



## Executive Summary

Examining the implications of APL and Exemption within the QCF in the context of supporting and measuring learner progression

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# Examining the implications of APL and Exemption within the QCF in the context of supporting and measuring learner progression

## Introduction

In 2007 Credit Works was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to *examine the implications of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) for recognising and measuring progression, in the context of accreditation of prior learning in a qualifications and credit framework.*

This Executive Summary provides a brief guide to and an overview of the full report<sup>1</sup> and the recommendations are reproduced in full. Other sections of the report are summarised: sector bodies on employer demand for APL and Exemption; why a set of working principles are needed (and are included in the full report); conditions that must be met for APL and Exemption to work successfully in the QCF. **(insert weblinks to full report).**

## Context

The LSC is a partner in the UK wide programme of reform of vocational qualifications (UK VQRP).

This research forms part of a strand of work focussing on new approaches to supporting learner progression in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and examination of potential performance measures and patterns of achievement in the QCF.

## Aim:

- Examine the implications for recognising and measuring progression in the context of accreditation of prior learning in a qualifications and credit framework.
- Make recommendations for managing APL in the QCF in the context of planning, funding and workforce development. As the VQRP is UK wide the work should also address and have applicability for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## Research objectives

The objectives of this project were to:

1. Establish a baseline of the current weaknesses and failures in APL systems (building on the previous research) in order to establish how these may be addressed in recognising and accrediting prior learning and achievement in the QCF (taking into account the technical specifications of the QCF).
2. Identify the potential for new approaches to APL that may be offered by the QCF and how existing and new approaches may be managed

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<sup>1</sup> Credit Works, *Examining the implications of APL and Exemption within the QCF in the context of supporting and measuring learner progression.* LSC 2007

through transition from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the QCF.

3. Examine how new and existing approaches will support achievement and progression in the context of sector qualification reform, particularly in the context of SQS prioritising qualifications for planning and funding purposes; how APL may be managed in this context and how it may be managed in terms of credibility and currency of prior learning and achievement for SSC/Bs and employers; how APL and Exemption could contribute to counting prior achievement without duplicating funding.
4. Consider the implications for increased use of APL within the QCF in the context of planning and funding of provision, but particularly in the context of workforce development and the implications for providers.

## A brief guide to the full report

**Section 1** introduces the report with a summary and guide; an overview of findings and recommendations; and descriptions of the research context, aim, objectives, methodology, terms and definitions. 64 organisational representatives were consulted in all, through telephone or face to face interview email and survey. This included a 'snapshot survey' of sector bodies which produced a set of 29 results and case studies.

Section **2** briefly summarises and reiterates those factors which have contributed to the failure of the system to recognise prior learning and achievement to date, and summarises the (2006) report<sup>2</sup> outcomes together with those recommendations relevant to this study. **Section 3** focuses on working with sector bodies to identify and characterise employer demand for the recognition of prior learning and achievement in the UK. **Section 4** examines the potential for using APL and Exemption in the QCF in three inter-related policy contexts in England:

- emerging new design principles for 'full level 2' qualifications
- progression pathways within the FLT
- 'inclusive entry 1' achievement and progression

**Section 5** summarises what needs to be put in place to for APL and Exemption to work in the QCF. This analysis effectively represents the report's conclusions – introducing a set of draft principles and describing conditions for successful use of APL and Exemption in the QCF. Recommendations for action are found in **Section 6**.

## Overview

There is no doubt that for most stakeholders interviewed, historical and many current approaches to APL<sup>3</sup> and Exemption were considered

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<sup>2</sup> In early 2006 the LSC commissioned Credit Works to undertake research to examine the feasibility of employing APL to support progress towards the achievement of full level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications. A report was published in June 2006 which recommended that the LSC should consider further work in this area, once tests and trials of the QCF had begun.

<sup>3</sup> Note: 'APL' is used throughout the report as a mnemonic for formal recognition of prior learning and achievement (see below for working definitions for this report)

ineffective, difficult, dull and bureaucratic. However as this project progressed clear evidence of demand for APL and Exemption emerged, providing the current weaknesses and failures were addressed and workable solutions were put in place within the QCF.

Interviewees suggested APL and Exemption (in the QCF) needed to be demystified and made as accessible as possible, and suggested that evidence of potential demand and examples of potential use would be crucial, as would a clear explanation of the relationship to policy drivers, planning and funding in EWNI. A set of common principles for APL and Exemption, within which stakeholders could test new practice was also requested and draft principles are included in the report for consideration.

Interviewees wanted the research to address all these factors, and for the report to suggest a way forward for operation of APL and Exemption within the QCF.

The policy contexts examined in this report presented a set of quite different challenges – from understanding how prior learning might be recognised within an inclusive entry 1 in the QCF, to getting recognition at all levels for achievements from informal learning at work. For example, the report suggests that design principles for ‘full level 2’ qualifications, as currently drafted for QCA, allow much scope for recognising prior learning and achievement and the report comments on the design principles accordingly.

However Progression Pathways for the Foundation Learning Tier are eventually defined, a model for integrating the recognition of prior learning into the FLT curriculum is suggested, where the benefits of working with others to reflect on, value and describe prior learning is seen as an integral part of a structured learning programme. The provider needs to be organised to support the learner through a reflective learning process from the outset of the learning journey, needs access to appropriate units in the QCF to recognise achievement and understand how such achievement of such units contribute to progression along a validated progression pathway. The importance of Initial Assessment and Ongoing Review (IAOR) cannot be overstated here; and Credit Works’ parallel study, published at the same time as this report, examines this in detail.

The starting point for this study was the identification of *potential demand* for APL and Exemption followed by identification of what needed to be put in place or to change for APL to succeed. In many respects the report presents an overall ‘business case’ for the place of APL and Exemption in formal recognition of achievement within the QCF. The contributions from sector bodies were invaluable, proving that there is clear demand and a need to come up with straightforward means to satisfy it.

Examples of positive current APL practice were identified that could be used to exemplify possible ways forward.

Some of the principal conditions for success exist already; for example the QCF specification is neutral on ‘APEL’ and intended to be positive on how Exemption could work within (qualification) rules of combination for units in the QCF. However the report questions whether the rules for exempted

achievements will affect transferability and progression in the QCF and recommends review of the specification accordingly.

Other conditions for success will need long term changes; for example providers currently operating linear learning programmes are already considering the logistical implications for moving to modularised delivery, with multiple starting points for learners throughout the year.

Conclusions are intended to inform understanding of the implications for implementation of APL and Exemption. A single recommendation is made; to act on the report's findings and conclusions within the phase 2 tests and trials of the QCF in 2007-8 and - through managed implementation - respond to the demand from stakeholders for workable and clear ways forward.

## **Recommendations**

**That the potential for APL and Exemption is examined in practice and evaluated through the Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials, including the current phase 2 trials where possible.**

The definitions explained in **Section 1.7** and used throughout the full report are cited again in the context of the report's recommendation; the definitions are intended to apply to the unit based credit system proposed for the QCF and though the terms and definitions used are slightly different, they are consistent with the definitions offered within the current QCF specification. However the recommendation that follows suggests that the position and status of Exemption in the QCF specification is examined and reviewed.

Two key definitions used in this report are:

**Accreditation of Prior Learning:** Within a Framework of credit based units this is defined as the award of credit based on verifiable evidence of the achievement of a unit or units gained through prior learning.

**Credit Exemption:** is claimed for already certificated achievement. Exemption offers the opportunity for learners to have already certificated achievement which is not credit based count towards the achievement of credit based qualifications; e.g. from qualifications that are currently in the NQF and not credit-based.

Note: The 'kite-marking' of outcomes from in-company training is not the same as Exemption. Kite marking (and/or recognition of achievements in a skills passport) can be done without any reference to the QCF or other qualifications systems.

The QCF tests and trials should address the following points:

**The tests and trials should involve:**

1. Sector bodies able to identify firm demand for APL and Exemption within their sectors
2. A range of suitable and willing providers engaged in the QCF tests and trials
3. Awarding bodies willing to develop customised assessment instruments specifically for APL, linked to units and/or qualifications which offer clear routes to APL for cohorts of learners and where there is sufficient identified demand to warrant it.
4. Awarding bodies capable of and willing to develop assessment tools for recognition of achievement for prior learning in the FLT (including inclusive entry 1) to facilitate and complement Progression Pathways designed for the FLT
5. Awarding bodies willing to recognise and use Exemption arrangements, within RoC in the QCF, where these are identified by sector bodies and employers.
6. Funding and Planning authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
7. Regulatory bodies for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

**Priority contexts:**

1. Priorities identified by sector bodies; a range of contexts, types of achievement and learners in EWNI. These should include the contexts identified in Section 3 of this report
2. FLT trial sites in the context of Progression Pathways
3. Full Level 2 qualifications within Phase 2 of the QCF tests and trials and related to sector body priorities, Train to Gain and the FLT as appropriate.

**Guidance, tools and methods on using APL and Exemption within the QCF:**

1. Resources to be developed systematically through sharing the development of APL and Exemption practice in tests and trials of the QCF.

**QCF specification:**

1. Examine the consequences for learner progression which may result from learners not being awarded credit for exempted achievement.

2. Address identified minor ambiguities in meaning of some terminology associated with APL and Exemption.
3. Examine and review the position of Exemption in the QCF specification in relation to the potential impact on credit accumulation and transfer and on learner progression:

*As exemptions will, by definition, already have been formally recognised through some form of certification outside the framework, no credits will be awarded where an exemption is granted.<sup>4</sup>*

#### **Draft Principles for APL and Exemption practice:**

1. Test the draft principles included in this report to find out if they help all stakeholders to define the parameters for APL and Exemption in the QCF.
2. The regulators for EWNI to oversee this aspect of the trial and through evaluation of practice and consultation, and refine, amend and add to these principles as necessary.

#### **Funding and planning:**

Any QCF test and trial which includes APL and/or Exemption should be connected to an investigation of the impact of the QCF on funding and Planning, to ascertain impact and potential consequences for providers, planning and funding systems and strategies and,

1. Identify any perverse funding incentives related to APL and Exemption (positive or negative).
2. Address questions such as:
  - What is the real cost of APL and Exemption to providers learners and other stakeholders?
  - Are current or proposed funding systems capable of meeting those costs?
  - Do funding systems need to define or determine terms for funding routes to achievement through APL and Exemption? Or is this a matter for providers operating their business within agreed spending boundaries/priorities?
3. As an outcome of testing and trialling APL and Exemption in the QCF, develop illustrative guidance on how APL and Exemption can be funded and managed.

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<sup>4</sup> QCA, CCEA, DELLS. (15.2) QCF Rules of Combination Guidance for developing rules of combination for the Qualifications and Credit Framework tests and trials Version 1. QCA 2006

### **Existing practice in Exemption should be examined for applicability for the QCF:**

1. Testing and trialling should be cognisant of APL approaches and practice in other countries of the EU, including Scotland, and examine applicability for the development of practice in the EWNI.
2. Development of APL and Exemption in the QCF should take account of and benefit from valuable and effective current practice, including models, understanding and expertise where possible; including APL and Exemption arrangements operated by professional bodies (in and out of the NQF) and recognised by their relevant sector bodies; fast track models of APL (comparable to the OSAT example cited) referenced by sector bodies in this study.

### **Questions, issues and opportunities for examination:**

**Section 3** of this report provides a number of key questions that should be investigated through tests and trials of APL and Exemption in the QCF. The following are offered as examples. There are many other potential questions and possibilities to be addressed that can be found in this and the 2006 report.

- How far does the scope for using RoC within the QCF reduce the need for Exemption?
- Will the inclusion of vendor qualifications within the QCF reduce the need for Exemption over time?
- Can APL and Exemption agreements between industry and professional bodies connect with the QCF?
- Can APL and Exemption save employers and learners, providers and the state, time and money?
- In 're-specifying' existing qualifications for the QCF should sector and awarding bodies be actively encouraged to identify opportunities for use of APL and Exemption?
- How would a sector/awarding body handle a case for Exemption or APL where there is not a 100% match between certificated prior learning and a unit or units in the QCF?
- How can sector and awarding bodies make decisions on Exemption within RoC with confidence? What processes should they adopt and how can they ensure these processes have credibility?
- What is the regulator's role in the process? How does a prior certificated achievement become *officially* exempt?
- Will Exemption be easier to determine in specific areas of learning?



## **Characterising demand for APL and Exemption from employers: a summary of sector body views**

This study focused primarily on real demand for APL and Exemption, identified by sector bodies, and what needs to be put in place to make APL and Exemption work. Sector body contributions were central to the usefulness and validity of the study and they were interested and willing to contribute information and views on the place of recognising prior learning and achievement in their strategies for assessment and qualifications. Researchers gathered both general responses via a snapshot survey and assembled individual case studies through interviews and a sector body seminar discussion. 32 of 33 sector bodies responded.

### **Key conclusions from the sector body snapshot survey**

1. 76% of respondents said their sector body included (or intend to include) the recognition of prior learning and achievement in their strategies for assessment and qualifications.
2. 83% had evidence of demand for recognising prior learning and achievement in their sectors (from employers and or employees)
3. 69% said there were (non UK qualification framework) certificated achievements in their sectors that they would like to see recognised in the QCF.
4. 93% said they were interested in exploiting the QCF to recognise prior learning and achievement in their sectors.
5. 89% thought recognition of prior learning and achievement should be addressed in further tests and trials of the QCF.

### **Potential benefits of APL and Exemption**

- Employers, funding bodies and individuals will be interested in APL and Exemption if it saves time and money.
- Freelance staff could get recognition for their prior learning.
- Some employers will only be interested in APL if the process 'accredits what they do'.
- APL could help with recognition of transferable skills within a sector.
- Scope to use Exemption to analyse and formalise 'grandfather rights'.

### **Issues and questions**

- NOS can be used as the key reference and starting point for validating outcomes from in-company training whatever the route to achievement of units in the QCF.
- APL will be viable if the quality of achievement is comparable to the outcomes from other assessment methodologies
- Do assessors, verifiers and moderators need specialised skills and knowledge for APL?

- 'Knowledge', 'skill' and 'competence': understanding the differences and the consequences for APL and Exemption.
- 'Blanket' systems for APL do not inspire confidence in the quality of outcome.
- APL Methodology: what would work to underwrite the quality of assessment outcomes from APL?

There is no question then, that sector bodies are able to identify demand for APL and Exemption, that recognition of prior learning and achievement either features or will feature in most sector body strategies and that the QCF is seen as a potential testing ground for new APL and Exemption practice.

## **Principles and conditions for successful use of APL and Exemption in the QCF**

Interviewees suggested that the scope for APL and Exemption in the QCF could be tested *if* some working principles were devised to set the terms and parameters for stakeholders, and *if* we were able to identify and describe other additional conditions that needed to be met for tests and trials of APL and Exemption to be successful.

**Section 5** of the full report contains draft principles for the operation of APL and Exemption in the QCF which are designed to summarise and address the range of questions that have arisen and provide a basis for testing and trialling requirements for APL and Exemption in the QCF. These principles should themselves be put to the test in QCF tests and trials. Additional conditions for the successful operation of APL and Exemption are described and the report suggests these are necessary conditions for success. Some of these conditions are more critical than others and are signalled as such.

## **Definition of terms and scope for APL, Exemption and Transfer in a credit system**

Terms and definitions were developed originally (and solely) for the Credit Works (2006) APL report, to provide common understanding of terms used when discussing APL with key stakeholders; and for clarity in the use of language of 'APL' in this report. By default, defining and explaining terms helped to tackle some of the questions the study set out to address, including those related to mutual understanding of terms and definitions.