



# **Post-Recognition Monitoring Report**

## Awarding Body for the Built Environment (ABBE)

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September 2010

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# **Introduction**

## **Regulating qualifications**

The responsibility for regulating qualifications lies jointly with three regulators:

- Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), the regulator for qualifications awarded in England and vocational qualifications awarded in Northern Ireland
- Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), the regulator for Wales
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the regulator responsible for qualifications (other than vocational qualifications) awarded in Northern Ireland.

We systematically monitor awarding organisations and their regulated qualifications against the requirements set out in the statutory regulations. The aim of this activity is to promote continuing improvement and public confidence in the quality of regulated qualifications.

Where an awarding organisation is found not to comply with relevant criteria, the regulators will identify areas of non-compliance that must be rectified within a certain period. Even if an awarding organisation is compliant, the monitoring team may make observations on ways in which the awarding organisation could change its systems and procedures to improve clarity or reduce bureaucracy.

Instances of non-compliance and observations arising from this monitoring activity are specified at the end of each section of this report. Awarding organisations are required to produce an action plan to show how they will deal with any non-compliances identified. We will generally agree the action plan and monitor its implementation.

We will use the outcomes of monitoring and any subsequent action taken by awarding organisations to inform decisions on future monitoring and/or the possible imposition of sanctions.

## **Banked documents**

As part of the awarding organisation recognition process, the regulators require awarding organisations to submit certain documents to Ofqual, to be held centrally. Information from these ‘banked’ documents is used to inform monitoring activities and may also affect an awarding organisation’s risk rating.

A suite of documents has been identified as suitable for banking, consisting of those items considered to be the most crucial in supporting an awarding organisation's ability to operate effectively. To maintain the currency of the banked documents, awarding organisations are responsible for updating them as and when changes occur. They are also reminded to review them at least annually as part of the self-assessment return.

## **About this report**

This report is the outcome of a monitoring activity on the Awarding Body of the Built Environment (ABBE) and was carried out by Ofqual in September 2010. It draws together our findings on areas of:

- management and governance
- resources and expertise
- diversity and equality
- development of units and rules of combination (RoC) for qualifications
- design and development of assessment
- delivery of assessment
- centre recognition
- awarding and certification.

This is the first post-recognition monitoring activity on ABBE in respect of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) since the awarding organisation received supplementary recognition in February 2010.

The monitoring activities included desk research of information already held by us, examination of ABBE's supplementary recognition application and scrutiny of the awarding organisation's website. We visited ABBE's head office to conduct interviews with staff and review documentation, and we also attended an External Examiners Panel meeting.

This report draws together our findings from these monitoring activities.

## **About ABBE**

ABBE was originally a partnership of professional institutions under the governance of the Birmingham City University. It became a separate company in 2005. ABBE offers a comprehensive suite of qualifications related to the property and construction sectors. For further information about ABBE and the qualifications it offers, visit its website at [www.abbe.co.uk](http://www.abbe.co.uk).

## **Management and governance**

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 2.1–2.3, 5.1 and 5.17.

### **Findings**

1. Initially part of the Birmingham Central University (BCU), ABBE was formed when the government's home inspection project was started. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BCU and a company limited by guarantee.
2. ABBE is independent of the BCU, having its own Board of Directors and financial structure. However, it takes advantage of the BCU infrastructure with service level agreements to secure access to support systems such as human resources, IT and disaster recovery plans.
3. The single point of accountability for ABBE is the Chief Executive Officer.
4. A Senior Management Team (SMT) consisting of the Chief Executive Officer, the Research and Development Manager and the Operations Manager, meets regularly and is the main decision-making team within ABBE. Although some action points from meetings are noted, most of these meetings are informal and therefore not recorded.
5. The SMT consults with the ABBE Advisory Board, which meets twice a year. The Advisory Board is made up of representatives from professional bodies, centres and industry. Its terms of reference state that it provides advice to the SMT.
6. ABBE works to a business plan, which is updated and reported to the Board of Directors annually. The *Business Plan 2010–11* is based on a three-year vision and includes consideration of the impact of moving to the QCF, a quality plan and cost issues. This demonstrates that the implications of the QCF are being considered at a strategic level within the organisation.

### **Non-compliance**

There are no instances of non-compliance in relation to this section.

### **Observations**

1. ABBE needs to ensure that all decisions that are made relating to its regulatory functions are formally recorded.

## Resources and expertise

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 2.4–2.6, 3.1, 4.1, 5.2, 5.5 and 5.6e.

