

**The Qualifications and
Credit Framework:
Implementing the
Service Layer**

A first stage prospectus

February 2009

Of interest to Awarding Organisations and
Providers

This document sets out the headline plans for implementing the 'Service Layer' of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The Service Layer is the central tier of the QCF delivery model that facilitates the transfer of data across the learning and skills sector.

LSC has been remitted by Ministers to take forward the design, delivery and implementation of the Service Layer for the QCF across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI), as part of the implementation of the QCF which was announced in November 2008.

The prospectus sets out a view of the overall aims of the LSC in taking forward QCF implementation in respect of the Service Layer. This version is principally targeted at providing information about the implementation of the transitional QCF Service Layer and has been updated following consultation with Awarding Organisations during January 2009. Further versions supporting additional consultation will be issued as the development of the LSC strategic service progresses.

Foreword

This prospectus outlines the direction of travel which the LSC intends to take in order to deliver its Ministerial remit to design and implement the Qualifications and Credit Framework Service Layer.

In taking forward the implementation of the Service Layer, both through a transitional solution and, by September 2010, to a strategic solution, we intend to work closely with key partners and stakeholders, specifically colleagues in the Devolved Administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland, with OfQual and with Awarding Organisations. In addition, we will continue to approach this work in an integrated way and to look for synergies with parallel and interdependent reforms across the wider employment and skills landscape across the three countries.

This is a challenging piece of work, but work which is essential if we are to deliver the type of flexible and responsive qualifications, education and training that is now so critical given the changing economic circumstances.

This prospectus is the first of a series and will be refined and updated as our work on the Service Layer progresses. At this stage we are seeking views on the direction of travel, headline details and timescales. Through the infrastructure of stakeholder engagement we are now putting in place we will have a range of formal and informal opportunities to talk to Awarding Organisations, providers and learners with regard to the work on the Service Layer.

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Purpose of this Prospectus

- 1 This document has been produced by Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and sets out the headline plans for implementing the 'Service Layer' of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The Service Layer is the central tier of the QCF delivery model that facilitates the transfer of data across the learning and skills sector.
- 2 LSC has been remitted by Ministers to take forward the design, delivery and implementation of the Service Layer for the QCF across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI), as part of the implementation of the QCF which was announced¹ in November 2008.
- 3 The prospectus sets out a view of the overall aims of the LSC in taking forward QCF Service Layer implementation. This version is principally targeted at providing information about the implementation of the transitional QCF Service Layer and has been updated following consultation with Awarding Organisations during January 2009. Further versions supporting additional consultation will be issued as the development of the LSC strategic service progresses.

LSC Role in Qualifications and Credit Framework

- 4 LSC has two distinct roles in taking forward the implementation of the QCF, with regard to:
 - the Service Layer as a service and systems provider across England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and
 - ensuring that planning, funding and performance is aligned to a unit based qualification and credit framework in England.
- 5 LSC has been given responsibility for delivering the QCF service, as announced by Ministers in November 2008. This responsibility transfers from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to the LSC from April 2009. In the period leading to April 2009, LSC will be consulting with a range of key partners and stakeholders in order to ensure that necessary requirements for service are captured and can inform design and development. Firstly, the LSC will develop a transitional service from April 2009, and then use this to inform the development of the strategic service being implemented from September 2010.
- 6 The transitional service will focus on the capture of QCF data from Awarding Organisations and the provision of information to Awarding

¹ <http://nds.coi.gov.uk/environment/fullDetail.asp?ReleaseID=384238&NewsAreaID=2>

Organisations to support the process of credit accumulation and transfer (CAT).

- 7 This first stage prospectus provides an overview of the strategic aims of the QCF but is primarily focused on LSC's role as a service provider for the QCF Service Layer.
- 8 Further details on how LSC will take forward the planning, funding and performance arrangements for QCF in England are set out in policy related documents available on the LSC website².

² <http://qfr.lsc.gov.uk/ukvqrp/>

Section 1: Introduction - What is the QCF?

