the test and trial programme will be adopted as the standard template for the QCF.**
- **Additional guidance on developing RoC within the standard template will be produced in order to address some of the issues raised by test and trial projects using the template.**

19. Qualification titles

- 19.1. The working specification sets out a format for the development of qualification titles within the tests and trials. This format combines some of the existing features of titling conventions within the NQF with an additional requirement related to the size of qualifications. This additional requirement has caused some concerns amongst test and trial projects.

Qualification size

- 19.2. Within the QCF the terms ‘award’, ‘certificate’ and ‘diploma’ are used to describe three different sizes of qualification. These three terms are used (respectively) for small, medium and large qualifications within the QCF. As ‘size’ in the QCF is determined by credit value, the following credit values for these qualification titles are being used during tests and trials:

Credit values	1 to 12	13 to 36	Above 36
Titles	Award	Certificate	Diploma

- 19.3. The rationale for developing these size indicators for qualifications is that it aids understanding of the framework by users and makes qualification titles easier to understand. Nevertheless, the proposed conventions on qualification sizes have generated a range of responses from test and trial sites, many of them negative.
- 19.4. The PwC IER comments on the reluctance of awarding bodies to relinquish their current uses of these terms (see page viii executive summary and pages 43–46). Opposition to the use of these terms to indicate qualification size is clearly linked in test and trial evaluations to the individual views of awarding bodies, based on existing usage within the NQF. The PwC IER includes no general critique of the use of these terms, but a number of awarding bodies ask why existing uses of these terms cannot be retained.
- 19.5. One suggested alternative to the current proposal is that the three terms should not be used at all, and that all qualifications should simply include their credit value rather than a more general indicator of size. As the term ‘diploma’ will be used for some qualifications in the QCF, this is not a realistic proposition.
- 19.6. Other projects have suggested that alternative names should be used. However, a report completed by the Central Office of Information (COI) on behalf of the regulators addresses this issue directly, and finds that alternative names would be difficult to identify, and no concrete options are suggested.
- 19.7. The PwC IER focuses on the particular range of credit values used in the test and trial programme and suggests that a further review of these sizes needs to be undertaken, with a focus particularly on the range of sizes for ‘diplomas’ (see page viii executive summary and pages 43–46, PwC IER). Other test and trial projects have suggested that qualification sizes might vary by level, with credit values linked to each term increasing at higher levels.
- 19.8. In order to prepare the technical specification of the QCF for consultation within new regulatory criteria, it is necessary to address the use of these terms through a more focused period of consideration prior to consultation on new criteria. The views of other parties within the UKVQRP also need to be considered in this process.

Qualification titles and RoC

- 19.9. The working specification also requires each qualification title to be linked to a unique set of RoC. This is another important mechanism within the QCF for simplifying the titles of

qualifications and making them more easily understandable to users. It is also important in developing the flexibility of the QCF, as it encourages the sharing of RoC between awarding bodies wishing to use the same qualification title.

- 19.10. To date the number of qualifications submitted for accreditation in the QCF has meant that this particular feature has not been fully tested. However, there are already examples of qualifications within the QCF that are offered by a number of different awarding bodies, based on shared RoC. Reports on this collaborative approach to developing qualification titles are positive.
- 19.11. This particular rule has implications for the development of qualification titles based on RoC that include units owned by an individual awarding body. Where such rules include units that are available only to one awarding body, it is possible that the RoC for the qualification will also be unique and that therefore a new qualification title will be generated. This has implications for the proliferation of qualification titles. Specifically, the more owned units that exist in the QCF, the more qualifications titles there are likely to be. This tendency towards the proliferation of qualification titles could be offset by encouraging collaboration in qualification development between awarding bodies, supported by an SSC/sector body.
- 19.12. It is possible to accommodate owned units within shared RoC providing the process of qualification design and development takes account of this. Indeed the test and trial programme offers positive examples of such collaboration. This is an important area where Strands 1 and 2 need to work closely together in the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 19.13. It should be emphasised here that the QCF itself is able to accommodate any number of qualification titles, based on different RoC. However, a very large number of qualifications may undermine a key aim of the QCF, namely, 'establish a simpler framework that is easier for all users to understand'. There are clear implications here for the role of SQSs and sector bodies in the process of 'approving' qualifications within the QCF that support these general aims.
- 19.14. In taking forward the development of the QCF, the regulators propose to maintain this link between qualification titles and unique RoC, and to work together with the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and sector bodies to develop guidance on how the qualification titling conventions of the QCF can be used to support the aims of both SQSs and the QCF itself.

Awarding body brand identities

- 19.15. The convention of sharing RoC between qualifications effectively redefines what a qualification is within the QCF. It will be possible in future to list qualifications in the framework as single entities, even in cases where a number of awarding bodies offer the same qualification title.
- 19.16. Of course this will not prevent awarding bodies using their own names or brand identities in the promotion and certification of qualifications. It will also not prevent two awarding bodies

that share a qualification title and RoC developing their own different approaches to the delivery and assessment of these qualifications. It will, however, guarantee to users that qualifications that use the same titles share a 'core structure' that can guarantee comparability between them.

- 19.17. In order to effect this subtle change in the definition of a qualification, it will be necessary to build in to the consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF some changes that enable this to be implemented. At present, the use of the NQF statutory regulations as the basis for accreditation of qualifications during tests and trials make it very difficult to evaluate in real terms the potential benefits of this change.
- 19.18. Further consultation with awarding bodies on the implications of this change needs to be undertaken prior to the publication of proposed regulatory criteria for the QCF in November 2007.
- 19.19. It will also be necessary to consider the issue of awarding body brand identities alongside the wider visual identity of the QCF. This is considered in Section 4.

Recommendation 11

- **The terms 'award', 'certificate' and 'diploma' will continue to be used to indicate the relative sizes of qualifications in the QCF.**
- **A review of the relative credit values of 'awards', 'certificates' and 'diplomas' will be undertaken, and proposals for the range of credit values for each of these terms will be included within the consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **Each qualification title will continue to be linked to a unique set of RoC.**
- **Strands 1 and 2 of the UKVQRP will work together to produce guidance on the development of shared qualification titles and RoC, based on both shared and owned units.**
- **The new regulatory criteria for the QCF should confirm that awarding body names or brands are not included within the formal listing of qualification titles.**
- **Awarding bodies will continue to be able to use their names or brand identities in promoting and certifying the qualifications they offer within the QCF, subject to guidance from the regulators.**

20. Grades

- 20.1. The regulators of external qualifications decided not to produce any explicit guidance on grading arrangements within the QCF for the test and trial programme. There is currently no concrete evidence from the test and trial programme about the application of grading arrangements within the QCF. Grading arrangements are being trialled through five different projects.

- 20.2. One feature of grading arrangements within the QCF needs to be clarified for the remainder of the test and trial programme, which is that the application of grading criteria is additional to assessment leading to the award of credits. Guidance on the updated specification for the QCF will reflect this technical feature.
- 20.3. Notwithstanding this ‘open’ approach to grading within the tests and trials, the PwC IER report reveals concerns amongst trialists that the continued lack of guidance from the regulators on grading arrangements could lead to a profusion of incompatible grading approaches within the QCF that would make it both more complex and less accessible to learners (see page ix executive summary and pages 53–56, PwC IER).
- 20.4. The PwC IER report suggests that the regulators have a responsibility within the longer-term development of the framework to ensure that grading arrangements are consistent with the overall aims of developing the QCF (see page ix executive summary and pages 53–56). In particular it is suggested that the regulators should establish a standard grading scale, and related guidance on its application, for those qualifications within the QCF that use grades.
- 20.5. The regulators will invite the views of those test and trial projects developing grading arrangements on the feasibility of developing a standard grading scale within the QCF that is both consistent with the technical specification of the framework and supportive of its aims. Proposals for a standard grading scale would then be included within the consultation on proposed regulatory criteria for the QCF.

Recommendation 12

- **The guidance on the revised specification for the QCF will be amended to confirm that grading criteria are to be applied over and above the award of credits.**
- **The feasibility and desirability of developing a standard grading scale within the QCF for graded qualifications, based on feedback from test and trial projects, will be assessed.**
- **Depending on the outcomes of this assessment, a standard grading scale may be proposed within the consultation on new regulatory criteria.**

21. Types of qualification

- 21.1. The working specification of the QCF is intended to be applied to all qualifications submitted for accreditation through the QCF tests and trials. In accrediting qualifications in the QCF, the regulators use this working specification together with the existing statutory regulations for qualifications in the NQF.
- 21.2. There are currently no types of qualification within the QCF. In other words all qualifications are accredited against a common set of criteria and to a single specification. There are no

additional criteria or specifications for any particular type of qualification within the QCF. Some test and trial projects have made reference in their feedback to date about the absence of qualification types in the QCF.

- 21.3. During 2007–08 the regulators will consider the costs and benefits of developing additional criteria for particular types of qualification in the QCF. In taking forward this strand of work, the regulators will adopt the position that the minimum possible number of qualification types should be established within the QCF that is consistent with the effective operation of the system of credit accumulation and transfer that underpins the framework.

Diplomas for 14- to 19-year-olds

- 21.4. One type of qualification that is being considered for inclusion within the QCF is the new Diploma for 14- to 19-year-olds in England. The regulators will produce proposals for consultation as part of the regulatory criteria for the QCF on the criteria that will identify these Diplomas as a particular type of qualification in the QCF.

Apprenticeships

- 21.5. The development of a type of qualification explicitly to support apprenticeships in England is another possibility that is under consideration.

Occupational qualifications

- 21.6. A small number of test and trial projects have commented on the absence of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) as a type of qualification in the QCF. Opinion amongst this minority of test and trial projects on the absence of NVQs in the QCF tests and trials is divided. One strong defence of the need to maintain NVQs by a large sector body is counterbalanced by the views of another large sector body that argues exactly the opposite case.
- 21.7. A number of trialists have commented positively on the suspension of the NVQ code of practice during the test and trial programme, which provides what they have described as a proportionate level of regulation (see page ix executive summary and page 62, PwC IER).
- 21.8. It should be emphasised here that there is nothing in the current design features of the QCF that will prevent the development of qualifications based explicitly on NOS that attest to competence in the workplace. It is also possible within the QCF to determine that assessment of performance should be conducted in the workplace through assessors with a particular qualification.
- 21.9. The issue that needs to be further considered is not whether competence-based qualifications can be developed within the QCF, but whether it is necessary to establish a particular set of additional criteria for accreditation that identifies such qualifications as a distinct type within the framework. If it is decided that the QCF would benefit from the identification of such a type, then a subsequent issue to be considered would be what such a type should be called.

- 21.10. It is suggested that, as part of the continuing work on considering the development of qualification types within the QCF, the regulators, in consultation with their partners in the UKVQRP, need to consider the particular issues related to the development of 'occupational' or 'competence-based' qualifications. As part of this process, the value of using the term 'NVQ' to describe such a type (if developed) also needs to be considered.
- 21.11. These are potentially complex issues and will need careful consideration over time. The outcomes of these considerations would be reported to ministers as part of the final report on the developmental phase of the QCF in July 2008.

Recommendation 13

- **A consultative mechanism will be established to consider the rationale and purpose for developing particular types of qualification within the QCF. The outcomes of this process will be reported in July 2008.**
- **Proposals for the development of Diplomas for 14- to 19-year-olds in England as a type of qualification within the QCF will be considered for inclusion in the consultation on new regulatory criteria.**
- **The development of a type of qualification to support apprenticeships will be considered further during 2007–8.**
- **The report to ministers in July 2008 will include recommendations on the costs and benefits of developing 'occupational qualifications' as a type of qualification within the QCF, together with consideration of the use of the term 'NVQ' to identify this type. Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together on this particular aspect of qualification types.**

22. Articulation with Scotland and Wales

- 22.1. It is the declared intention of the QCF that it should articulate where possible with the SCQF. Work has been undertaken between the regulators of external qualifications and SQA to develop such an articulation agreement.
- 22.2. The SCQF is an established framework for lifelong learning and as such is not a regulated framework, so a comprehensive articulation agreement is unlikely to be agreed. However, the sub-frameworks of SQA and higher education are regulated, and it is with these sub-frameworks that formal and reciprocal articulation agreements may be reached.
- 22.3. Common definitions for alignment and articulation have been proposed for agreement by all the UK regulators of external qualifications. These are as follows:
- alignment describes the broad relationship between frameworks or elements of frameworks such as levels
 - articulation is a firm linkage between levels of qualifications in frameworks that is usually formalised in an agreement between frameworks or framework managers.