### Findings

1. ABBE is a small organisation consisting of eight members of staff. In addition to the SMT there is a Finance Manager and four administrative staff who have discrete roles within the organisation. ABBE holds informal team meetings every two weeks, which keeps staff updated on current issues. All members of staff are subject to an individual performance review through which any learning and development needs are identified.
2. ABBE's staff's knowledge of the QCF has come from attending QCDA / Federation of Awarding Bodies and Sector Skills Council (SSC) events and from accessing related guidance. The research and development manager and the operations manager both demonstrated a good understanding of the ethos of the QCF and of the wider implications for its use. The Research and development manager deals with the development of units/qualifications and the operations manager is responsible for their delivery, assessment and awarding. Information is cascaded to other staff as necessary.
3. ABBE relies on teams of external consultants to provide the expertise required to carry out many of its regulated functions. The majority of these consultants are either examinations personnel or external verifiers.
4. ABBE has an established team of eight external verifiers as well as a chief external verifier. A formal recruitment process is in place, consisting of a written application and checks on occupational competence and experience. Once appointed, new external verifiers have induction training and carry out accompanied visits to centres.
5. The roles and responsibilities of external verifiers are described in each qualification handbook.
6. External verifiers attend two development days a year. Evidence was seen that showed that the last development day included an overview of the QCF and a session on access to assessment. ABBE intends that the next event will focus on a new QCF qualification in more detail, including unit structure and credits. ABBE also requires its external verifiers to undertake continual professional development, which is reviewed annually.
7. ABBE examinations personnel are usually recruited by recommendation but they also follow a formal application procedure. Their roles cover a range of

functions, including item writing, and examination paper reviewing, marking and moderation. Currently there are six examinations personnel. The examination panels oversee all ABBE examinations and meets monthly.

8. The *Examination personnel guide* outlines the roles and responsibilities for all specialists required to work within the examinations area.
9. ABBE has a person specification in place for a unit writer. This document is insufficient as, although it states what expertise is required it does not make any reference to the QCF, credits or levelling, all of which are related to the duties of a Unit Writer. ABBE needs to develop a job description that outlines the roles and responsibilities of a unit writer. ABBE staff stated that they had not yet developed units for their own qualifications since being recognised to operate in the QCF. For the existing units the role of unit writing was carried out by the lead consultant and reviewed through the award development groups. This is explained in more detail in the section Development of units and RoC for qualifications.
10. ABBE has its own IT system hosted by an external company, but it is also able to access support from the BCU. The University's system is backed-up nightly. In terms of business continuity the SMT can access the system from home if required.

## **Non-compliance**

There are no instances of non-compliance in relation to this section.

## **Observations**

2. ABBE should produce a document that defines the roles and responsibilities of a unit writer.

## Diversity and equality

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 2.11–2.14.

### Findings

1. ABBE has a policy document: *Equal opportunity and equality of access to fair assessment* (version 3, July 2009). The document shows that due consideration is given to the needs of all candidates in qualification specifications. However, it should include reference to consideration being given during the development of units and RoC.
2. Diversity and equality is embedded into the unit and qualification development processes, and discussions are recorded within the minutes of the award development groups. It is not clear whether this information is used to inform unit, RoC and qualification review. ABBE has some qualifications that specifically require physical ability, such as inspection of lofts. These are justifiable barriers and are clearly stated.
3. As stated elsewhere within this report, there was evidence of access to assessment training for external verifiers. Guidance is also provided to writers developing questions for examinations. This is good practice.
4. Consultation with learners is sought via the award feedback forms collected from centres. There are also learner representatives on the ABBE Advisory Board.
5. A customer services report is produced annually for the ABBE Advisory Board. The report includes an analysis of gender and age of candidates taking qualifications, which is very useful in informing development.

### Non-compliance

There are no instances of non-compliance in relation to this section.

### Observations

3. ABBE should consider reviewing its equal opportunities policy in order to better reflect the requirements of the QCF.

# Development of units and RoC for qualifications

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 3.2, 4.2–4.3 a–f and 6.2a.