- 9 During the last three years key partners – the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), along with the Devolved Administrations, QCA, Ofqual, LSC, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils (the Alliance) and Awarding Organisations have been working together to take forward and implement a programme of vocational qualification reform. The QCF is a key component of that programme of reform.
- 10 The QCF is intended to be a simple and rational organising structure for units and qualifications, capable of supporting the accumulation and transfer of credit achievement, alongside qualification achievement. Overtime, the QCF will replace the current qualifications system in England Wales and Northern Ireland – the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The QCF will provide an improved learning and training offer and experience for learners and be more responsive for employers, through increased flexibility and engagement.
- 11 The key distinguishing feature between the NQF and the QCF is the use of credit as a currency of achievement. The QCF allows learners to achieve units of learning that are all assigned a standard currency of credit to represent the volume of learner achievement. This credit can be accumulated and transferred by the learner to build over time towards a qualification. In addition, by providing the facility for learners to accumulate and transfer smaller bite-sized chunks of learning through units, learners will benefit from being able to manage their learning better around their personal circumstances and be able to tailor their own learning to most closely meet their needs and interests.
- 12 Employers will also be another prime beneficiary as they are able to tailor their training offering to more closely match their needs and ensure that any training activity has the maximum impact in terms of their employees' productivity.

Key Benefits

- 13 There are a number of key benefits that will be delivered by the QCF.

For Learners

- A more flexible approach, taking smaller steps of learning and gaining credit (through the achievement of units) that can be accumulated over time and subsequently combined and submitted to claim a qualification.
- A more mobile learner community will be facilitated as the QCF will allow learners to change providers and Awarding Organisations for

different units (where appropriate) and the transferability of credit will ensure that no learning is lost.

- Increased opportunities to participate in accredited learning and training (as a result of the flexibilities and the capacity of the QCF to embrace a wider range of achievement than the NQF) potentially leading to an increase in the number of qualifications achieved.
- The provision of a holistic learner record detailing a learner's credit and qualification achievement history that can be used as a tool for supporting Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), planning future training strategies and supporting job applications.
- The achievement of credits which can be used to measure progress towards a qualification and also retain partial achievement of a qualification.

For Employers

- Ability to tailor the training they offer so that it is more specific to their business and organisational needs.
- Ability to identify packages of units that can be used to respond quickly and efficiently to a range of training needs against new economic challenges.
- Ability to accredit their training and hence get external verification and national accreditation as to its quality.
- Help towards becoming an Awarding Organisation (from the employer recognition project).
- Better information regarding employees' previous training, helping to avoid funding duplicate qualifications.

For Awarding Organisations

- Increased market opportunities with the widespread use of units and credits and increased demand from employers to deliver accredited training.
- A wider range of provision now accredited as part of the QCF and greater clarity over where public funding will be focussed.
- Increased demand from employers to deliver accredited training.
- Ability to respond quickly and flexibly to develop additional units and qualifications to meet market demands.

For Providers

- A wider range of accredited provision which is better matched to the different learning aspirations, starting points and aims and ambitions of a wider range of learners.
- Ability to better personalise and tailor learning to serve the needs of learners.
- Improved information about learners' prior achievements.

Section 2: Background and LSC Remit

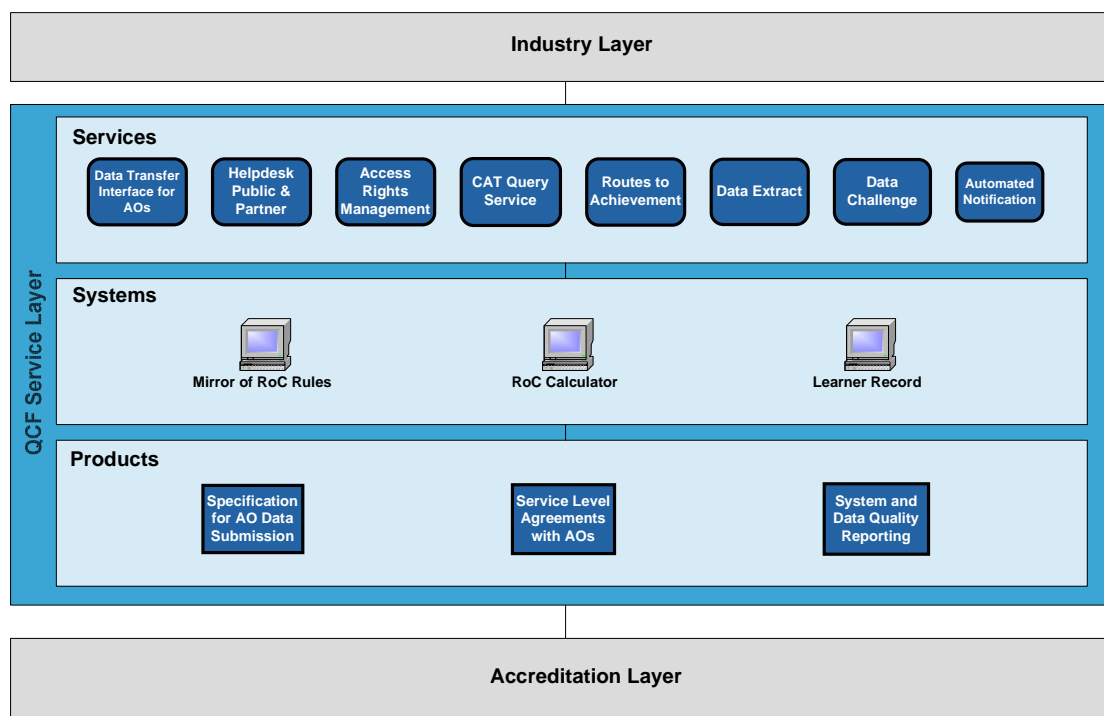
14 The delivery of the QCF will be through an operating model consisting of three layers which will set out the processes necessary for the accumulation and transfer of credit.