- 22.4. The nine levels of the QCF have been evaluated to establish how far they align with 12 levels of the SCQF. This work showed that a perfect alignment is not possible on the basis of the comparison of level descriptors. As a subsequent exercise, 250 units from the SCQF, QCF and CQFW (which uses the same level descriptors as the QCF) were compared against the levels descriptors of SCQF and the QCF.
- 22.5. No firm conclusions on alignment could be made from this research. Further work will be initiated to examine the alignment of the two frameworks using units developed as part of the QCF tests and trials.
- 22.6. The QCF forms one pillar in the CQFW and as the same levels are used in both frameworks, alignment across levels is straightforward. However, further work is needed to ensure that the QCF aligns appropriately with the other pillars of the CQFW.

Recommendation 14

- **Further work will be initiated to take forward alignment between the QCF and SCQF using units that have been developed as a part of QCF tests and trials. This joint work between QCA, SQA, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA), and the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) will begin later in 2007.**
- **The outcomes of work on alignment will form the basis for articulation agreements between framework or sub-framework regulators.**

23. Alignment with higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- 23.1. Levels 4–8 of the QCF have been specifically designed to align directly with levels of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). The FHEQ applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other higher education awards and includes five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate.
- 23.2. The QCF will coexist with the FHEQ accommodating units and qualifications at higher levels, such as professional qualifications, while the FHEQ will remain applicable to higher education awards. There are implications for the presentation of the QCF at higher levels in this relationship with the FHEQ.
- 23.3. An important measure of the success of the QCF will be the extent to which it can support learner progression to the higher levels through the accumulation and transfer of credit. To this end, the regulators have undertaken a range of activities designed to investigate the role the QCF might play in facilitating progression.
- 23.4. The regulators commissioned a project in the QCF tests and trials with the University of the Arts London (UAL). UAL is interested in populating the QCF databank with units that it has

developed. UAL has applied to become a recognised awarding body in the QCF and is currently submitting a level 4 Diploma to the WBA system that it intends to award. This project begins to explore the capacity for the higher education sector to submit units into the QCF, use units from the QCF databank and offer qualifications within the framework.

- 23.5. The regulators also commissioned Foundation Degree Forward and Continuum (the research arm of the University of East London) to explore with a sample of higher education institutions the technical issues arising from the alignment of the QCF and the FHEQ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Initial findings provided the regulators with an understanding of the issues and benefits and a platform to continue dialogue with the higher education sector.
- 23.6. In November 2005, the Joint Forum for Higher Levels received a remit from the Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education to develop a set of overarching principles and operational criteria for a common approach to credit. The overarching principles and operational criteria for a common approach to credit have been agreed and will be tested in lifelong learning networks between July and December 2007.
- 23.7. In parallel to this work, the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group, known as the Burgess Group, has consulted with the higher education sector on *Proposals for the national use of academic credit in higher education in England*. The findings of this consultation and a proposal for action were published in November 2006.
- 23.8. In England and Northern Ireland, learners will progress to higher levels, facilitated via credit transfer within the QCF. The work of the Joint Forum in developing the overarching principles and operational criteria for a common approach to credit will attempt to bridge the further education and higher education sectors (in Wales the CQFW will fulfil this function) and the National Higher Education Credit Framework will enable credit transfer between higher education institutions.

Recommendation 15

- **The regulators will continue to engage and work with the higher education sector in England and Northern Ireland during the second year of trials.**
- **A dedicated communications strategy will be produced and implemented to improve understanding of the QCF amongst higher education institutions, tailored to individual country needs.**

24. Links with the EQF

- 24.1. The QCF has been developed explicitly to align with the EQF, and level descriptors 1 to 8 of the QCF are expected to align very closely with the eight level descriptors of the EQF. The regulators welcome the establishment of a European reference framework to support

mobility throughout member states and beyond, and will continue to develop the QCF consistently with the EQF.

- 24.2. The four UK administrations have agreed that the QCF, CQFW and SCQF will each be linked to the EQF. A UK coordination group will be established that will have representation from all frameworks.
- 24.3. Several European countries including Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Belgium (Flanders) are in the process of designing qualification frameworks that could become closely aligned with the QCF development. If implemented, the QCF could become a model for the development of credit-based qualifications within the EQF in other European countries.
- 24.4. In early 2007 a European EQF implementation group was established that will consider the implementation arrangements. The Council of Ministers of the European Union is expected to approve the EQF in the autumn, resulting in a Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council.
- 24.5. Following formal approval, member states will be invited to establish a single contact point that will support implementation of the EQF. National qualification systems will be required to reference their levels to the EQF levels by 2010 and ensure that national qualifications make reference to the appropriate EQF level by 2012.
- 24.6. The UK could move faster than most European countries given its experience with qualification frameworks and so influence and lead the implementation of the EQF.
- 24.7. The UK coordination group could work closely with the European Commission and the UK representative in the EU EQF Implementation Group.

Recommendation 16

- **The specifications of the QCF will continue to reference and align with the emerging EQF.**
- **The QCF will be actively promoted across Europe as a model for the development of a QCF.**

Part 2: The key operational processes

25. Unit development

- 25.1. The regulators of external qualifications have sought to encourage a wide range of approaches to unit development during the test and trial programme. Although the regulators have produced guidance on the unit development process, they have not been prescriptive in defining a particular process of development. This has been seen as a positive feature of the test and trial programme to date, but now is an appropriate time to review this 'open' approach as we approach the second year of tests and trials.
- 25.2. The evaluation of the test and trial programme reveals that a wide range of processes have indeed been followed in developing units. The PwC IER records that no two test and trial projects have used exactly the same process in the development of units (see page vi executive summary and page 18). In one respect this reflects a positive benefit in the QCF in being able to accommodate a wide range of developmental processes. On the other hand, as the PwC IER records, there are concerns amongst trialists that some of the units developed through the test and trial programme do not meet QCF requirements.
- 25.3. Striking an appropriate balance between variety in the process of unit development and consistency in the outcomes of these processes is a clear challenge to the continuing development of the QCF through the test and trial programme. The PwC IER states clearly that, at present, this balance is weighted too much towards variety, to the potential detriment of quality in the unit development process (see pages 32–33).
- 25.4. The PwC IER includes a number of examples of differences in the unit development process. For example:
- Some sector bodies have approached unit writing as an extension of their work on standards development. A consultant has been engaged to develop units (often a standards writer for the SSC) and the process of development is primarily a process of dialogue between the consultant and the commissioning officer or group within the SSC.
 - Other sector bodies have set up a collaborative process of unit development, with awarding bodies (and in some cases providers) involved from the outset in unit development, either through a standing committee of the SSC or through a group convened for the purpose of advising on unit development.
 - In some instances awarding bodies have led the process of unit development and SSCs have become involved either towards the end of the development process, or at the point of 'signing off' the unit for submission to the QCF databank.
 - A number of trialists report that they are building on well-established collaborative processes for unit development, based on many years' experience of developing units within credit systems outside the NQF.

- 25.5. Evaluation of unit development within the test and trial programme to date suggests that units of good quality, with considered and internally consistent credit values, are best developed through a collaborative process involving four key interests:
- people with an interest in ensuring that the unit is based on appropriate standards (such as an SSC)
 - people with an interest in ensuring that the unit can be validly and reliably assessed through a manageable process (such as an awarding body)
 - people with an interest in ensuring that the unit is meaningful and accessible to learners (for example a provider or employer)
 - people who are familiar with credit systems.
- 25.6. The PwC IER suggests that where people with these interests are actively involved through the whole process of unit development, the units resulting from this process are more likely to meet QCF requirements than those produced through a process where one or more of these interests is absent (see pages 26, 30–31, PwC IER).
- 25.7. It is therefore proposed that, as part of the process of updating and reviewing guidelines to support the development of units of good quality in the remainder of the QCF test and trial programme, the regulators should produce additional guidance on the unit development process, based on feedback from the test and trial programme.
- 25.8. The PwC IER recommends that the regulators should become more proactive in disseminating examples of effective practice in unit development across test and trial projects (see page 59). The regulators propose to establish a range of methods for disseminating effective practice in unit development during the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 25.9. Work is already underway, based on the recommendations of the IER, to establish a structured process of sampling units from test and trial projects to assess their quality. This process itself, together with the dissemination of reports arising from the sampling process, will be used to support the quality of units during the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 25.10. Dissemination of the outcomes of this sampling process will form part of a wider programme of capacity building across participants in the remainder of the test and trial programme.

Recommendation 17

- **The existing guidance on the unit development process will be updated to support the overall consistency and quality of units developed through the test and trial programme.**
- **Processes will be established for sharing effective practice in unit development more explicitly between test and trial projects.**
- **A more explicit definition of a good quality unit will be established through examples taken from the tests and trials.**
- **The proposals to establish a process for sampling units during the remainder of the test and trial programme to assess their quality should be implemented forthwith.**
- **The capacity of test and trial participants to produce units of good quality that meet QCF requirements will be further developed during the remainder of the tests and trials.**

26. Developing units from NOS

- 26.1. One issue that has arisen from the evaluation of test and trial projects is the considerable difficulty experienced by a small number of projects in developing units within the QCF unit pro forma that are derived from NOS.
- 26.2. The PwC IER emphasises that this is not a problem in all cases. Some 60 per cent of units developed to date have been derived directly from NOS and many unit developers report few problems with the unit pro forma (see page vii executive summary and pages 19–26, PwC IER). There are also examples of units being developed from occupational and professional standards (including NOS) that have been recently reviewed and redesigned to be more appropriate to the process of supporting unit development.
- 26.3. Nevertheless, it seems that where the process of unit development is based on NOS, the process has sometimes been found to be more problematic. This is particularly the case where sector bodies are concerned that the process of ‘translating’ NOS into the QCF unit format will somehow corrupt the standards themselves. The PwC IER refers to this process as ‘shoehorning’ NOS into the QCF unit format (see page vii, executive summary).
- 26.4. The review of NOS being taken forward as part of the SQR programme of each individual SSC may help to alleviate these problems. Unfortunately the timing of the SQR programme means that only six SSCs will have developed reformed NOS to support unit development within QCF tests and trials. In this context it will be necessary to produce some interim guidance for sector bodies and awarding bodies on the use of NOS in the unit development process. Initial work on developing this guidance has already begun as an outcome of the test and trial programme.

- 26.5. The development of this guidance will take place as part of the proposed fast-track arrangements for developing the QCF during 2007–8 in advance of the anticipated outcomes of the SQR programme. These proposals are set out in Section 39 below. This guidance will form part of the wider updating of guidance on unit writing to support the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 26.6. Strands 1 and 2 will also work closely together to ensure that guidance on developing new NOS through SQS action plans reflects the potential use of NOS to underpin the development of units within the QCF.

Recommendation 18

As part of the updating of guidance on the process of unit development, additional guidance explicitly aimed at the use of NOS in this process will be produced jointly by Strands 1 and 2 for use within the QCF.

27. Developing consistent and comparable credit values

- 27.1. It should be noted that, to date, some 1,191 units have been developed through the test and trial programme and placed in the WBA 'unit databank'. The PwC IER reports that, in general, most people involved in the unit development process are confident that unit credit values are a fair and accurate representation of the value of learner achievement.
- 27.2. We should note the advantages of building on existing practice here. Many of the people involved in the unit development process are familiar with existing credit systems and are confident in deploying their experience within the unit development process to arrive at consistent credit values.
- 27.3. The PwC IER reports that, in around 25 per cent of cases, unit developers are not confident that the credit values of units are consistent with those developed in other projects or are necessarily an accurate representation of the size of the unit in comparison to other similar units.
- 27.4. The PwC IER suggests that further interventions from the regulators need to be made in this area to ensure that the remainder of the test and trial programme produces greater assurance to users of the comparability of credit values across all areas of the QCF (see page 40).
- 27.5. Although the use of a standard unit format is in itself a necessary pre-condition for developing consistency in credit values, the PwC IER suggests that once again the balance between variety in the unit development process and consistency in the representation of credit values needs to be adjusted towards greater consistency if the QCF is to be able to support a system of credit accumulation and transfer.
- 27.6. The regulators have a clear responsibility to establish and maintain this consistency, and the proposed regulatory criteria for the QCF will reflect this responsibility. Although a variety

of approaches to unit development will continue to be supported, greater consistency between these approaches is required.

27.7. Based on the PwC IER's assessment of some of the apparent difficulties experienced by a minority of test and trial projects in determining unit credit values, the following areas seem to warrant further intervention during the test and trial programme:

- identifying examples of effective practice in the process of developing unit credit values in the test and trial programme, and promoting the use of this practice through the remainder of the tests and trials
- establishing a process for ascertaining the comparability of credit values developed by different test and trial participants during the second year of tests and trials through the sampling of units
- drawing more explicitly on the operation of other credit systems (both in the UK and internationally) in developing future guidance on the determination of unit credit values
- communicating more effectively to stakeholders the importance of comparable credit values in the future operation of the credit system that will underpin the QCF.

27.8. Given the importance of developing mutual trust and confidence in this credit system for the future implementation of the QCF, it is proposed that the regulators of external qualifications monitor more closely the process of determining unit credit values during the remainder of the test and trial programme, so as to support more explicitly the development of this mutual trust and confidence.