## Findings

1. The vast majority of ABBE units and RoC for qualifications are based on national occupational standards owned by the relevant SSC. ABBE staff stated that the units were also developed by the SSCs, and ABBE may or may not contribute to that development.
2. For ABBE's own qualifications, proposals for new units and/or qualifications can come from a variety of sources. This includes SSCs, industry and ABBE's award development groups' review of units/qualifications. Many are licence to practise qualifications. Another key driver can be EU legislation, as with the Level 3 Diploma in Domestic Energy Assessment (Vocationally Related Qualification), which has to be achieved by individuals before they can issue energy performance certificates. Most often, new QCF units come directly from the SSC, seeking comment from the awarding organisations likely to deliver them.
3. ABBE has developed a business case document to accumulate evidence and ascertain the viability of new ideas, which was submitted as part of its QCF application. However, the existing qualifications within the QCF were developed prior to recognition so the new business case template has not been used. There was some evidence of a business case being made in the initial stages of the development of some qualifications, but this was carried out on a more ad-hoc basis.
4. The initial process for looking at the viability of a unit or qualification may include a feasibility study. This entails holding a meeting of interested parties from industry and professional bodies from which confirmation of support is sought.
5. Any decision as to whether or not to proceed with an idea is made by ABBE's SMT. These decisions are not currently documented.
6. Once ABBE has confirmed the viability of a new unit and/or qualification it will establish an Award Development Group (ADG) to develop the award, the assessment, the qualification handbook and any other assessment documentation.

7. Each ADG is led by a lead consultant appointed by ABBE from its pool of experts to carry the development work forward. The group will also include technical and industry experts, learner representatives from centres and an External Verifier. Terms of reference for the ADG are circulated to the members at the beginning of each development process.
8. The lead consultant writes the units and these may be sent to a small number of ADG members for comment. The lead consultant will amend the units before they are submitted to the whole of the ADG to review and agree. The ADG meets at face-to-face meetings and has secure online forums. The online forums are also used to enable a wider industry consultation group, as well as other interested parties, to comment on units and to review any associated assessment materials. The industry consultation group is made up of subject experts and practitioners.
9. The ADG meetings are recorded and the monitoring team saw a selection of the minutes. Much of the documentation recorded the debates and discussions, but it was not always clear where the decisions had been made. This means that ABBE has no complete audit trail so that it can check that the regulatory requirements for unit or RoC development have been met.
10. For example, there does not appear to be evidence of a systematic search of the unit database in the unit or RoC development process.
11. Diversity and inclusion is considered in the development of units of assessment. The ADG identifies potential barriers within the units and discusses if barriers can be mitigated. Learners' views are considered as centre staff members are on the ADG. There are detailed records of barriers in the minutes of the ADG.
12. Level and credit are agreed at the ADG meetings. Technical experts are consulted outside of ADG meetings via the online forum in order to reach a broad consensus on level and credit. This process needs to be documented and evidence of decisions recorded clearly in the notes of meetings.
13. Both the Research and Development Manager and the ADG check to ensure that section one of the QCF regulatory requirements are covered. However, there is no evidence or record to confirm that this has taken place.
14. When the ADG has agreed the unit content and the RoC, the research and development manager signs it off. There is no evidence of sign-off for the units or RoC that have been developed by ABBE to date. A new unit sign-off sheet has been produced, but this has yet to be implemented.
15. The RoC for most of ABBE's existing QCF qualifications were determined by the SSC, and ABBE is directed to use the RoC as specified by the SSC. In the qualifications within the QCF there is evidence to demonstrate that some

features of RoC, such as exemptions, are being used and these are clearly stated in the national database of qualifications.

16. While it was evident from discussions with ABBE staff that they have a good level of understanding of the QCF, credit and levelling, and of the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and exemptions, no new qualifications have been developed since accreditation. ABBE has therefore not implemented all of the required procedures.
17. Currently ABBE reviews RoC and qualifications in order of expiry date. To date it has not reviewed any QCF qualifications, as they are new. ABBE has an award review form on which feedback is noted. Feedback is gathered from centres and learners through the external verification process. The reviews are discussed by the ADGs, but the outcomes are not recorded. ABBE will need to consider how it will carry out unit reviews if the expiry dates of units are different to the whole qualification expiry date.

## **Non-compliance**

1. ABBE must implement its procedures for unit development to be assured that it is fully meeting the regulatory requirements. Specifically, it must:
  - interrogate the unit databank to ensure that an existing unit, available to the unit developer, does not meet identified needs
  - ensure that all units developed meet the requirements set out in section 1
  - review and sign off the quality of units prior to submission to the unit databank.

