

**“HOW DO WE REALISE THE POTENTIAL OF THE QCF TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE SKILLS AGENDA?”
REPORT OF A STAKEHOLDER LUNCH AND DEBATE HOSTED BY NATIONAL OPEN COLLEGE NETWORK**

NOCN hosted a lunch for its stakeholders on 6th October at Sheffield College, aimed at initiating a strategic exploration of “How do we realise the potential of the QCF to contribute to the Skills Agenda?”. Around 40 delegates attended, including representatives of both government departments, LSC, UKCES, a number of SSCs, and learner forums. NOCN is grateful to Sheffield College for making the college restaurant available for the day, and to the students on their Year 1 Catering Studies for providing a sumptuous lunch.

Those gathered were welcomed by Eric Galvin, Chair of NOCN and heard presentations from The Work Foundation, Ofqual, and QCDA, all of which posed some challenges for the QCF and the nature of the Skills Agenda over the next 10 to 15 years.

Penny Tamkin, Programme Director, Management and Leadership, at the Work Foundation set the context for the roll out of the QCF by re-stating the evidence of the UK falling further behind its major competitor economies in terms of productivity and skills levels, before setting out a clear case for the positive relationship between levels of training, qualification levels, and productivity. The evidence is that investment in training pays dividends in productivity levels, but even more so when that training occurs in a context of generally effective HR practice. Despite this evidence however, UK employers do not develop their employees enough; the link between qualification or skill level and productivity is not sufficiently compelling to UK employers, and as a result UK employers do not yet demand the high levels of skills that most analysts accept are needed to make the UK more competitive in global markets.

If qualifications are used as proxies, or indicators, of skills levels, and if UK employers do start to increase their investment in training and skills development in ways that lead to qualification outcomes, then it is critical that the qualifications system delivers the right sort of qualifications, with guarantees to employers of quality and fitness for purpose. Richard Garrett, Team Leader for QCF Regulatory Policy at Ofqual, set out the critical role for Ofqual in creating confidence in the new QCF qualifications through ensuring robust quality. There were now almost 2,500 qualifications within the QCF and around 11,500 units, yet despite this significant achievement much of the regulatory arrangements and criteria for the QCF were still undergoing evaluation, as more Awarding Organisations increased their QCF activity. Ofqual would therefore continue to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the new QCF regulatory arrangements in practice, with an initial evaluation report due in December 2009. While Richard was clear that Ofqual needed to have proper regard for quality he stressed that it was critical that Ofqual’s processes supported the current momentum for the implementation of the QCF rather than acting as a brake.

Sue Georgious, Director of Adult Skills, QCDA, posed the central challenge for the learning and skills sector that if it was so important to raise UK skills levels what was the sector doing in response that would have a significant and positive impact? Sue argued that although we are living in a period of what may seem like constant flux in policy in the sector there is much that needs to change further if the UK is to successfully overcome the challenges ahead. The current qualifications and skills levels of the UK population are still a long way short of the targets for 2020 set out in the Leitch Report.



In 14-19 the challenges are the low level of participation in education and training, problems still with the basic skills, a persistent and stubborn gap in the opportunities for the most disadvantaged, and rapid structural change in the economy.

With regard to adult skills we need to develop more agile and responsive skills and employment provision, as well as raising the ambition and capacity of UK employers to be world class. Yet just as Penny Tamkin questioned whether UK employers were “buying in” to the relationship between investment in skills and economic productivity, so Sue Georgious questioned whether Awarding Organisations and Sector Skills Councils were also serious about implementing the full vision and potential of the QCF – and the QCF is in Sue’s view critical to creating a more flexible, inclusive and innovative qualifications system capable of meeting the needs of employers and employees alike.

To date it was suggested that – perhaps necessarily so – the population of the QCF with qualifications has largely consisted of unitising previous NQF qualifications and moving them into the new framework, and not much more. While this was an achievement, and a positive development, if the skills agenda was to be met then there was a need for more radical reform of the nature of qualifications. Clearly traditional qualification structures had been part of the “problem”.

It was reasonable to assume that the sector now had sufficient understanding of the QCF to begin to create different sorts of qualifications. Qualifications that were developed with a consideration of the learning process and journey that underpinned their achievement; qualifications that made it more possible to transfer credit within and across sectors; qualifications that combine both knowledge and occupational competence; qualifications that combine different elements into bespoke combinations for specific work roles; and above all qualifications that are simple to use, relevant and flexible. A culture shift amongst all those working in the qualifications sector was required to ensure that the QCF eventually looked and felt different.

NOCN POSITION STATEMENT

NOCN itself fully supports this position. NOCN is strategically committed to the QCF, and to not only the flexibilities of unitised qualification structures but also to the award of credit to learners. This commitment to credit is based on NOCN’s 26 years of experience of operating credit-based qualifications and accreditation to a wide range of formal and informal learning, experience that has provided numerous illustrations of the transformative effect that being physically awarded credit certification for small steps of learning achievement can have on many individual’s lives.

NOCN is also committed to doing what it can to realise new types of vocational qualifications, ones that are based not on a “tick box” approach to occupational competence but rather that for post 19 learners are rooted in known good practice in adult pedagogy. For 14-19 learning NOCN is committed to applying good practice in adult learning to different contexts, and to creating more inclusive qualifications that address rather than perpetuate educational exclusion and disadvantage.

NOCN recognises that it needs to apply these principles consistently in the development of its qualifications, and in its partnership working with Sector Skills Councils, providers, and other stakeholders.



NOCN is delighted that the ensuing discussion at the lunch on 6th October demonstrated that there are many other organisations and agencies that share this commitment and who do wish to realise the vision of the QCF. NOCN will therefore continue to foster a continuation of a progressive dialogue and debate with interested and like minded organisations, through the publication of occasional papers and the organising of further focused debates.