Recommendation 19

- **The comparability and consistency of unit credit values from tests and trials will continue to be monitored through unit sampling arrangements in order to inform the consultation on new regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **Further guidance on the process of developing comparable and consistent credit values will be produced as part of the updated guidance to support the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

28. Qualification development

28.1. In addition to a more explicit role in the development and 'approval' of units, it is expected that sector bodies will also become more involved in the future in the 'approval' of the content of vocational qualifications in the QCF. The test and trial programme offers an opportunity to test out aspects of this enhanced role, and it is clear from the evaluation reports that some SSCs are already playing an active role in the development and approval of qualifications.

- 28.2. It appears that most SSCs are unaware of the range of ‘approval’ mechanisms available to them within the QCF. Indeed some SSCs assume that their approach to qualifications approval will be based primarily on current practice in the NQF. Feedback from test and trial projects suggests:
- some SSCs have yet to appreciate that in a unit-based framework, assessment requirements relate to units and not to whole qualifications
 - there is an assumption from some SSCs that all learning outcomes based on NOS have to be assessed in all circumstances through performance in the workplace
 - there are very few examples of SSCs explicitly identifying opportunities for credit transfer into approved qualifications from ‘neighbouring’ sectors
 - there is very little evidence that SSCs are establishing arrangements for exemption within the structure of ‘approved’ qualifications.
- 28.3. More work needs to be done in raising awareness amongst SSCs of the potential range of options open to them to deploy in the process of ‘approving’ the structure of qualifications. In particular, SSCs need to become more familiar with the operation of RoC within QCF qualifications, and more familiar with the technical features of the RoC template to ensure qualification structures in the QCF are consistent with SSC qualification strategies.
- 28.4. It is therefore proposed that the qualifications regulators should work with Strand 1 partners to produce information, advice and support to SSCs about how the technical features of the RoC template within the QCF can be used to support the process of ‘approval’ of the content of qualifications in the new framework. This can be produced in time to support the proposed fast-track arrangements set out in Section 39 below.

Recommendation 20

Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together to produce explicit guidance for SSCs on how the particular features of units and RoC within the QCF can be used in the process of ‘approving’ the content of qualifications.

29. The accreditation of qualifications

- 29.1. Some 53 qualifications have now completed the accreditation process in the QCF to date, and around 60 other proposals for accreditation have begun this process. Feedback on the process of accreditation is based on this larger number.
- 29.2. Although some test and trial projects have commented positively on the less burdensome approach to accreditation that is operating during the test and trial programme, the PwC IER records that some 60 per cent of test and trial reports have a negative experience of qualifications accreditation (see page x executive summary and page 65).

- 29.3. The source of many of these negative comments has been the WBA system and the difficulties that have been experienced in using the adapted WBA system for the QCF. These issues are considered further in Part 3 below.
- 29.4. A further source of concern has been the sometimes problematic relationship between the working specification for the QCF and the existing NQF statutory regulations. Some trialists have noted potential conflicts between the information in these two documents, for example in relation to qualification assessment strategies or to the scope of information required for qualification submission.
- 29.5. It is suggested here that clarity in the process of qualification accreditation, and in the relationship of this process to both the unit databank and to the 'approval' responsibilities of SSCs/sector bodies, can be addressed through the development of new regulatory criteria appropriate to the operation of the QCF, as well as through work on SSC 'approval' of the content of qualifications.

Recommendation 21

The approach to qualifications accreditation in the test and trial programme will be continued, and will be reflected in the proposed new regulatory criteria for the QCF.

30. Assessment

- 30.1. The identification of assessment criteria linked to each learning outcome within a unit creates a sound basis for making fair and valid assessment judgements about learner achievements across all parts of the framework. Although work still needs to be done in improving unit quality in some areas, the unit format itself is an important basis for developing mutual confidence in assessment judgements between all users of the QCF.
- 30.2. Although the QCF specification requires assessment criteria to be made explicit, it does not require awarding bodies to identify particular assessment methods within the unit format. Where a unit is shared between awarding bodies, different assessment methods may be deployed to assess the achievement of the learning outcomes of the unit against the given assessment criteria.
- 30.3. Within the QCF, awarding bodies may therefore develop assessment arrangements appropriate to particular sectors or groups of learners. This makes the technical specifications of the QCF simple and enables assessment to be conducted in ways that are responsive to the needs of particular employers or individual learners.
- 30.4. In monitoring awarding body quality systems, the regulators will wish to scrutinise systems for ensuring fairness, validity and reliability in making assessment judgements.
- 30.5. Evidence from the PwC IER, though limited, suggests that this approach to assessment within the QCF is operating effectively. Where awarding bodies share units across different

qualifications, there is an acceptance that the outcomes of the assessment process are mutually acceptable to each awarding body, even though they are aware that each one is deploying different assessment methods to these shared units.

- 30.6. This is an important message from the tests and trials. Though only a small number of projects have established such arrangements, there is no evidence of negative feedback from awarding bodies on this issue. In other words, providing the criteria on which assessments are to be based are developed through a collaborative process and are sufficiently robust to support fair and valid assessment, awarding bodies seem able to establish mutual confidence in their approaches to assessment of shared units.
- 30.7. While units in the QCF must be capable of being assessed independently, it is not anticipated that this will always be the case in practice. One of the flexibilities inherent in the QCF is that assessment instruments may be designed that cover the assessment criteria of more than one unit. So, for example, it will be possible for an awarding body to develop an assessment instrument (such as a multiple choice questionnaire, a practical project or series of short-answer questions) capable of generating evidence to meet the assessment criteria of a group of units or an entire qualification – a synoptic assessment.
- 30.8. The regulators will continue to monitor this feature of the test and trial projects during 2007–8. The regulators will also aim to share examples of effective practice in assessment more widely during the remainder of the test and trial programme, as recommended in the PwC IER.

Recommendation 22

- **The use of different assessment methods across shared units will continue to be monitored to ensure that mutual trust and confidence between awarding bodies is promoted.**
- **Examples of effective practice in this area will be disseminated to support test and trial projects.**

31. The award of credit

- 31.1. The recording of credits in the learner achievement record (LAR) is at a very early stage of development, and much more trialling of the processes for awarding credit needs to take place during the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 31.2. The technical issues relating to the further development of the LAR are considered in Part 3 below. However, the PwC IER identifies some positive messages about the award of credit emerging from test and trial reports. The separate evaluation of stakeholder engagement in the development of the QCF is also positive about the award of credit.
- 31.3. According to the PwC IER, a majority of providers participating in the test and trial programmes are familiar with credit awards and see positive benefits in developing the

credit system within the QCF. The development of the QCF should be able to build positively in the future on the wide use and understanding of credit systems outside the NQF amongst providers.

- 31.4. There has been no challenge through the test and trial programme to the proposition that awarding bodies within the QCF should be recognised to award both credits and qualifications. Indeed, evidence from international cases suggests it would be a mistake to separate out within the framework different responsibilities for awarding credit and for awarding qualifications. No changes are therefore proposed in the current test and trial arrangements for the award of credit.
- 31.5. The role of awarding bodies in awarding credit will form an important part of the regulatory criteria that support the operation of the QCF, and the qualifications regulators will need to ensure that these criteria provide a robust basis for the operation of the credit system within the framework when it becomes operational.

Recommendation 23

The proposed new regulatory criteria will confirm that awarding bodies will be recognised to award both credits and qualifications within the QCF.

32. Credit accumulation and transfer

- 32.1. The current stage of development of the QCF means that the process of credit accumulation within test and trial sites has either not yet begun or has been very straightforward. There are as yet no functioning examples within the tests and trials of learners accumulating credits towards qualifications with complex and extensive RoC.
- 32.2. This means that the use of the LAR as a vehicle for recording the process of credit accumulation for individual learners remains untested within the tests and trials. Further evaluation of the use of the LAR to support the process of credit accumulation will need to be undertaken in the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- 32.3. Feedback from trial sites, from the PwC IER and from stakeholder engagement evaluation suggests that the principle of credit accumulation within the QCF (namely that qualification RoC set explicit requirements for the process of credit accumulation) is well understood and fully supported as a key process within the framework.
- 32.4. Where difficulties have arisen in setting out requirements for credit accumulation, the current WBA system has been identified consistently as problematic. Awarding bodies and sector bodies are well able to set out requirements for credit accumulation in their own documentation, but have problems (sometimes severe problems) in expressing these requirements into the WBA system. Again these issues are further considered in Part 3 below.

- 32.5. Based on feedback to date, no amendments are proposed to the process of credit accumulation that will operate across the QCF.
- 32.6. All the comments about the stage of development of credit accumulation arrangements set out above also apply to the practical examples of credit transfer arrangements operating within the QCF – there are no examples yet reported.
- 32.7. Evidence from projects to date suggests that, even where projects are well advanced, there has been little consideration of credit transfer arrangements built in to the design of RoC. Some trial projects are developing relatively small qualifications with simple RoC in the first instance. Other projects are focusing on qualifications that mirror the structure of existing qualifications in the NQF.
- 32.8. It is also probable that the desire to involve a wide range of organisations operating within different subject/sector areas has limited opportunities for credit transfer within the trials. Although it is possible that some test and trial projects simply have not addressed credit transfer opportunities within their RoC, it is also possible that some have considered them and found that there are currently no realistic credit transfer opportunities available.
- 32.9. The regulators will continue to monitor the impact of SQS on credit transfer opportunities. Many SSCs have identified labour market mobility and job flexibility as important strategic concerns in their sector. In theory these strategic concerns should feed into the development of increasing opportunities for credit transfer within the QCF as it develops over time.
- 32.10. In the interim though, the regulators need to monitor the development of RoC within test and trial projects to identify and disseminate positive examples of credit transfer opportunities being developed between qualifications and awarding bodies. The regulators also need to ensure that the regulatory criteria that underpin the future implementation of the QCF are capable of supporting the effective operation of credit transfer between qualifications and awarding bodies.

Recommendation 24

- **The proposed regulatory criteria will support the development of effective arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer, subject to RoC.**
- **The capacity of test and trial participants to establish effective arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer will be further supported during the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

33. The award of qualifications

- 33.1. Within the QCF, qualifications are achieved through the accumulation (and possibly transfer) of credits in accordance with the RoC for the qualification. The first qualification was awarded within the QCF in December 2006.
- 33.2. So far, the number of qualifications awarded through the test and trial programme is very small, but there has been no real test of the systems for awarding qualifications through an explicit process of accumulating and/or transferring credits. In many of the qualifications awarded to date, achievement of the qualification has been simultaneous with the achievement of the (often small number of) credits required for award of the qualification.
- 33.3. This is another area where further work needs to be undertaken during the remainder of the test and trial programme to ensure that the ICT infrastructure for the QCF is supporting the quality assurance processes of awarding bodies leading to the achievement of a qualification. In particular we need to ensure that the record of credit accumulation and transfer in the LAR can provide accurate and timely information to awarding bodies to confirm that the RoC have been met, and that there is therefore a secure basis for awarding the qualification.
- 33.4. Part 3 of the report identifies the technical issues to be addressed in developing the LAR to support the secure and timely award of qualifications through the process of credit accumulation and transfer.

Part 3: The technical infrastructure

34. Introduction

- 34.1. The role of the IT system for the QCF is to underpin the key operational processes of the framework and to help make the system accessible and understandable to end-users. This means that it needs to support and enable credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) and provide information about progress and routes to achievement directly to learners. These QCF specific functions need to operate within a very complex environment made up of existing stakeholder systems and processes.
- 34.2. The principle underpinning all IT development work, as set out in the original business case for the QCF, is that ‘all IT infrastructure and data-recording initiatives will be tested prior to any decisions being made on the final model. The key issue to be agreed and tested is how maximum benefits can be realised at least cost, with maximum efficiency against existing systems, and with minimum bureaucracy.’
- 34.3. The overarching objective of the QCF tests and trials is, from an IT perspective, to define the IT architecture, functional requirements, performance requirements, support and costs of the full QCF implementation. This aim is being taken forward in collaboration with the key stakeholders, including the LSC, MIAP, awarding bodies, sector bodies and providers to ensure practicality and to gain their acceptance of the proposal. A secondary objective has been to provide IT infrastructure and applications within the tests and trials themselves. This is in order to support their operation and to enable a real dialogue with all the stakeholders involved. A priority for the next year will be to undertake a cost–benefit analysis of the technical infrastructure supporting the QCF.
- 34.4. The IT strategy has been to provide the QCF specific functions as prototype services, built specifically to support the tests and trials, and to explore integration options with the related systems of other stakeholders which ensure the required function can be provided while minimising the impact on these systems. This helps to ensure:
- that the specification of the minimum impact solution(s) for full implementation is driven out
 - it is possible to remove or change QCF components without adversely impacting other participants’ systems
 - the impact is understood and can be analysed and costed
 - resistance to change is minimised from the outset
 - the cost of implementation for all parties is also minimised – the strategy is to support open, standards-based interfaces that anyone can implement
 - speed of implementation can be maximised
 - there are minimal interdependencies, and where these cannot be eliminated, they are controlled by using alternative approaches.

- 34.5. It is important to stress the scope of the QCF IT work. At the end of the trials there will be a full understanding of, and recommendations for, the IT system necessary to support the QCF. Therefore the information and analysis that follows are interim findings on the progress made to define an implementation solution.

35. Approach

- 35.1. In order to meet the objectives outlined above, the QCF IT strand has developed a strategy based on the following activities.

Challenging assumptions made about the IT architecture and implementation by some stakeholders

- 35.2. Stakeholders have voiced concerns that elements of the system will not work and that the views of all organisations are not being taken into account. In order to challenge these assumptions the QCF IT strand has built a set of disposable IT applications that can be used and modified to explore options in all the required areas. Population of these applications with achievement data arising from QCF test and trial projects will enable a dialogue with key stakeholders to be established, based on actual case studies.

Working with existing systems wherever possible

- 35.3. The strategy of the QCF IT strand is not to reinvent systems and processes unless absolutely necessary. This part of the strategy recognises that coexistence with and migration from the current 'business as usual' model to the 'to be' model when the QCF is fully implemented could be a long and complex process.

Doing the minimum necessary to deliver the required function

- 35.4. The QCF IT work is focusing exclusively on facilitating CAT and provision of information about this to learners. The IT team has experienced pressure to increase the scope of its work, for example to provide comprehensive reporting of 'non-achievement' data. The objective of the programme remains to deliver CAT with the possibility of addressing these other areas once this objective has been achieved.

Influencing new and emerging systems to meet QCF requirements

- 35.5. Where new processes and data are being introduced that could be reused by the QCF, then our requirements are presented as early as possible in the development lifecycle as it is then possible to influence the eventual outcome. An example of early success in this area is the cooperation with the MIAP learner registration system (LRS). Other areas to be determined include the MIAP learner interface.

Addressing the most complex issues first

- 35.6. The entire product lifecycle has been defined at the outset and the most complex areas addressed as a priority. These have emerged as:
- defining and validating RoC
 - learner identity management
 - integration of achievement data.

36. Current status of the QCF IT system

36.1. The IT delivery of QCF functions has been split into four main areas as illustrated below.

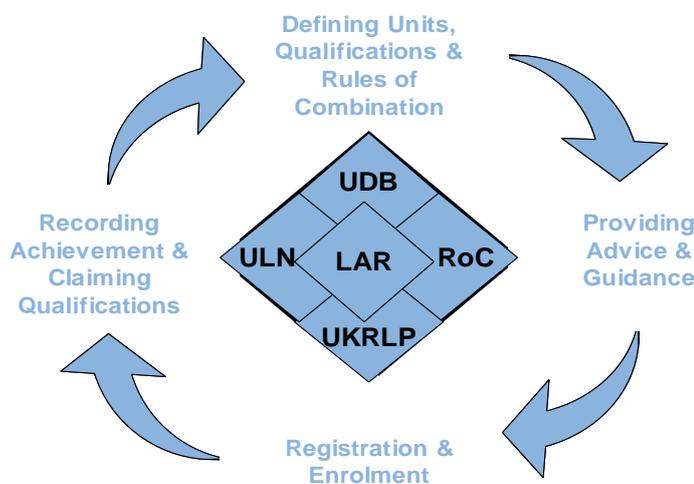


Figure 1 – QCF Lifecycle

Summary

Function	Status
Defining units and qualifications	Fully operational, in live use
Providing advice and guidance	Fully operational, full use is dependent on recording achievement
Registration and enrolment	Fully operational, in 1:1 test use
Recording achievement and claiming qualifications	Being developed, prototype in test

- 36.2. The aim is to have all applications fully operational in supporting the QCF tests and trials. As has been stressed, this does not imply that they are fit for purpose to support the full roll-out of the QCF and will involve variants to test options and aspects of the required systems and processes.

36.3. The following paragraphs describe the development activity and current status of the delivery of the QCF IT functions.

Defining units and qualifications

36.4. The QCF programme is building on the existing WBA application to enable data on units, qualifications and RoC to be manually entered into the accreditation process by awarding bodies. This data underpins all other aspects of the IT systems for the tests and trials.

36.5. The QCF specification requires:

- a unit databank
- a mechanism to combine units together to create RoC
- a format in which to supply the rest of required information about qualifications to permit accreditation.

36.6. In order to support CAT and the full provision of information to learners, it is not enough simply to describe RoC, it is necessary to define them programmatically. This has proved to be a major development and is discussed in detail in lessons learnt, below.

36.7. The WBA development was able to provide all the features necessary to collect data about units and qualifications. The revised version of WBA went live in October 2006 and since then over 1,000 units and over 200 qualification proposals have been entered into the system of which 53 have been accredited.

36.8. The existing WBA function was supplemented by an innovative new development, the RoC engine that validates the RoC of QCF qualifications. This supports and creates great efficiencies in the accreditation process by ensuring that the QCF requirements for RoC (for example that the credit value of an 'award' is between 1 and 12 credits) are met and therefore do not have to be checked manually.

36.9. This function also underpins the operation of the LAR as it is also used to establish when a learner has met a particular rule. The RoC engine identifies potential claims and also generates 'routes to achievement' for the LAR. The RoC validation function also went live in October 2006.

36.10. There has been some reluctance on the part of the awarding bodies to key data into WBA to specify the QCF units. As part of the QCF response, the IT strand has sponsored the development of a system-to-system interface to provide a unit bulk upload function. This function enables an awarding body system to communicate directly with the WBA system to deliver data on units with little or no human intervention, giving significant efficiencies and improving data quality. This feature was completed in July 2007 but evaluation of this does not form part of this report.

Providing advice and guidance

- 36.11. Advice and guidance on QCF units and qualifications is provided in two distinct ways. The first is simply to enable information about QCF units, qualifications and RoC to be available within the National Database of Accredited Qualifications (NDAQ) and this has been available since November 2006.
- 36.12. The second is based on access to the same information via an individual's LAR and is referred to as 'routes to achievement'. In this instance though, the advice that learners receive is personalised as it can show them, based on the credit that they have achieved, the qualifications for which they have already accumulated credits.

Registration and enrolment

- 36.13. The regulators are working with two aspects of the MIAP programme: the integration into QCF processing of the UK Register of Learning Providers (UKRLP) and the learner registration service that administers the ULN. The UKRLP is a live service and the QCF is asking learning providers to register for it if they have not already done so.
- 36.14. The QCF tests and trials have been working with the prototype LRS that has been available since September 2006 and will be the first programme to use the production service when it becomes available in late September 2007. The work with the prototype LRS has made significant contributions to our understanding of learner identity management.

Recording achievement and claiming qualifications

- 36.15. The recording of credit achievement in the LAR and its use in supporting claims for qualifications is the way in which the IT system supports CAT. Prototype applications have been developed to help identify the data requirements for CAT and to demonstrate its implementation. These applications are now being developed to accept achievement data from awarding bodies to populate LARs for all QCF achievements.
- 36.16. This development is being undertaken in conjunction with several awarding bodies within the test and trial programme to ensure the solution is compatible with a variety of systems. Awarding bodies have agreed to participate in the provision of data, take part in end-to-end testing and provide ongoing provision of achievement data to the QCF test and trial programme.

37. Lessons learnt

- 37.1. Lessons have been learnt in all facets of the lifecycle. Use of IT prototypes has enabled assumptions to be challenged and options to be explored with all types of stakeholder involved in systems delivery. At this stage there is more information and concrete recommendations about defining units, qualifications and RoC as this is where there has been the greatest trial activity.

Defining units and qualifications

- 37.2. Feedback from the trial participants has consistently and correctly identified that WBA has not been specifically designed for the QCF. The decision to reuse a version of WBA modified to meet QCF requirements was taken at the inception of the QCF tests and trials and was based on the assumptions that:
- it would be quicker and less costly to implement
 - there would be substantially less impact on users by reusing the existing application as opposed to developing one specifically to support the QCF
 - it would be possible to provide the features of the QCF that are new or different from the NQF within this existing application.
- 37.3. Much of this analysis proved correct. By reusing WBA it was possible to support the accreditation of QCF units and qualifications early in the programme. It also eased implementation, as the application is already in use in awarding bodies, and the regulators of external qualifications, and awarding body and regulatory staff are familiar with the existing processes. The WBA system has proved able to support all units and qualifications developed to the specification of the QCF to date.
- 37.4. Nonetheless it is clear that there are significant issues to consider as this development is taken forward. Trialling of the system has achieved the primary requirement of the IT strand in terms of defining the requirements necessary to support full implementation. However, as the PwC IER notes, 'The Regulators should consider undertaking an urgent and thorough review of WBA' (see page 71). It is clear that, although WBA works in a way that can support the limited trials of the QCF, it does not work in an optimal way that can support users of the system in easily and efficiently using it. This is analysed under key aspects of the specification below.

Units

- 37.5. The WBA application has not allowed the development of a separate unit databank as set out in the QCF specification. Although it has been possible to implement the basic requirements of the QCF specification in terms of allowing for the submission of units that are picked up and developed into RoC, it cannot happen in a straightforward manner in WBA.
- 37.6. The system architecture of WBA is built around qualifications rather than units, as it was developed to support the NQF. The QCF version of WBA inherits most of these features. This solution has hampered users' understanding about the relationship between units and qualifications in the QCF. In addition, the provision of a range of tools for searching the unit databank and identifying credit transfer has not been possible, making it difficult for users to see and understand the range of units available in the system. The trials have made clear the need to develop a clearly separately identifiable unit databank with powerful search tools.

- 37.7. Many users have also complained about the amount of time that it takes to enter information about units into WBA and called for an electronic unit template (see pages 67–68 of PwC IER). They have also commented that the pro forma for entry of information about units does not reflect the layout of the unit template published in the QCF specification, which they have found confusing. The unit bulk upload project will address these concerns and develop a single, consistent electronic format for the entry of data about units in the QCF.

Recommendation 25

- **A clearly identifiable unit databank will be developed to support QCF.**
- **The work to develop a unit bulk upload will continue and will be integrated into the development of a databank.**

Qualifications

- 37.8. Users have been able to interact with the WBA for providing RoC but this has required extensive training on the use of WBA to define RoC. The WBA was also able to represent all the RoC sector and awarding body users wanted to see developed. However, overwhelmingly the feedback (see PwC IER pages 68, 70, and 71) from users has been that the solution provided is complex and difficult to engage with.
- 37.9. The key problem has been that users have not found the solution intuitive, finding it too technical and distant from the way in which they wish to present qualifications and are described in the QCF specification. It is also impossible to copy RoC between users, which has obscured some of the benefits of collaborative qualification development. Guidance and support has helped in this area, but would prove difficult to sustain during full implementation. Collecting the data in a complex way also has a negative impact on the way it is presented to learners. Collecting it in a more straightforward way would allow it to be presented more straightforwardly.
- 37.10. It is clear that good progress has been made in the development of a system that can handle units and qualifications and particularly RoC. There is, however, a clear need to develop a user friendly, intuitive system and this should be a priority for the next year of trials. It is also clear that the information required for the accreditation of qualifications is more extensive than just RoC and that there have been no issues in the trials with WBA's performance in this area. As new regulatory criteria are developed, how WBA operates and captures this information must also be considered.

Recommendation 26

- **Undertake research on best practice in end-user interfaces used to specify RoC in order to define a suitable format for RoC for the implementation of the IT system for the QCF.**
- **Review the suitability of the existing system to manage any additional qualifications that come into the QCF in the remainder of the trials to develop appropriate solutions to improve current concerns.**
- **Use findings from the trials to review the suitability of the WBA system to support all aspects of the QCF accreditation process to determine whether it can be appropriately modified to support implementation of the QCF.**

RoC engine

- 37.11. The development of the RoC engine to check data about RoC has been a groundbreaking development. It required the technology to be developed from scratch with little opportunity to build on the regulator's existing systems. Given this fact, the amount of progress that has been made in this area is notable.
- 37.12. The solution developed has been working well and been able to support the accreditation of all the qualifications developed for the trials. The trials have been successful in identifying where further work is needed on this application. Work has already begun to implement some of these. The RoC engine has also provided a solid foundation to underpin the development of the LAR and this function will be further tested in the second year of trials.
- 37.13. As the interface is based on open government standards it could be published to other users. So, for example, awarding bodies could validate qualification structures without entering the data into WBA. This use of the application for a wide range of organisations will be explored in the second year of trials.

Recommendation 27

Work will continue to update the RoC engine to ensure that it correctly validates all QCF qualifications.

Providing advice and guidance

- 37.14. The systems required to provide advice and guidance to learners are all in place but have been subject to limited trialling as few learners have completed units and qualifications in the QCF. However, even at this early stage a number of things have become clear about the way in which these systems operate.

- 37.15. There is a range of sources of information for learners, providers and employers about units and qualifications, and many people do not refer to the NDAQ. There is therefore a need to explore interaction with other systems, such as those of awarding bodies, local authorities and colleges.
- 37.16. The provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) has raised some issues. As the PwC IER report notes (see, for example page 75) there is a need to undertake work with IAG providers in order that they can understand the system generally, but also so that they are able to use the new information that will be available to them and to learners. In England this work will need to take account of the review of IAG provision being led by the DfES that was completed in December 2006. In England, QCA and LSC will work closely together to ensure IAG providers are prepared for the QCF.

Recommendation 28

Continue with work to understand how the QCF can support the IAG needs of learners and allow them to make choices in a unit-based credit system. This will include investigation of how data from NDAQ can be provided to other IAG services.

Registration and enrolment

- 37.17. As predicted, the majority of information related to identifying learners required to support the QCF is gathered by learning providers as part of their own registration processes.
- 37.18. Providers pass most of the data the QCF requires to the MIAP LRS to enable it to issue a ULN. The LRS and the LAR both require data to be collected to issue the ULN and subsequently for the QCF IT systems to provide a LAR to a learner.
- 37.19. MIAP has conducted its own tests to establish what data needs to be collected to meet the long-term identity management requirements for learners. The data now being collected by the MIAP prototype LRS will migrate into the production system scheduled for September 2007. This indicates good progress for the QCF IT strand, as the requirements of the QCF LAR are well provided for by the data that is captured by the LRS.
- 37.20. In the course of the trials it has come to light that some of the data on individuals required by the LRS and the LAR is not being collected by learning providers, for example postcodes and email addresses.
- 37.21. Even where a learning provider is capturing some or all of the required data items there is no guarantee that they will be consistent within the learning provider, for example initials may be provided rather than names, and last name and date of birth can be provided in several formats. All of these issues create ambiguity that requires resolution.

Recommendation 29

- **Continue to work with the MIAP LRS to test the viability of the ULN and work with the LSC, DCSF and other bodies to ensure the needs of the QCF are met.**
- **Work with the awarding bodies and providers in the trials to secure a better understanding of the QCF IT requirements for registration and enrolment.**

Recording achievement and claiming qualifications

- 37.22. Recording achievement data to support the QCF requires the accurate correlation of achievements from multiple episodes of learning with multiple learning providers and multiple awarding bodies. This is why the QCF IT systems are key to supporting CAT. Without the provision of the central record that the QCF IT system provides for, there is no mechanism to record, validate and understand achievements made across these multiple episodes of learning. To achieve this, there is a requirement for each of these key entities: achievement, learner, learning provider and awarding body to be uniquely identified to the system.
- 37.23. The limited experience of trials with learners has prevented extensive testing of this with real learners and qualifications (see PwC IER, page 71). Testing the recording of achievement and claiming of qualifications with the data that emerges from accredited QCF qualifications will be a priority for the IT strand for the second year of trials.
- 37.24. Scenarios that have been tested with trialists include: use of the QCF qualification accreditation numbers to identify units and qualifications, identification of awarding bodies by their QCA ID and identification of learning providers via the UKRLP. This has thrown up a number of issues such as the fact that not all QCF learning providers are identified within the UKRLP and even where a provider has a UKRLP it is not generally used in communications between the provider and the awarding bodies.
- 37.25. Although all QCF units and qualifications can be identified by the associated qualification accreditation numbers and this is the only unique code across units and qualifications, it is not universally implemented within awarding bodies that use their own internal coding schemes. There will need to be continuing activity in the remainder of the trials to resolve these things and develop solutions in order to understand the issues in developing a system to support implementation of the QCF.

Recommendation 30

Continue to test scenarios and resolve issues that arise in the second year of the trials. Priorities for this work include:

- **developing standards for the definition of ‘achievements’**
- **working with MIAP common data definition to ensure compatibility of ‘achievement’ with the MIAP learner record**
- **developing standards for code translations, focusing on UKRLP as the target code.**

Part 4: Longer-term developments

38. Continuing the QCF test and trial programme

- 38.1. This report has been produced at the planned halfway stage of the QCF test and trial programme. No adjustments to the timescale for the test and trial programme are proposed in the report, and it is assumed that the programme will continue as planned until May 2008.
- 38.2. Many of the test and trial projects are still at a relatively early stage of development. It is anticipated that, from September 2007, a more significant proportion of test and trial projects will be involved in delivery rather than design and development activities. By the end of 2007 the focus of much test and trial activity will shift from testing the design specifications of the QCF to trialling the operation of systems for the award, accumulation and transfer of credits.
- 38.3. From September 2007 it is also anticipated that the outcomes of the SQR programme will begin to have a significant impact on the population of the framework. Accommodation will need to be made within the future development of the framework for new priorities to be identified beyond those currently being taken forward through tests and trials.
- 38.4. Consideration of the scope of the programme during 2007–8 is addressed in the following sections of this report. However, if the shift of focus from design and development towards operation and delivery is to be supported and evaluated effectively within the remainder of the test and trial programme, the key design specifications of the framework set out in Part 1 need to be secured at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 38.5. As Parts 2 and 3 of this report have confirmed, there is a major agenda of further testing and trialling of the QCF that needs to be undertaken from now until May 2008. The expansion of the scope of tests and trials considered below will further extend this agenda. In parallel to this test and trial activity, a major formal consultation will take place on the regulatory criteria that will underpin the QCF from August 2008.
- 38.6. When the draft regulatory criteria are published for consultation, the responses to this consultation will become the primary process through which further amendments to these specifications are made. In effect, the consultation process on the regulatory criteria will supersede feedback from the tests and trials as the methodology through which the technical specifications of the QCF are secured prior to implementation.

Recommendation 31

When published, the formal consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF will supersede the outcomes of the test and trial programme as the primary source for continuing development of the technical specifications of the framework. Other aspects of the QCF will continue to be developed through tests and trials.

39. Developing fast-track arrangements within the tests and trials

- 39.1. The proposals for linking QCF and SQR developments during the remainder of the test and trial programme will focus primarily on the SQSs so far produced by six pilot SSCs. These SQSs and their related action plans should lead to the identification of priority qualifications for development within the QCF.
- 39.2. In addition to these six pilot SSCs, a further six SSCs have been invited by LSC to identify priority qualifications to be developed in the QCF for delivery from August 2008. We may anticipate that SSC activity, either UK-wide or in England only, will produce a significant number of proposals for qualification development in the QCF from September 2007 onwards.
- 39.3. If the QCF is to respond to these demands for accreditation in 2007–8, then the scope of the test and trial programme needs to be extended to include such submissions based on SQS action plans and/or SSC priorities.
- 39.4. As development of the new regulatory criteria for the QCF will not be complete until July 2008, any submissions for accreditation for the QCF prior to this date will need to be considered on the same basis as submissions arising from the test and trial programme, namely on the basis of the technical specifications of the QCF (amended as proposed elsewhere in this report) and the existing statutory regulations for the NQF.
- 39.5. In addition to priority qualifications developed from the SQR programme, SSCs may also wish to identify priorities for qualification development within the QCF based on the impending expiry of current qualifications in the NQF. The accreditation of some 500 vocational qualifications in the NQF will expire between August 2007 and July 2008.
- 39.6. It is proposed that, where a qualification in the NQF expires during 2007–8 and the relevant SSC supports the development of a replacement qualification in the QCF, these qualifications too should be considered for accreditation during the test and trial programme. Access to accreditation could be considered irrespective of the progress of the SSC in developing an SQS or an action plan.
- 39.7. It should be emphasised here that, as part of their general responsibilities within the SQR, SSCs and awarding bodies will be expected to support the rationalisation of qualifications in transforming them within the QCF. The accommodation of this group of new qualifications could be managed within the scope of the test and trial programme during 2007–8.

- 39.8. It is proposed that these qualifications expiring in the NQF in 2007–8, together with others identified through the SQR programme or in response to LSC priorities, should – where an SSC supports such an action – be offered access to the QCF through the test and trial programme.

Recommendation 32

- **Priority qualifications identified for development by 10 selected SSCs, including the six SSCs involved in SQS pilots, should be included within the scope of the test and trial programme.**
- **All qualifications expiring within the NQF from 1 August 2007 to 31 July 2008 may be replaced by a qualification within the QCF test and trial programme.**

40. Developing progression pathways within the QCF

- 40.1. Both these fast-track routes relate to qualifications that may be offered across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England it will also be important to ensure that the further development of the QCF takes due account of the needs of progression pathways (within the joint QCA/LSC foundation learning tier or FLT programme of work).
- 40.2. Although FLT developments fall formally outside the scope of the UKVQRP, it is agreed that QCF units and qualifications will be used as the achievement sets with which to build progression pathways. Progression pathways began phased implementation from August 2007, so it is important that fast-track mechanisms also take account of the need to populate entry and level 1 of the QCF in order that there is enough provision to build progression pathways in England.

41. Basic and functional skills

- 41.1. In England, work is continuing on the development of new functional skills and the piloting of new functional skills units will begin in September 2007. The new units are being designed and developed to meet QCF requirements. It is proposed to bring a sample of this piloting activity within the scope of the QCF test and trial programme in 2007–8 in order that the outcomes of this pilot can contribute to the July 2008 report to ministers.

Recommendation 33

A sample of functional skills pilot centres in England will be invited to contribute to the evaluation of the QCF test and trial programme.

42. Developing new regulatory criteria for the QCF

- 42.1. Plans are already agreed across the three regulators to establish revised regulatory criteria appropriate to the QCF by August 2008. (The plans also take account of the proposed timetable in England for developing 14–19 Diploma lines 6 to 15 within the QCF.)
- 42.2. Work on new regulatory criteria began in September 2007, and a formal consultation will run from December to February, leading to the publication of new criteria by 1 May 2008, and statutory enforcement of these criteria from 1 August 2008. Annex B to this document sets out these plans in more detail.
- 42.3. These plans and timetable for developing regulatory criteria for the QCF need to be agreed in order to provide a secure policy basis for the changes that will be put forward for consultation.
- 42.4. Part of this timetable for developing new regulatory criteria are proposals for the transition from the NQF to the QCF. Of course the fast-track proposals, and the continued development of the SQR programme, will provide a strong impetus towards transition to the new framework in any event.
- 42.5. To ensure that the outcomes of the SQR programme, the identification of priority qualifications, the accreditation of 14–19 Diplomas and the expiry of vocational qualifications in the NQF can all be planned into the continuing development of the QCF, it will be necessary to plan the transition from the NQF to the new framework.
- 42.6. It is proposed that the final date for submission of new qualifications to the NQF should be established simultaneously with the publication of new regulatory criteria for the QCF. No changes are proposed to the existing deadline for the transition of all vocational qualifications to the QCF (or the expiry of all NQF accreditations) by 31 December 2010.
- 42.7. Of course SSCs may set a deadline prior to this proposed date for final submissions to the NQF, if this accords with SQS action plans.

Recommendation 34

- **The last date for acceptance of new qualifications for accreditation within the NQF should be set simultaneously with the publication of new regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **The existing deadline of 31 December 2010 for expiry of accreditation for all vocational qualifications in the NQF should be reconfirmed.**

43. Building the capacity of the qualifications system

- 43.1. The first year of the tests and trials has focused on building capacity with test and trial participants and in raising awareness across the sector. The regulators commissioned research to establish how effectively this had been managed. The research revealed that there is a high level of awareness across the sector in terms of what the QCF is and that it

is being tested and trialled (89 per cent of those outside the tests and trials were aware of the QCF when prompted²) and that test and trial participants felt capacity building was progressing well.

- 43.2. All capacity building work has taken place with those involved in the tests and trials. The second year of the tests and trials needs to see this continue but also needs to see the scope of capacity building increased to prepare bodies across the sector for August 2008. For example work will need to take place with all awarding bodies to prepare them for transition from the NQF to the QCF and with the six pilot SSCs to support them in developing their action plans.
- 43.3. The revised Stakeholder Engagement and Capacity Building (SECB) strategy proposes a mapping of all the different government agencies that will have a role in capacity building across the sector to prepare bodies for implementation.
- 43.4. It is essential for the Strand 2 to work closely with the other UKVQRP strands in terms of capacity building and communications to ensure a joined-up approach and best use of resources. One of the clearest messages from stakeholders is that they need to understand the scope of the QCF and its relationship to other reforms (such as Diplomas, FLT and SQR programmes) and the timeline for implementation. Until this is made clear many stakeholders will not be ready to engage with the reform and it may be difficult to work with the sector to prepare them for August 2008.
- 43.5. In this context it will also be necessary to work closely with colleagues in Scotland to ensure that building the capacity of the QCF also takes account of the UK-wide context for vocational qualifications reform.

Recommendation 35

- **SECB has been key to raising awareness levels across the sector and in building capacity across the test and trial projects. It has been revised based on feedback from participants and outcomes of research and it will continue to be the main driver for activity throughout the second year of the tests and trials.**
- **Strand 2 develops a business case for a robust capacity building programme across the sector, detailing potential approaches, timeline, costs and agencies' roles and responsibilities for consideration.**

44. Communications and promotion of the QCF

- 44.1. Communications during the first year of tests and trials have focused on those in the tests and trials, and key groups outside the tests and trials such as awarding bodies, sector skills

² Taken from *Evaluation of the stakeholder engagement and capacity building strategy to support the development of the QCF*, a report produced by COI for QCA, CCEA and DCELLS, May 2007.

councils and employers. A number of communications methods have been established to ensure regular communications with these groups and they should be maintained.

- 44.2. To prepare for the potential implementation of the QCF it is essential that a clear visual identity and language set is created to communicate the benefits and purpose of the QCF to a much wider audience.
- 44.3. During the first year of tests and trials the regulators commissioned the branding agency Corporate Edge to explore language and visual identity issues for the QCF and report on:
- name creation for the QCF (and whether a new name is required)
 - how best to communicate the LAR to a range of stakeholders
 - how to communicate the key benefits of the system to all audiences.
- 44.4. Corporate Edge worked with a wide range of stakeholders to come up with answers on the above and submitted its final report at the end of May 2007. It recommends that the name QCF has no significant issues for education stakeholders. But there is a need to look at the language of the system such as units, learning, and training from the end-users' perspective to ensure it is clear and motivating. The report proposes the use of a 'mark' to distinguish QCF units. The 'mark' was seen as a motivating point of difference for learners and providers. It would be a way of showing that the unit was part of an accredited QCF qualification. It could also help to differentiate units in the QCF from those in the NQF during the transition period. It proposes that of all the elements of the QCF the LAR could most easily carry a brand. It is likely to become a focal point of the QCF for learners and employers. Because of this it is important that learners have a consistent experience with the LAR across all three nations and that there is one name for it.
- 44.5. The report also sets out the scope of Phase 2 of this work (creative development). If the QCF is to be implemented from August 2008 it is essential that there is branding (language and visual) in place to support the implementation. Work started on Phase 2 in September 2007, for implementation in August 2008.
- 44.6. A number of policy issues will need to be resolved in order to develop a visual identity and language set for the QCF:
- any issues related to using a 'mark' to show that a unit is part of an accredited qualification within a QCF qualification
 - whether it is possible to have one user experience and name in relation to the LAR
 - agreement over specification language such as award, certificate, diploma.
- 44.7. It is important that a visual identity and language set is developed specifically for the QCF so that the regulators are able to communicate its purpose and benefits to the wide range of stakeholders that will engage with the framework. However, it is important that this work link to any communications developed for the overall UKVQRP.

Recommendation 36

- **A visual identity and language set is developed for the QCF. Phase 2 of this work should take place during 2007–8 so that solutions can be implemented in line with the proposals for fast-track accreditation.**
- **This work also needs to take account of awarding body brand identities within the QCF.**

Part 5: Recommendations

The technical features of the QCF

Recommendation 1

The general basis for developing the QCF as a unit-based qualifications framework, underpinned by the award, accumulation and transfer of credits, is reconfirmed as the appropriate model for continued development.

Recommendation 2

- The *Working specification for framework tests and trials* will be updated, based on feedback from test and trial projects.
- This updated specification will be used for the remainder of the test and trial programme.
- The updated specification will form part of the consultation on proposed regulatory criteria for the QCF.

Recommendation 3

A standard unit format will be adopted as the building block for all qualifications in the QCF.

Recommendation 4

The unit format being used in the test and trial programme should be adopted, with some minor adjustments,* for the QCF.

* These minor adjustments are set out in the following recommendations.

Recommendation 5

The following adjustments will be made to the unit format used in the test and trial programme:

- **include a broader range of introductory statements before learning outcomes and assessment criteria**
- **substitute 'assessment requirements' with 'assessment requirements or guidance'**
- **substitute 'sector endorsement' with 'sector approval'**
- **the current *Guidelines for writing units of assessment for the QCF tests and trials* will be reviewed and updated based on feedback from test and trial projects**
- **the capacity of sector bodies, awarding bodies and other organisations to develop units during the remainder of the test and trial programme will be further developed to meet QCF requirements.**

Recommendation 6

- **The development of both owned and shared units within the remainder of the test and trial programme will be closely monitored.**
- **Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together to ensure that the future development of units within the QCF supports the aims of SQR.**

Recommendation 7

The scope of the unit submission pilot will be extended to include a range of other organisations within the second year of tests and trials.

Recommendation 8

- **The existing level descriptors will be reviewed and adjusted (if necessary) as part of the updated specification for the QCF. This review will take particular note of the distinctions between levels 3 and 4.**
- **The descriptors for levels 5 to 8, and for entry 1 and 2, will be kept under review during the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

Recommendation 9

- **The definition of credit used in the development of the tests and trials will be adopted as the definition of credit for the QCF.**
- **The guidance for the remainder of the test and trial programme will be updated to include more information about the definition of credit and its application to unit development.**

Recommendation 10

- **The RoC template developed for the test and trial programme will be adopted as the standard template for the QCF.**
- **Additional guidance on developing RoC within the standard template will be produced in order to address some of the issues raised by test and trial projects using the template.**

Recommendation 11

- **The terms 'award', 'certificate' and 'diploma' will continue to be used to indicate the relative sizes of qualifications in the QCF.**
- **A review of the relative credit values of 'awards', 'certificates' and 'diplomas' will be undertaken, and proposals for the range of credit values for each of these terms will be included within the consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **Each qualification title will continue to be linked to a unique set of RoC.**
- **Strands 1 and 2 of the UKVQRP will work together to produce guidance on the development of shared qualification titles and RoC, based on both shared and owned units.**
- **The new regulatory criteria for the QCF should confirm that awarding body names or brands are not included within the formal listing of qualification titles.**
- **Awarding bodies will continue to be able to use their names or brand identities in promoting and certificating the qualifications they offer within the QCF, subject to guidance from the regulators.**

Recommendation 12

- **The guidance on the revised specification for the QCF will be amended to confirm that grading criteria are to be applied over and above the award of credits.**
- **The feasibility and desirability of developing a standard grading scale within the QCF for graded qualifications, based on feedback from test and trial projects, will be assessed.**
- **Depending on the outcomes of this assessment, a standard grading scale may be proposed within the consultation on new regulatory criteria.**

Recommendation 13

- **A consultative mechanism will be established to consider the rationale and purpose for developing particular types of qualification within the QCF. The outcomes of this process will be reported in July 2008.**
- **Proposals for the development of Diplomas for 14- to 19-year-olds in England as a type of qualification within the QCF will be considered for inclusion in the consultation on new regulatory criteria.**
- **The development of a type of qualification to support apprenticeships will be considered further during 2007–8.**
- **The report to ministers in July 2008 will include recommendations on the costs and benefits of developing ‘occupational qualifications’ as a type of qualification within the QCF, together with consideration of the use of the term ‘NVQ’ to identify this type. Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together on this particular aspect of qualification types.**

Recommendation 14

- **Further work will be initiated to take forward alignment between the QCF and SCQF using units that have been developed as a part of QCF tests and trials. This joint work between QCA, SQA, CCEA and the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) will begin later in 2007.**
- **The outcomes of work on alignment will form the basis for articulation agreements between framework or sub-framework regulators.**

Recommendation 15

- **The regulators will continue to engage and work with the higher education sector in England and Northern Ireland during the second year of trials.**
- **A dedicated communications strategy will be produced and implemented to improve understanding of the QCF amongst higher education institutions.**

Recommendation 16

- **The specifications of the QCF will continue to reference and align with the emerging EQF.**
- **The QCF will be actively promoted across Europe as a model for the development of a QCF.**

The key operational processes

Recommendation 17

- **The existing guidance on the unit development process will be updated to support the overall consistency and quality of units developed through the test and trial programme.**
- **Processes will be established for sharing effective practice in unit development more explicitly between test and trial projects.**
- **A more explicit definition of a good quality unit will be established through examples taken from the tests and trials.**
- **The proposals to establish a process for sampling units during the remainder of the test and trial programme to assess their quality should be implemented forthwith.**
- **The capacity of test and trial participants to produce units of good quality that meet QCF requirements will be further developed during the remainder of the tests and trials.**

Recommendation 18

As part of the updating of guidance on the process of unit development, additional guidance explicitly aimed at the use of NOS in this process will be produced jointly by Strands 1 and 2 for use within the QCF.

Recommendation 19

- **The comparability and consistency of unit credit values from tests and trials will continue to be monitored through unit sampling arrangements in order to inform the consultation on new regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **Further guidance on the process of developing comparable and consistent credit values will be produced as part of the updated guidance to support the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

Recommendation 20

Strands 1 and 2 will work closely together to produce explicit guidance for SSCs on how the particular features of units and RoC within the QCF can be utilised in the process of approving the content of qualifications.

Recommendation 21

The approach to qualifications accreditation in the test and trial programme will be continued, and will be reflected in the proposed new regulatory criteria for the QCF.

Recommendation 22

- **The use of different assessment methods across shared units will continue to be monitored to ensure that mutual trust and confidence between awarding bodies is promoted.**
- **Examples of effective practice in this area will be disseminated to support test and trial projects.**

Recommendation 23

The proposed new regulatory criteria will confirm that awarding bodies will be recognised to award both credits and qualifications within the QCF.

Recommendation 24

- **The proposed regulatory criteria will support the development of effective arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer, subject to RoC.**
- **The capacity of test and trial participants to establish effective arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer will be further supported during the remainder of the test and trial programme.**

The technical infrastructure

Recommendation 25

- **A clearly identifiable unit databank will be developed to support QCF.**
- **The work to develop a unit bulk upload will continue and will be integrated into the development of a databank.**

Recommendation 26

- **Undertake research on best practice in end-user interfaces used to specify RoC in order to define a suitable format for RoC for the implementation of the IT system for the QCF.**
- **Review the suitability of the existing system to manage any additional qualifications that come into the QCF in the remainder of the trials to develop appropriate solutions to ameliorate current concerns.**
- **Use findings from the trials to review the suitability of the WBA system to support all aspects of the QCF accreditation process to determine whether it can be appropriately modified to support implementation of the QCF.**

Recommendation 27

Work will continue to update the RoC engine to ensure that it correctly validates all QCF qualifications.

Recommendation 28

Continue with work to understand how the QCF can support the IAG needs of learners and allow them to make choices in a unit-based credit system. This will include investigation of how data from NDAQ can be provided to other IAG services.

Recommendation 29

- **Continue to work with the MIAP LRS to test the viability of the ULN and work with the LSC, DCSF and other bodies to ensure the needs of the QCF are met.**
- **Work with the awarding bodies and providers in the trials to secure a better understanding of the QCF IT requirements for registration and enrolment.**

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Continue to test scenarios and resolve issues that arise in the second year of the trials. Priorities for this work include:

- **developing standards for the definition of ‘achievements’**
- **working with MIAP common data definition to ensure compatibility of ‘achievement’ with the MIAP learner record**
- **developing standards for code translations, focusing on UKRLP as the target code.**

Longer-term developments

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When published, the formal consultation on regulatory criteria for the QCF will supersede the outcomes of the test and trial programme as the primary source for continuing development of the technical specifications of the framework. Other aspects of the QCF will continue to be developed through tests and trials.

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- **Priority qualifications identified for development by 10 selected SSCs, including the six SSCs involved in SQS pilots, should be included within the scope of the test and trial programme.**
- **All qualifications expiring within the NQF from 1 August 2007 to 31 July 2008 may be replaced by a qualification within the QCF test and trial programme.**

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A sample of functional skills pilot centres in England will be invited to contribute to the evaluation of the QCF test and trial programme.

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- **The last date for acceptance of new qualifications for accreditation within the NQF should be set simultaneously with the publication of new regulatory criteria for the QCF.**
- **The existing deadline of 31 December 2010 for expiry of accreditation for all vocational qualifications in the NQF should be reconfirmed.**

Recommendation 35

- **SECB has been key to raising awareness levels across the sector and in building capacity across the test and trial projects. It has been revised based on feedback from participants and outcomes of research and it will continue to be the main driver for activity throughout the second year of the tests and trials.**
- **Strand 2 develops a business case for a robust capacity building programme across the sector, detailing potential approaches, timeline, costs and agencies roles and responsibilities for consideration.**

Recommendation 36

- **A visual identity and language set is developed for the QCF. Phase 2 of this work should take place during 2007–8 so that solutions can be implemented in line with the proposals for fast-track accreditation.**
- **This work also needs to take account of awarding body brand identities within the QCF.**

Annex A: Lead organisations and partners engaged in tests and trials

Project title	Lead organisation	Partners (involved with and contributing to the project)
Developing, testing and trialling units, credits and qualifications in generic skills	ASDAN	Skill Force (national – focusing on engagement, if appropriate), LSC West of England, City of Bristol College (and other providers listed below), Sir Bernard Lovell School/Kingswood Partnership, South Gloucestershire, Strode College, Somerset, Tides (Devon Youth Service), Weymouth, North Devon College, Barnstaple, Devon, Kingsway Meadow, Teignmouth, Devon, Fairmead School, Yeovil, Somerset, Premier Training, Nottingham, NACRO, Telford, East London Skills for Life
Developing, testing and trialling units and credits in personal and social development through the NfAYPA (Network for Accreditation Young People's Achievement)	ASDAN/NfAYPA	NOCN (National Open College Network) Awarding Body The National Youth Agency NfAYPA Award organisations: AQA, ASDAN, Chrysalis Club 2000, Clubs for Young People, Connect Youth/British Council, The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Fairbridge Trust, 'Getting Connected' YALP, Girlguiding UK, Mencap, The National Open College Network, The National Youth Agency, The Prince's Trust, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, The Scout Association, Sports Leaders UK, Trident Trust, Weston Spirit, WJEC, UK Youth, Youthtrain Local LSCs: Devon and Cornwall, Yorks and Humberside

Project title	Lead organisation	Partners (involved with and contributing to the project)
Developing a flexible suite of units and qualifications relating to health and safety for the QCF	ASET	Skills for Care and Development and its UK partners (CWDC, CCFW, SfC, NISCC, Skills for Health)
Developing a flexible suite of units and qualifications relating to health and social care for the QCF	ASET	Skills for Care and Development and its UK partners (CWDC, CCFW, SfC, NISCC, Skills for Health)
Diploma in Licensed Retail Operations	BIIAB	People First, Federation of Awarding Bodies
Extended Schools and Children's Centres Environments	CACHE	Training and Development Agency, SkillsActive, Jarvis Training Management and COVE
Step-by-Step: recognising achievement through graded objectives in modern languages	CCEA	Belfast Metropolitan College, Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research
Diploma in Financial Planning	Chartered Insurance Institute	No awarding bodies CII will continue to work with FSA and FSSC

To test the suitability of the specification requirements in relation to vocational qualifications for catering	City & Guilds	ASET, Royal Society for the Promotion of Health
Visual Arts – New Adult Pathways	City Lit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Mary Ward Centre ii) Morley College iii) Working Men's College iv) Workers Education Association (WEA) London Region v) Hillcroft College vi) Open College Network London Region vii) LSC London viii) Creative and Cultural Skills
IT Professional	e-skills UK	Stage 1 and 2 BCS, City & Guilds, EDI, Edexcel, OCR, QCA, CCEA/QCA N Ireland, Welsh Assembly, DCELLS
ITQ	e-skills UK	OCR, Edexcel, City & Guilds, BCS
Flexible Level 2 BTEC Qualifications in the Qualifications and Credit Framework	Edexcel	GoSkills
Identifying needs in Lantra's competence framework and developing units and	Lantra	NPTC, Edexcel, Class UK, Bagma, Reaseheath College, Writtle College, Greenmount College (NI), Brooksby College, Lantra Awards, Easton College, Bishop Burton College, NPTC, Duchy College, Industry Group Members, Institute of Groundsmanship, Reaseheath College, Askham

qualifications to meet the framework test and trial specifications		Bryan, Green keepers Training Committee, Capel Manor, Welsh College of Horticulture, NPTC and Industry Group Members
Teacher Qualifications Framework for the Lifelong Learning Sector	LLUK	City & Guilds, OCR, Edexcel, CIPD, JEB/EDI
Maritime 'Gateway' to Qualifications	Maritime Skills Alliance	EAL, Merchant Navy Training Board, Ports Skills and Safety, Sea Fish Industry Authority, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, British Marine Federation, Glasgow College of Nautical Studies, North West Kent College, EAL (Engineering Awards Ltd). In addition to those represented on the project group, the following were also involved in agreeing the content of the units before reformatting to comply with the pro forma: Royal Navy, Company of Watermen and Lightermen, Marine Society and Sea Cadets, Association of Inland Waterways, Royal Yachting Association

Applying the working specification to learning currently outside of the National Qualification Framework to develop new units/qualifications that meet the requirements of the specification for the credit and qualifications framework and contribute to the foundation learning tier	NCFE	TDA, LSC, CACHE, Nationwide Community Learning Partnership (Technical & Training Services), NCFE, Children's Workforce Development Council, NCFE providers, QCA Foundation Learning Tier team, Skills for Care and Development, Sector Skills Council, TDA, LSC, CACHE (observer)
Providing pre-apprenticeship programmes in railway engineering and in fashion and jewellery	Newham College of Further Education	Railway – RITC, EMTA, WAGN, GNER, Eurostar UK Fashion and jewellery – R. Holts & Co Ltd, SEMTA, Savile Row Bespoke Ltd, Skillfast UK, EAL
Qualification and Unit progression project	NOCN One	Belfast Institute of Further Education, City of Bristol College, Newham College of Further Education, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, Nottinghamshire LEA, Tower Hamlets College
SkillsTrain	NOCN Two	London Area Prison Service, HMP Belmarsh, Kensington & Chelsea College of FE, City & Islington College of FE, Lewisham College of FE, National Probation Service, Open College Network London Region, Office of London Regional Offender Manager
Learndirect/CLAIT (unaccredited learning)	OCR	No specific partners

ProStaTT (Professional Status for Traffic & Transportation)	Transport for London	TfL Streets, Transportation Vocational Group, Open University, Transport Planning Society, ConstructionSkills, GoSkills, CASL -TMS, Cambridge Professional Development
Testing credit in relation to national occupational standards and vocational qualifications in the engineering sector	SEMTA	City & Guilds, EAL, Edexcel, ETCNI, OCR, FAB, SQA and SSSA
SFEDI Business Start-Up	SFEDI	ILM, CMI, IAB, Edexcel, OCR, NOCN, VTCT, Bolton Business Support Service, Scarborough Enterprise Agency, North Warwickshire College, Business Enterprise Support Ltd
Trialling credit-based occupational qualifications in the retail sector and the systems to support these	Skillsmart Retail	City & Guilds, EDI, OCR

Level 1 Introduction to Youth Work	ABC Awards	The Prince's Trust
Employer training network	ABC Awards	Skillfast-UK, the sector skills council for apparel, textiles, footwear and related businesses
Test and trial of new units developed from the Automotive Skills Level 2 Vehicle Maintenance & Repair (Light Vehicle) qualifications	Automotive Skills	IMI, City & Guilds
Credit-based Level 2 Qualification in Construction	CCEA	Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT), Language Network for Northern Ireland
Testing and trialling a cross-sector qualifications matrix	Council for Administration	City & Guilds, EDI, OCR, ENTO, Management Standards Centre, Institute of Customer Service, Marketing and Sales skill sector bodies
Testing and trialling the Business & Administration Apprenticeship as a qualification	Council for Administration	City & Guilds, EDI, OCR, ICS
Trialling credit-based vocational units/qualifications in the polymer sector	Cogent	SASL, North Down and Ards Institute, Polymer Training
Trialling credit-based vocational units/qualifications in the chemical sector	Cogent	PAA/VQSET

Testing credit in relation to proposed qualification for apprentices in construction	Construction Skills	Wates Group, Carillion Construction Training, UCATT, Awards UK, Edexcel, Institution of Civil Engineers, Awarding Body for Construction, City & Guilds, Construction Skills CIC
Test the Integrated Qualifications Framework's Complementarity with the QCF	CWDC	SkillsActive, Skills for Health, IDeA, Nursing and Midwifery Council, Skills for Justice, General Social Care Council, Creative and Cultural Skills, The General Teaching Council for England, Training and Development Agency for Schools, Lifelong Learning UK, CWDC, Edexcel, City & Guilds, CACHE, NCFE, OCR, EDI
OPP L2 credit framework	Energy and Utility Skills	City & Guilds Develop
Evaluation of the Certificate in Regulated General Insurance against the criteria for the QCF with the development of new units, where necessary, and the evaluation of the resulting qualification to meet the framework specification requirements for unitisation and credit transfer	IFS School of Finance	No partner organisations

Developing units of credit for ILEX's new Legal Executive qualifications	ILEX	ILEX will communicate and discuss the direction of the project with Skills for Justice. However, it will not have any formal role in the project.
Playwork QCF Project	Meynell Games	CACHE', City & Guilds,' SkillsActive'
Welsh for Adults	NOCN	OCN Wales, Welsh language centres, WJEC
The TUC Education and Training Framework	NOCN	TUC
Work with Parents Vocational Qualifications	Parenting UK	City & Guilds, Parenting Forum NI, Children in Wales, Lifelong Learning UK (Sector Skills Council)
Business Enterprise	SFEDI	OCR, CMI, NOCN, Edexcel, ILM, Cooperatives UK, Social Enterprise Coalition, The Prince's Trust, Jenkinson Consulting, Bolton MBC
Award in Substance Misuse	Skills for Health	Skills for Justice, Skills for Care and Development, City & Guilds, Edexcel
Highways Maintenance (Construction)	SQA	No partners
Level 4 UAL Foundation Diploma in Art and Design	UAL	No partners
Voluntary sector management and governance awards	UK Workforce Hub	NOCN
Youth Work Training Board Coherent Training Route	Youth Council for NI	LLUK and NOCN/OCNN, Youth Work Training Board

Annex B: Regulatory criteria development timelines

Milestone/Action	Start date	Delivery date
Initial regulatory impact assessment	1 May 2007	31 May 2007
Draft regulatory criteria produced		September 2007
Consultation on draft regulatory criteria	November 2007	February 2008
Full regulatory impact assessment	1 August 2007	1 May 2008
Publish regulatory criteria		1 May 2008
Publish transition arrangements	1 August 2007	1 May 2008
Implement criteria		1 August 2008

Annex C: Initial Regulatory and Delivery Impact Assessment (RADIA) for the QCF

Section	Subsection and brief description of content
<p>Purpose and intended effect</p>	<p>Purpose of this section: To summarise what the published regulations or advice to the Secretary of State is designed to do.</p> <p>Questions to consider when filling out this section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are we trying to achieve?</i> • <i>Why are you producing the criteria?</i> <p>The regulators of external qualifications are providing an interim report to ministers in July 2007 setting out the progress made to date in developing the QCF and making recommendations on the priorities for further development in 2007–8. The report summarises findings and makes proposals in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the technical features of the QCF • the key operational processes • the technical infrastructure • priorities for further development • preparing for implementation of the QCF. <p>Regarding the development of regulatory criteria to support the QCF, the report recommends that ministers should endorse the timetable that has already been agreed across England, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the QCF programme of work, as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internal draft of regulatory criteria – by end September 2007

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation on criteria – November 2007 to February 2008 • issue of criteria – 1 May 2008 • implementation of criteria – 1 August 2008. <p>A final report on the outcomes of tests and trials will be provided in summer 2008.</p>
<p>Consultation</p>	<p>Purpose of this section: To summarise the consultation process including dates and consultations and stakeholders involved.</p> <p>Questions to consider when filling out this section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Did you conduct a consultation on the proposed changes?</i> • <i>With whom, where and when?</i> • <i>Was there a formal consultation, if not who was involved?</i> <p>There has been extensive consultation and development work on qualifications and credit frameworks over a number of years across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.</p> <p>The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales has been in operation since early 2006, when awarding bodies and higher education institutions began using the Credit Common Accord. Since then, work has been ongoing to test the Common Accord with a range of other organisations, including professional bodies and sector skills councils, and across different types of learning, including non-formal and informal learning.</p> <p>The NICATS project undertook development work from 1996 to 2002; since then CCEA has had responsibility for credit developments. The SCQF was established in 2003 and is a slightly broader framework with some differing technical features.</p>

In England, QCA and LSC started working on a Framework for Achievement in September 2003. In March 2004, LSC and QCA published *Principles for a credit framework for England* which acknowledged the debt owed by QCA to the development work of organisations such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and its predecessors on the concept of a credit framework. It also built on the practical work of Open College Networks (OCNs) over a number of years.

In April 2004, the development of a credit framework and the reform of vocational qualifications were brought together in a single programme of work. QCA set out the aims of this programme of work in July 2004 in *New thinking for reform*. A range of other research and development projects were also run by QCA and LSC during 2004 and 2005.

During the development of the Framework for Achievement two groups were responsible for steering the respective areas of work: the UKVQ Steering Group, supported by the UKVQ Programme Officers Group, and the Framework and Credit Advisory Group (FCAG) supported by the following:

- awarding bodies advisory group
- employers advisory group
- providers advisory group
- higher education advisory group.