(*The Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), criteria 3.2a, 3.2e and 3.2f)

2. ABBE must implement its procedures for developing RoC to be assured that it is fully meeting regulatory requirements. Specifically, it must:
  - interrogate the unit databank effectively to establish the units required for RoC and ensure new units are developed if required
  - review and sign off the quality of the rationale for, and the RoC for, a qualification.

(*The Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), criteria 4.3 a and f)

## **Observations**

4. ABBE needs to maintain auditable records of decisions to develop qualifications, including those relating to how credit and level is determined.
5. ABBE should formalise its processes for unit, RoC and qualification review, including recording outcomes from relevant discussions.

## Design and development of assessment

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 5.3 a–g, 5.4 and 5.16a.

### Findings

1. Appropriate methods of assessment for each qualification are discussed and agreed by the ADG following a recommendation from the lead consultant.  
ABBE uses internal assessment, using a portfolio of evidence, and external assessment through multiple-choice questions. Some qualifications only use internal assessment, some only use external assessment and others contain a mix of both.
2. The portfolio method for internally assessed units enables sufficient evidence to be produced that is cost effective for centres to deliver. The ADG advises on the nature and amount of evidence to produce. The evidence requirements in the qualification handbook are explicit in terms of what to do and the minimum evidence requirements.
3. All of ABBE's QCF units can be assessed individually. However, for some qualifications, such as the Level 3 and Level 4 Diploma in Air Conditioning Energy Assessment, candidates achieve units through internal assessment with the multiple-choice examination as an additional component to confirm knowledge from across all of the units. Candidates have to achieve all of the required units and pass the external assessment to gain the qualification.
4. External assessment is valued by the sector, which also considers that multiple-choice questions are an appropriate test. The lead consultant drafts potential questions, which are then taken to the ADG to debate and agree.
5. Draft questions are passed to the Operations Manager who oversees the production of the examination materials. A team of experts drawn from the examination personnel follow a procedure to develop examination questions and papers for each examination.
6. The question writer produces questions that are moderated by two other experts to ensure accuracy, consistency, level, accessibility, clarity and lack of ambiguity. Questions are assigned a 'set level' of difficulty. The questions are then stored in a databank. Questions in the question bank are reviewed monthly and then over 10–12 month periods using the 'set levels' as a benchmark.
7. Examination papers are produced by paper setters for each exam to the structure in the specification for the examination. The papers are reviewed to ensure an appropriate balance of questions before being issued for use.

8. Although ABBE follows a set process for the design and development of assessments, the stages of development are not sufficiently recorded to provide assurance that all the regulatory requirements have been met.
9. ABBE intends to review the design and development of assessments through the self-assessment process. However, it is too early in the QCF process to have sufficient information for a review. The first report has yet to be produced.

## **Non-compliance**

3. ABBE must have a procedure that provides it with an assurance that the development of assessment methods is consistent with the design features in Section 1 of the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), criteria 5.3a.

## **Observations**

6. ABBE should consider whether there could be potential for over assessment where units are assessed internally by portfolio and by external assessment.

## Delivery of assessment

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 5.5–5.6, 5.9–5.10, 5.16b and 5.20–23.

### Findings

1. Centres are provided with the qualifications handbooks that contain details on the assessment requirements for each qualification. The roles and responsibilities of staff involved in the delivery of assessment is clearly stated in both the examination personnel guide and the qualifications handbooks.
2. For the internally assessed units, candidate evidence is assessed and internally verified by centre staff. The occupational competence and expertise of assessors and internal verifiers are checked at centre approval and monitored by external verifiers. The Internal Verifier manages the centre's assessment team. Their role includes holding standardisation meetings for assessors, sampling assessments and keeping accurate records.
3. External verifiers make a minimum of two visits a year to centres to check the quality assurance arrangements. The external verifier does this by sampling candidate evidence, speaking to assessors and internal verifiers, observing assessments and talking to candidates. An external verification report is completed and sent to the operations manager and the chief verifier.
4. Standardisation activities are carried out at two external verifiers' training days each year. External verifiers are allocated a selection of centres so are able to standardise their approach across these centres. The chief external verifier checks reports for standardisation across all external verifiers and all centres. The chief verifier will also make some accompanied visits with external verifiers.
5. The administrative requirements for centres hosting external examinations are clearly set out in the centre operations guide. Registration for a qualification entitles the candidate to two attempts at the examination but will incur an additional cost for further attempts.
6. The examinations have a set pass mark of 70 per cent. ADG has agreed that this is a reasonable pass mark and practice has shown that this works well.
7. Examination results are entered onto a spreadsheet in the ABBE database. The entries are double checked by another member of staff before being reviewed by an examinations officer from the examinations panel. The examinations officer also checks the performance of the questions by reviewing any high or low scoring questions. The examinations officer produces a report for each examination that goes to the Examination Panel.

