

An Introduction to “Accreditation” for Bewildered Financial Capability Professionals

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Why are you interested?

You are probably interested because you have experienced the random (even chaotic) way that Financial Capability programmes are funded and you wish to know whether having your course “accredited” will open new funding doors or provide greater certainty of funding.

So what is accreditation?

According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA www.qca.org.uk), accreditation is the process through which the regulatory authorities confirm that a qualification and the associated specification conform to the regulatory criteria. In England this process is led by the QCA (and in conjunction with local bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland). In this context, a qualification is a form of recognition that a learner has completed a course of study and demonstrated knowledge, skills and understanding.

Why is this important?

Learners and employers need to be confident in the standards and levels of their courses of study. Accreditation is part of the process of maintaining and demonstrating these standards. People need to know, for example, that an ‘A’ Level issued by one organisation is equivalent to that offered by other organisations

So what is the process?

Any organisation that wishes to offer qualifications first has to be granted the status of “recognised awarding body” by the QCA. The list of recognised awarding bodies includes such organisations as City & Guilds, the Chartered Institutes, Edexcel Limited and the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers. The process of being recognised assesses the organisation’s ability to act in a fit and proper manner in all aspects of creating and running qualifications. Once it is recognised, the awarding body can then submit individual qualifications to the QCA to be accredited.

Once accredited, the qualifications are placed in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This is a form of classification that recognises the level of skill, knowledge and understanding required to achieve the qualification. You may have heard people talking about “Level 2 qualifications” or “Entry Level 3 qualifications” – these levels refer to the NQF (for a guide to the NQF see Appendix 1). For the full list of accredited qualifications see www.openguals.org.uk. Also note that it is *qualifications* that are accredited, not *courses*. Technically QCA has no responsibility for the quality of any of the courses that might lead to a qualification.

How do Universities fit into this?

Because the British way of doing things involves splitting things up into as many pieces as possible, Universities are not regulated in this way at all! Indeed, the Universities are very concerned about academic freedom. However, they do subscribe to an organisation called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA www.qaa.org.uk) whose mission is “to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.” The process for doing this is different from that used by the QCA – enough said. However, the level of achievement for Degrees can be mapped against the NQF even though it does not form part of the QCA regulation process!

What does this all mean to you?

Here we need to bring in the Learning and Skills Council (LSC www.lsc.gov.uk). The LSC, in its own words, “is responsible for planning and funding high quality education and training for everyone in England other than those in universities”. One of the tools it has at its disposal is

the Learning Aims Database (<http://providers.lsc.gov.uk/LAD/>), which is a list of qualifications whose delivery can be funded by LSC. Qualifications that have been accredited by QCA would automatically be included on that database. However, a learning provider would need to have a contract with the LSC in order to deliver that qualification. Learning providers include FE Colleges and private training providers.

So does this bring you any nearer to funding?

Possibly! The challenge for Financial Capability work is that as yet neither the DfES, the QCA nor the LSC has a definition of Financial Education that meets the needs of practitioners. Until the subject is recognised in its own right it will always exist either as a portion of Functional Maths, Key Skills or Basic Skills. Excellent work is being done through Basic Skills curricula using personal finance content matter. The Basic Skills Agency has been responsible for creating a wealth of teaching resources that can be found at www.money-bsa.org.uk. When these are used in the context of Basic Skills courses (which form part of the LSC's priorities) then they can be funded by LSC.

There are other LSC programmes where there may be the possibility of accessing funds for personal finance courses. One of the LSC's current priorities is the new Train to Gain initiative that aims to provide funding for training for employees who do not have the equivalent of 5 good grade GCSEs. The training delivered must be the equivalent of a "full Level 2", which poses a challenge for Financial Capability practitioners as there is little or no provision of "full Level 2" personal finance courses suitable for adults.

If you have struggled to grasp all this, do not worry! It is a complex landscape – and, to complicate things further, it is changing. The LSC is in the process of creating a new qualifications approach. The new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF!) will permit learners to build up qualifications on the basis of credits for smaller units of learning. This is at a very early stage but there is a possibility that this may allow greater flexibility for Financial Capability learning to be introduced without the need for a "full Level 2" course, for example.

What about the Private Sector funders?

Some Financial Capability practitioners report that Private Sector funders of their programmes are increasingly asking, "Are your courses accredited?" This probably reflects a growing trend by the Private Sector of seeking to partner with delivery organisations that can demonstrate a "quality" approach rather than any expert knowledge of accreditation (you almost certainly know more than they do once you have read this briefing!) However, what is indisputable is that Private Sector funding or delivery is not dependent on accreditation – unless they care to make it so! In fact, Private Sector funders are probably more interested in funding exploratory programmes that seek out "hard to reach" learners, who almost by definition are less ready for full-size accredited courses.

They are also more likely to be concerned about your ability to reach significant numbers of target learners than they are about the formalities of the accredited status of your courses. This may well change in the future, though. As the subject of Personal Finance becomes more established we can expect it to face the same accreditation requirements as other subjects. Indeed, perhaps we should welcome this as it may also indicate that Financial Education for adults will be invited inside the Government funding tent.

Appendix 1
National Qualifications Framework Levels

Framework level	Level indicators	Examples of qualifications
Entry	Entry level qualifications recognise basic knowledge and skills and the ability to apply learning in everyday situations under direct guidance or supervision. Learning at this level involves building basic knowledge and skills and is not geared towards specific occupations.	Qualifications are offered at Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3, in a range of subjects
Level 1	Level 1 qualifications recognise basic knowledge and skills and the ability to apply learning with guidance or supervision. Learning at this level is about activities which mostly relate to everyday situations and may be linked to job competence.	NVQ 1; Certificate in Plastering; GCSEs Grades D–G; Certificate in Motor Vehicle Studies.
Level 2	Level 2 qualifications recognise the ability to gain a good knowledge and understanding of a subject area of work or study, and to perform varied tasks with some guidance or supervision. Learning at this level involves building knowledge and/or skills in relation to an area of work or a subject area and is appropriate for many job roles.	NVQ 2; GCSEs Grades A*–C; Certificate in Coaching Football; Diploma for Beauty Specialists.
Level 3	Level 3 qualifications recognise the ability to gain, and where relevant apply a range of knowledge, skills and understanding. Learning at this level involves obtaining detailed knowledge and skills. It is appropriate for people wishing to go to university, people working independently, or in some areas supervising and training others in their field of work.	Certificate for Teaching Assistants; NVQ 3; A-levels; Advanced Extension Awards; Certificate in Small Animal Care.
Level 4	Level 4 qualifications recognise specialist learning and involve detailed analysis of a high level of information and knowledge in an area of work or study. Learning at this level is appropriate for people working in technical and professional jobs, and/or managing and developing others. Level 4 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Certificates of Higher Education.	Diploma in Sport & Recreation; Certificate in Site Management; Certificate in Early Years Practice.

Level 5	<p>Level 5 qualifications recognise the ability to increase the depth of knowledge and understanding of an area of work or study to enable the formulation of solutions and responses to complex problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the demonstration of high levels of knowledge, a high level of work expertise in job roles and competence in managing and training others. Qualifications at this level are appropriate for people working as higher grade technicians, professionals or managers. Level 5 qualifications are at a level equivalent to intermediate Higher Education qualifications such as Diplomas of Higher Education, Foundation and other degrees that do not typically provide access to postgraduate programmes.</p>	Diploma in Construction; Certificate in Performing Arts.
Level 6	<p>Level 6 qualifications recognise a specialist high level knowledge of an area of work or study to enable the use of an individual's own ideas and research in response to complex problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the achievement of a high level of professional knowledge and is appropriate for people working as knowledge-based professionals or in professional management positions. Level 6 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Bachelors degrees with honours, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas.</p>	Certificate or Diploma in Management
Level 7	<p>Level 7 qualifications recognise highly developed and complex levels of knowledge which enable the development of in-depth and original responses to complicated and unpredictable problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the demonstration of high level specialist professional knowledge and is appropriate for senior professionals and managers. Level 7 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas.</p>	Diploma in Translation; Fellowship in Music Literacy
Level 8	<p>Level 8 qualifications recognise leading experts or practitioners in a particular field. Learning at this level involves the development of new and creative approaches that extend or redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.</p>	Specialist Awards

(The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, QCA 2004)