The three layers consist of:

- an accreditation layer (regulatory arrangements for the QCF were published by Ofqual in August 2008 and they provide the framework for the operational model)
- an industry layer (which is the responsibility of the Awarding Organisations); and
- the Service Layer.

15 LSC is responsible for the provision of the Service Layer, the content of which is illustrated in Figure 1 below. This model sets out the strategic solution that will be in place from September 2010.

Figure 1: QCF layer model



16 The Service Layer holds a copy of achievement information submitted by the creators and owners of the data, the Awarding Organisations. The Awarding Organisations are the authoritative source of the data, and they alone can authorise changes to it, and they alone have the authority to award a qualification.

- 17 At the most simple level the Service Layer is principally responsible for supporting the ability of Awarding Organisations to facilitate Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) and for providing information to learners on their achievements.
- 18 It is intended that the Service Layer will be provided on a 'no charge to use' basis. Awarding Organisations retain responsibility for the accuracy of data they provide to the service layer and LSC have responsibility for ensuring that the received data is stored securely and not corrupted within the Service Layer.
- 19 The responsibility for the delivery of the Service Layer transfers to LSC as of April 2009. Within their new remit LSC have been given specific responsibility for delivering the fully specified QCF Service Layer across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 20 The strategic solution will be in place across the three countries (EWNl) by September 2010.

Section 3: Implementation Timetable

- 21 The Service Layer will need to support all Awarding Organisations, providers, IAG and learners across EWNI. Once the QCF is fully populated with units and qualifications the numbers of people and organisations accessing the service will be extremely significant.
- 22 The delivery of such a service to a wide number of organisations whilst supporting the development of the broader skills policy context (including Machinery of Government changes) requires a significant focussed planning and development process. Therefore, it is intended to deliver the Service Layer in two phases. There will initially be an LSC provided transitional service that will be in place from April 2009. This will be followed by the strategic service that will be in place from September 2010. The two will be interdependent, with the design and development of the transitional service informing the design and development of the strategic service.
- 23 LSC has established an Awarding Organisation Advisory Group in partnership with the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) and the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) to support the wider implementation of the QCF, including the Service Layer. As part of its work this group will advise the LSC on aspects of Service Layer development.
- 24 Figure 2 below details the high level timeframe for QCF implementation.

Figure 2: High level Service Layer implementation timetable



- 25 The following sections of this prospectus discuss the transitional service solution and the strategic service solution respectively and in doing so identify the key milestones identified by the numbered diamonds within Figure 2.

Section 4: The Service Layer - Transitional Solution

- 26 The LSC transitional Service Layer solution will be available from April 2009 (Milestone 1) and continue to be developed and enhanced up to August 2009 (Milestone 4). It is then anticipated this service will run 'as is' until September 2010 when the Strategic Service will be made available.
- 27 From April 2009 onwards, in recognition of Awarding Organisation lead times for systems implementation, we anticipate a progressive increase in use of the Service Layer – both for the submission of achievement data and subsequent support of credit transfer.
- 28 The transitional service will provide Awarding Organisations with the facility to upload a copy of their unit and qualification achievement data and then validate the achievement of specific units to support the award of a qualification. This validation service will be where the details of specific units are requested and accompanied by the learner's ULN and date of birth. Viewing this data in parallel with the relevant Rules of Combination (RoC) held by Awarding Organisations will provide them with trusted information that will assist them in their decisions as to whether to award a qualification.
- 29 The transitional service will enable providers and publicly funded discrete IAG providers the ability to view the achievement record of Learners with whom they hold a legitimate relationship to help facilitate the provision of information, advice and guidance in the second half of 2009.
- 30 QCA will offer limited access to the LAR that was developed as part of the QCF tests and trials systems but this service will be switched off on 31 March 2009.
- 31 LSC will be building a new system that can deliver a secure transition service until the strategic service becomes available. To populate the new system LSC will need to receive QCF achievement data from Awarding Organisations. This data can relate to awards made prior to April 2009 as long as it is provided in the required format. There will be no provision for Awarding Organisations to submit live data to LSC before April 2009. .
- 32 As the transitional service will not provide direct access to learners it will only be delivered in an English language format. The strategic solution will support a dual language (English/Welsh) format.