A consultation on the Framework for Achievement was launched in November 2004 and ran until the end of February 2005; a report on the outcomes of the consultation was published in May 2005. This was followed by a series of technical seminars and modelling workshops on the Framework for Achievement between May and July 2005. In addition, QCA, the Federation of Awarding Bodies and the Joint Council for Qualifications produced a synthesis paper in spring 2005 as part of the process of agreeing how this development should be taken forward. Following receipt of a remit letter in November of 2005, a series of meetings with stakeholders took place during the latter part of 2005 and early 2006 to develop a working specification for tests and trials.

With the establishment of a Programme Board in November 2005 to oversee reform across the UK a formal reporting structure was put in place. The structure is as follows:

UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme Board (supported by a Programme Office) oversees five strands of work:

- Strand 1 – Sector qualification reform
- Strand 2 – Framework development
- Strand 3 – Planning and funding
- Strand 4 – Rationalisation
- Strand 5 – Communication.

In turn, Strand 2 has its own sub-programme board and strands of work as follows:

Strand 2 Framework development sub-programme board (supported by the Framework Development Operations Group and Framework Development Programme Office):

- Sub-programme Strand 1 – Technical specification
- Sub-programme Strand 2 – Articulation and alignment
- Sub-programme Strand 3 – Regulation
- Sub-programme Strand 4 – Technical data and IT
- Sub-programme Strand 5 – Stakeholder engagement and capacity building.

A two-year period of testing and trialling of the QCF is currently underway, running from July 2006 to July 2008 and this name was adopted by all partners in September 2006 to demonstrate that this is now an agreed three-country programme of work. Testing and trialling comprises two phases – in April 2006 organisations were invited to submit applications for participation in Phase 1 based on publication of a prospectus and application form on the QCA and partners' websites. Twenty-five Phase 1 projects were launched in September 2006.

	<p>The same broad approach was used to select projects for Phase 2, but using a more tightly defined prospectus; the prospectus and form were published in December 2006 and 27 projects commenced in March 2007.</p> <p>PwC has been appointed as the independent evaluator for tests and trials based on a limited tender exercise in October 2006. All Phase 1 and 2 projects were requested to submit interim reports to PwC by the end of May 2007 evaluating their experiences of testing and trialling the working specification and supporting documentation for the QCF.</p>
<p>Options</p>	<p>Purpose of this section: To set out the options that were considered as ways of achieving the stated policy objective. To identify the chosen way forward, including the resulting changes.</p> <p>Questions to consider when filling out this section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identify all options that were considered as ways to fulfil the project brief?</i> • <i>Doing nothing is an option that can be included, but what will happen if we maintain the ‘status quo’?</i> <p>The QCF is a successor to the Framework for Achievement, for which the original concept was derived from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the joint remit given in December 2002 to QCA, the LSC and SSDA to reform vocational qualifications • the July 2003 White Paper <i>21st Century Skills: realising our potential</i>, where Chapter 5 titled ‘Reforming qualifications and training programmes’ proposes that qualifications reform should be underpinned by a unit-based national system of credit and qualifications. <p>The 2005 White Papers on <i>14–19 education and skills</i> and <i>Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work</i> cemented the Framework for Achievement firmly as the cornerstone of the reform agenda.</p> <p>QCA, LSC and SSDA received advice from ministers at the DfES following receipt of recommendations in October 2005 on taking forward the framework.</p>

In November 2005, ministers agreed the establishment of a Programme Board to oversee reform by bringing together key strands of work across the UK. Framework development forms a key strand within the UKVQRP. The overall aim was to develop a jointly regulated framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This should be a simple and rational organising structure for units and qualifications, which reforms the current three-country NQF and is capable of supporting the accumulation and transfer of credit achievement over time.

In light of the above, the development of a QCF can be considered as a given based on government policy. There have, however, been differing options available around the practicalities of its implementation, and these are explored below.

Stakeholder events held in Stratford and Birmingham in January and February 2006 were used to consider options for defining the key aspects of the working specification for tests and trials, including units, credit, RoC, assessment and grading; the outcomes of these discussions are reflected in the first draft of the specification issued in April 2006.

There were also options around the extent to which guidance material should be produced to support tests and trials, and the areas this should cover. Steering groups comprising key stakeholders were formed to develop guidance on writing units and on determining levels, and structured workshops were held to review guidance on developing RoC. The development of these guidance materials also involved recognised experts, with an in-depth understanding of the issues and options involved.

Regarding the regulatory arrangements in place for tests and trials, there have been options concerning the relationship between existing NQF regulations and the potential development of new regulatory arrangements to support implementation of the QCF. For the purposes of testing and trialling, the regulators of external qualifications have taken a decision to continue to use *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2004)* supported by the *Working specification for Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials (April 2006)* as the regulatory baseline rather than developing new regulatory criteria at this point. It has also been decided not to enforce the NVQ code of practice within tests and trials; in addition, test and trial participants have been given the

option of requesting the disapplication of regulatory criteria contained with the statutory regulations; it is hoped that this will provide a sense of where additional flexibility can be used to encourage innovation.

Linked to the above, the regulators of external qualifications have also taken certain decisions regarding the broader regulatory arrangements for implementation of tests and trials. These include the requirements for all trials to include a recognised awarding body which has an access to five-day application in progress, a satisfactory track record in terms of previous monitoring activities and proven expertise in the areas covered by tests and trials. Other options considered included a range of less tightly defined requirements. However, it was considered appropriate to take steps to mitigate the risk associated with tests and trials.

More recently, we have been presented with options around the participation of previously unrecognised organisations in tests and trials. These include the proposal that sector bodies and providers should be able to submit units to the unit databank; following discussion of proposals with the Regulatory Advisory Group and Sub-programme Board we are running a pilot with a defined number of sector bodies involving a review of their processes for unit development before access to the unit databank is granted. We are also piloting a streamlined awarding body recognition process with a higher education institution seeking to participate in Phase 2 tests and trials, based on a mapping exercise against Quality Assurance Agency processes which shows that certain of our requirements have already been addressed.

<p>Costs and benefits</p>	<p>Purpose of this section: To set out the impact and potential risks that the chosen options are likely lead to for key stakeholders. Where a decision is yet to be made, the impact of all options to be recorded. If possible, monetary costs should be assigned.</p> <p>Questions to consider when filling out this section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why has the specific option been chosen?</i> • <i>Which stakeholders are affected by the resulting changes?</i> • <i>Having identified stakeholders, what might the impact be on each of them, for example</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Will there be an increased administrative burden on awarding bodies?</i> <i>Will the change increase or reduce the assessment burden on leavers?</i> <i>Will the change increase or reduce the administrative burden on providers ie increased paperwork or invigilation?</i> <i>Will the change reduce or increase the number of examiners required?</i> <i>Will the changes result in extensive development of new/revised specifications with associated development and accreditation costs?</i> <p>Overview</p> <p>The current proposed option in terms of enacting the QCF is to develop a new set of regulatory arrangements to be published in May 2008 that include the key technical features of the framework as outlined in the working specification. The following stakeholders are likely to be affected by this change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • awarding bodies • employers • learners • sector bodies
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- providers.

This section provides information on the main aspects of the framework that are likely to have a significant impact on the above stakeholders, as identified through the evaluation of tests and trials to date. Evaluation has been carried out primarily through the PwC activity but also includes other feedback from IT and regulation projects.

It should also be emphasised that a number of the areas explored below are identified as costs in the short term because of the early stage of development and the consequent lack of familiarity with requirements; this does not necessarily mean that these will continue into the longer term. As an example, PwC found that whereas in March 2007 only 30 per cent of test and trial participants considered the QCF to be an appropriate development, by June there was a change in attitude with around 94 per cent supporting the concept. The experiences of Newham College, which manages a similar credit-based system, also suggest that many costs are born out of a lack of familiarity, and become outweighed fairly quickly by benefits, for example in terms of learner achievement. Based on the above, this document will be updated on an ongoing basis as tests and trials progress and a final version produced to support the issue of regulatory criteria in May 2008.

Unit development including determination of credit and level

The *Working specification for the Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials* requires participants to develop units according to a specific unit pro forma with the following main features: title, level, credit value, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. By its nature the working specification therefore requires the redevelopment of existing units and standards to varying degrees; this clearly represents a cost to those organisations that are submitting units in the short term, particularly in view of the proposed timetable for transition from the NQF to the QCF between 2007 and 2010. The aspect of unit development that appears to have generated the most significant additional effort is the determination of credit value, particularly as there is as yet no established body of practice in this area. Interestingly, the collaborative approaches to unit development being used by a number of projects, while viewed as a cost in terms of time and resources, have also been

cited as a key benefit of the new framework, because of their inclusive nature.

Implementation of revised regulatory processes

As specified at the beginning of this impact assessment, the current timetable indicates that new regulatory criteria designed to support implementation of the framework are due to be published in May 2008. Depending on the scope of these criteria, they have the potential to require stakeholders to put a range of additional arrangements in place; these are explored below.

It is highly likely that revised criteria will make reference to the need for organisations developing and submitting units to the framework to have processes in place for ensuring those units meet the requirements of the working specification, and particularly for determining credit and level. Consequently, it is also possible that the regulators of external qualifications will implement a framework-specific recognition process for organisations wishing to participate in the framework once it is 'open for business'; this would certainly have implications for awarding bodies and potentially also for other organisations, including sector bodies, providers and employers, depending on decisions around how these bodies should be regulated. The type of regulatory approach needed to ensure consistent outcomes from units assessed using a range of methods has yet to be determined, but is also likely to require awarding bodies to put certain quality assurance mechanisms in place.

Information technology

Feedback from tests and trials suggests that participants have been experiencing significant issues in terms of using the WBA system, particularly in terms of the time needed to enter units and RoC; PwC found that 60 per cent of projects have encountered problems in this territory. This short-term cost needs to be weighed up against the resource that would be needed to develop a framework-specific IT system, particularly as this would involve the loss of familiarity users currently have with the system. In addition, there are indications that some providers are likely to identify issues at the point when they begin to register learners, owing to incompatibility between the data that

	<p>is currently collected and the information that will be needed in relation to framework IT systems. One awarding body has also emphasised a concern that the availability of information of routes to achievement through the LAR may lead to additional demands on IAG services. Finally, some concerns have been expressed about the LAR being available solely as a WBA and the potential implications this might have for learners with no easy internet access. It should be noted that, with the exception of the comments on the WBA system, these points are largely speculative at present owing to the early stage of development of most test and trial projects.</p> <p>The above indicate areas where short-term costs have been identified; many of these costs relate to the initial implementation of the framework although some may continue to be an issue in the medium and longer term. While there is a general consensus of opinion that it is too early within testing and trialling to have a firm idea of benefits, there is nevertheless evidence already emerging about positives. Highly positive comments have been received from at least one employer involved in a test and trial project, both about involvement in the process and the resulting qualification. Emerging evidence also suggests that end-users are finding that QCF units are easier to understand, more flexible and better meet their needs. The evidence base for such benefits will doubtless grow as tests and trials proceed, and this document will be updated to reflect this.</p>
<p>Small firms impact test</p>	<p>Purpose of this section: To set out the impact, if any, of the changes on small business.</p> <p>Questions to consider when filling out this section:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is there a specific impact on small business?</i> <p>The QCF is likely to impact on small firms in two ways. First, through the involvement of small, specialised organisations in developing and awarding units and qualifications within the framework. The potential costs identified above will have a more significant impact on these organisations as they will have a smaller pool of resources on which to draw. It should be noted that, particularly in the case of awarding bodies, it has tended to be the larger institutions that have participated in tests and trials to date, meaning that this is an area that needs to be given due consideration during the second year of tests and trials.</p>

	<p>Secondly, if the aims of the framework are realised, there should be significant benefits for small and medium-sized enterprises in terms of access to more tailored and flexible training and achievement and as a result better qualified employees. Again, this is an area that evaluation of the second year of tests and trials could usefully focus on.</p>
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References and sources of information

Primary sources

The principle sources from which evidence has been drawn to support the recommendations in this report are the reports from the QCF test and trial programme. Some 48 separate test and trial projects have submitted detailed monthly traffic light reports and more comprehensive end-of-stage and interim reports as a part of their trials.

In addition to these individual reports, the regulators commissioned an independent evaluation of the whole test and trial programme from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). The findings, conclusions and recommendations made in this report stem directly from that evaluation.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, Government and Public Sector. (June 2007) *Qualifications and Credit Framework evaluation project: Final report*

Secondary sources

In addition to the test and trial programme, the regulators have also commissioned a comparative study of similar initiatives in other countries. This study, undertaken by Oxford University, is intended to supplement evidence arising from test and trial evaluations, and to locate the development of the QCF in a broader international context. Again, PwC have provided the regulators with their own evaluative summary of this international comparative study. A comprehensive Bibliography of secondary sources used in this research are attached below.

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This report also draws in part on the lessons from developments in the UK that have informed (and continue to inform) the development of the QCF. These developments include both the SCQF and the CQFW as well as credit systems in UK higher education, in Access to Higher Education qualifications, and in the credit systems established outside the NQF over the past 25 years across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Documentation for each of these areas has been drawn principally from web sources as below.

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