

Pathway to practice

Gordon Jones presents 10 ways the new Qualifications and Credit Framework could help your business

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) for vocational learning in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been hailed as a ‘genuinely radical reform’, and it’s already up and running.

The Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (WCSM) was one of the first awarding organisations to be approved under the new framework, and it will continue to offer its Certificates at Levels 2 and 3 in Optical Practice Support, its Level 2 Certificate in Optical Production Processes and its Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians. The organisation is also bringing out a new qualification, the Level 2 Certificate in Optical Customer Service (Spectacles), which is designed for people working in practices or in manufacturing.

What difference will it make?

1 Qualifications in the QCF are made up of **units**. This means that people can build up qualifications bit by bit, at a pace that suits them. At the WCSM, for example, we’ve gone through an exercise of ‘unitising’ our qualifications. The syllabus is the same, but the new structure means that learners can tackle units individually or, as in the past, do the entire qualification in one go.

2 Each unit has a **credit value**, where one credit is equivalent to about 10 hours’ learning time. So the credit value gives an indication of how long the unit takes to complete. Learning time includes tutoring (like that provided through the WCSM’s



Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support requires about 350 hours’ learning time

distance learning courses), learning on the job (with managers or other colleagues) and individual study.

3 The QCF gives people **more flexibility**. People can build the same qualification from different combinations of units. Of course, there are ‘rules of combination’: some units are optional, some are mandatory. For example, our Level 2 Certificate in Optical Production Processes has six mandatory units. Learners then choose from different ‘pathways’ – such as the lathe-cut contact lens pathway, or the spectacle glazing pathway – that contain a choice of units to suit the particular needs and interests of the learner.

4 **Completed units stay with people** and credits can be transferred between qualifications and levels. This avoids repetition of learning and assessment – each person is given a ‘unique learner number’

that stays with them for life.

5 This will help all of us in the optical industry to develop a **skilled workforce** with more flexible career routes. This is one of the things that the WCSM has been focused on in recent years: developing a co-ordinated programme of training and qualifications.

6 In the QCF, qualifications have **clearer names** that tell people three things: the level of difficulty, the size and the content (Figure 1).

7 **Level:** There are nine levels, from entry level (the lowest) to level 8 (the highest). As a guide, A-levels are equivalent to level 3, a bachelor’s degree is level 6. The WCSM offers qualifications at levels 2, 3 and 4.

8 **Size:** Qualifications come in three different sizes. An ‘Award’ has a total credit value of between 1 and 12, a ‘Certificate’ requires 13 to 36 credits, and a ‘Diploma’ is made up of 37 or more credits. For example, our Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support has a total credit value of 35 (which means it requires about 350 hours’ learning time). Our Level 4 Diploma for Optical Technicians, on the other hand, requires 98 credits (which are normally obtained over a two-year course).

9 **Content:** this tells people what the qualification is about. For example, our Level 3 Certificate in Optical Practice Support is made up of the following units (each of which has its own set of ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘assessment criteria’): the legal requirements in an optical practice; managing people in a practice; general optics and optical screening; supporting the provision of spectacles in a practice; supporting the provision of contact lenses in a practice.

10 When does the **changeover** happen? The QCF has been up and running since 2008, and the old National Qualifications Framework will close for registrations at the end of this year. (NVQs will disappear at the same time, although some qualifications will retain the term ‘NVQ’ in their titles.) At the WCSM, our first QCF-compliant distance learning courses start in September, and we’ll be holding examinations at least twice a year, increasing the frequency as demand grows.

● One final point: it’s important to note that qualifications obtained under the old framework will retain their status, and be equivalent to those achieved under the QCF. ●

Level 2	Certificate	in Optical Customer Service (Spectacles)
level	size	content

Figure 1 Clearer names indicate the level of difficulty, the size and the content