Awarding Organisation Access

33 Awarding Organisations must be recognised by Ofqual (as set down in their regulations) in order to operate in the QCF. Once this has happened they can be granted access to the Service Layer. The transition service will provide access as follows.

- Access will be via the secure LSC gateway service.
- There will be at least two levels of account, standard user and admin user. Each will have pre-defined access levels and the admin user will be able to manage standard users for an Awarding Organisation.
- Account name and password information will be communicated separately to nominated individuals.
- Password rules will be applied to user accounts (including minimum length, character mix and change frequency).

Awarding Organisation Upload

34 The transition service will enable Awarding Organisations to upload learner achievement data.

- Initially the transition service will accommodate batch upload using XML or csv file formats. File naming and data standards will be developed and are expected to align with Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) common data definitions. They will be published in February 2009.
- File sizes will be limited to 20MB for release 1 of the transition service (in excess of 100,000 records in CSV format).
- Awarding Organisations will receive confirmation of file receipt.
- Two types of amendment will be possible on already submitted data.
 - Awarded qualifications can be withdrawn.
 - The date of award can be changed.
- There will be limited checking at the point of upload to ensure, for example, that codes are entered in a valid form.
- There will be no cross-checking of fields; Whilst LSC accepts responsibility for accurately and securely storing the data it receives, Awarding Organisations will retain liability for errors in data submitted to the service layer.
- Awarding Organisations are expected to ensure valid ULNs are submitted to the Service Layer.
- Checking of ULN within the transition service will be limited to ensuring that the ULN has a valid check digit.
- Files submitted will be validated. Any validation errors will result in the entire file being rejected. The reasons for rejection will be communicated to the submitting Awarding Organisation with meaningful error messages that will report all errors in the file.
- After successful processing, a confirmation message will be generated.

- 35 Direct (screen based) entry of achievement at an individual learner level will follow later. LSC is aware that this may pose challenges for smaller Awarding Organisations and will be seeking further discussions with a range of smaller Awarding Organisations to understand what challenges this may pose and how this can be resolved.
- 36 There is the potential for the introduction of an Application Programme Interface (API) after April 2009 but this will not be available in the initial release.

Data Requirements

- 37 The mandatory data fields that LSC will require from Awarding Organisations to populate and support the Service Layer are detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Mandatory data fields

Mandatory data fields
Unique Learner Number (ULN)
Awarding Organisation reference number (as defined by Ofqual)
Provider Name
Provider Post Code
Unit/Qualification status (Award or withdrawal)
Unit/Qualification code (as defined by Ofqual)
Date of award or withdrawal of achievement
Learner date of birth
Learner given name
Learner family name

- 38 Whilst ULN may not be mandated by regulations it will be required in order to use the Service Layer
- 39 It is recognised that currently UKPRN is not universally collected by Awarding Organisations. The vision is that this will be the case in the future strategic service but for the short term further work needs to be completed to map other provider identifiers to UKPRN such as National Centre Number (NCN).
- 40 Further fields may need to be collected and will be defined in the interface specification to be published in February 2009. Currently these are expected to include UKPRN, Grade and Assessment language. Other reference data such as credit value and level will be drawn from Accreditation Layer reference data.

Awarding Organisation - Support for credit transfer

- 41 Credit transfer will be supported during transition through the provision of the credit transfer query.

- This query will only be available to Awarding Organisations.
- It will allow Awarding Organisations to validate the achievement of specific units for a learner by submitting a ULN, date of birth and unit reference number.
- The Awarding Organisation must check the return against their Rules of Combination.
- Initially the query will be based on individual ULNs.
- A batch based bulk query will be developed for later issue.

Awarding Organisation Reporting

42 Reports will be provided to summarise the achievement data an Awarding Organisation has submitted. These will include:

- when those uploads were made
- the user submitting the upload data; and
- batch file references.

43 Basic reporting for the above items, together with details of processing errors, will be available in the initial release in April.

Provider Access

44 Providers will be able to view achievement data for their learners from June 2009 (Milestone 2). Awarding Organisations may be required to vouch for private providers who cannot be verified against other trusted sources of information in order that such providers can be granted access to the service.

45 For the transition service, provider access methods will be as described for Awarding Organisations but will be subject to different data restrictions.

46 In order to access a learner's achievement record, a provider will need to know their ULN and other identifying items of data, such as given name, family name or date of birth. Providers will have access to view all historic achievement gained by the learner in their capacity as providers of information, advice and guidance.

Discrete Information, Advice and Guidance Provider Access

47 Publicly funded discrete Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers will be able to view achievement data for learners from June 2009. In order to do so, they will need to request access to QCF from the LSC. LSC will be able to vouch for their authenticity and consequently approve or reject their application for access.

48 For the transition service access for these providers will be as described for providers above.

49 In order to access a learner's achievement record, a discrete IAG provider will need to know their ULN and other identifying items of data, such as given name, family name or date of birth. Providers will have access to view all historic achievement gained by the learner in order to facilitate the provision of information, advice and guidance.

Learner Access

50 Learner access will be mediated through providers as there will be no direct learner access to the transition service. This access will be used to support information, advice and guidance and in understanding prior QCF achievement. The transition service will be capable of supporting credit transfer claims facilitated by providers and Awarding Organisations. Direct Learner access will be a feature of the full strategic solution and provided through a single MIAP Learner Record that will display participation and achievements. This will happen from September 2010.

Help and Support Services

51 A Service Desk and support services will be provided for users of the Service Layer. The Service Level Agreement (SLA) will detail the service levels to be provided and these will apply to all parties who require its services in relation to the operation of QCF services. For the transition service, Service Desk availability is likely to be 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

Service Level Agreements

52 The Service Level Agreement (SLA) will create a formal, two-way business relationship between LSC and the Awarding Organisations. The overriding purpose of the SLA is to provide a mechanism that will increase the likelihood that learners receive a good quality service from the QCF.

53 The aim is to develop a robust Service Level Agreement (SLA) that:

- clearly documents the relationship between the operational requirements and the quality requirements; and
- sets out the model that will govern that relationship.

54 In order to develop a robust SLA, the following pre-conditions should be in place.

- A clear definition of the service requirement i.e. what is to be delivered and when.
- A clear definition of quality i.e. how good the service needs to be.
- An agreed method for measuring and reporting performance.

55 In addition, performance must be measured against an agreed set of criteria supported by trusted, common management information reports.

Data Governance

- 56 All data held in the system will be protected by the LSC's data governance procedures. As such LSC will not release data to third parties without first seeking the owner's permission. The way in which these governance procedures will relate to Awarding Organisations will be agreed and documented in the relevant service level agreements.
- 57 All individual users of the service will be subject to a fair processing notice and will be required to accept the fair processing notice as a condition of using the service.

Enhancements to the Transition Service Solution

- 58 It is expected that a number of developments and upgrades will be made to the transition service. These will be discussed with Awarding Organisations through the Awarding Organisation Advisory Group once the initial service has been implemented.

In June 2009:

- Providers will be able to gain access to the QCF transitional Service Layer and view individuals' achievement history. In order to access learner records the provider will need to know the learner's ULN together with other identifying data items (such as given name, family name or date of birth) in order to prevent 'harvesting' of learner data.

In August 2009:

- Accredited Awarding Organisations will be able to directly enter QCF achievement data on a learner by learner basis via the web portal.
- The service will be enhanced to facilitate batch processing of bulk CAT queries and return of results.

Section 5: The Service Layer – Strategic Service

59 From September 2010 (Milestone 10) the strategic solution for the Service Layer will be in place which will provide full functionality as indicated in Figure 1. This will be subject to extensive consultation as part of the development of the strategic service.

60 The indicative additional functions that it will be offered over and above the transitional service are as follows.

- Integration with MIAP to provide a QCF section on the MIAP Learner Record. This provides a learner direct access to a holistic view of their achievement history.
- Ability for a learner to grant access to their QCF MIAP Learner Record to learning providers, current and potential employers and Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers should they wish to do so.
- The ability to view potential future learning pathways for a learner (based on what they have already achieved) by running a 'routes to achievement' (RtA) query. This query will enable a learner (or other party granted delegated access) to the ways in which they could use their credit and unit achievements to obtain qualifications.
- The ability for Learners to review progress towards particular learning aims.

61 The strategic service will be developed to support the various planning, funding and advice services across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

62 LSC will procure a supplier to deliver a fully managed service. This means LSC will appoint an organisation to design, build and operate the systems and services required to deliver the Service Layer. The process to select the supplier will start in spring 2009 (Milestone 6).

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