8. The results for each examination go through a moderation process using two moderators before results notification is issued. The operations manager oversees this process, but the system of peer review and moderation is self-regulating.
9. The recognition of prior learning policy is out of date and needs to be revised to meet the requirements of QCF.
10. There is a well developed process for claims for exemption. The RoC for qualifications clearly state exemptions for different qualifications.
11. ABBE intends to review its arrangements for the delivery of assessment through the self assessment process.

## **Non-compliance**

There are no instances of non-compliance in relation to this section.

## **Observations**

7. The recognition of prior learning policy needs to be updated to fully meet the requirements of the QCF.

## Centre recognition

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 5.11, 5.16b and 5.18.

### Findings

1. Potential centres apply by completing an application form. ABBE also offers to talk through the requirements and the process with centres. Centres are provided with the *Centre Operations Guide: Guide to the Administration of all ABBE Qualifications* (November 2009), which includes information on how to apply and ABBE's requirements for centres.
2. New centres complete a full application and provide supporting documentary evidence. If existing centres are seeking to amend their approval status, for example by offering a new qualification, they will complete a shortened version of the application form.
3. Completed applications are subject to an administrative check before an external verifier is allocated to carry out an approval visit.
4. On completion of the centre approval visit the external verifier makes a report and recommendation as to whether the centre has met the centre approval criteria. The operations manager reviews the report and makes the approval decision.
5. Recently the centre approval and centre monitoring documents have been amended to address the requirements for the QCF, including provision for a unique learner number (ULN) and expansion of the diversity and equality section.
6. These new aspects are to be monitored by the External Verifiers. The external verifiers interviewed at the monitoring had differing levels of confidence in these new aspects. ABBE needs to ensure that all external verifiers have a consistent understanding to enable them to check that centres meet the additional requirements of the QCF. For example, that centres have systems to support credit transfer and accumulation.
7. ABBE holds centre awareness events to update centres, for instance, on new qualifications frameworks and new qualifications.
8. Following approval, centres receive a minimum of two monitoring visits a year. As well as confirming assessment decisions the external verifier also checks centres' ongoing compliance with ABBE's centre approval criteria. Centres with a proven track record may be given direct claim status for specific qualifications.

9. Any non-compliance reported results in an action plan. The degree of action or sanction is agreed with the operations manager and the chief external verifier.

## **Non-compliance**

4. ABBE must ensure that external verifiers have the appropriate training, and are adequately informed and supported to fulfil their responsibilities.

(The Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (2008), criteria 5.6d)

## **Observations**

There are no observations in relation to this section.

## **Awarding and certification**

Subject to the *Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (2008), paragraphs 5.12–5.15, 5.16 c–d and 5.19.

### **Findings**

1. Candidate achievements are recorded in the ABBE database. Once a candidate has achieved the units required by the RoC, the centre submits a certificate request form. The request is verified by the external verifier or the recognised internal verifier if the centre has direct claim status.
2. If the qualification includes an examination, the results are confirmed by the examination panel. There is no grading and the examination result is a pass or fail.
3. ABBE staff members check that the relevant units and components have been recorded accurately in the database before a certificate is produced.
4. ABBE prints its own certificates from a template stored electronically, ensuring security. Certificates are issued within ten working days of receipt of the certificate request form. To date no QCF certificates have been issued, however ABBE must ensure that the certificate meets the regulators' design requirements.
5. Although it is early in the QCF process, ABBE must put in place a procedure to ensure that standards are comparable year on year across centres, units and qualifications.

## **Non-compliance**

5. ABBE must have procedures in place to ensure that, for the awards it makes, standards are comparable year on year, across centres, units and qualifications at the same level with the same title, and where identical units are assessed using different assessment methods.

*(The Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (2008) criteria 5.16d)*

## **Observations**

There are no observations in relation to this section.

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Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation  
Spring Place  
Coventry Business Park  
Herald Avenue  
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346

[www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk)