
Developing functional skills qualifications

Introduction

This document has been produced to support and explain the work QCA is carrying out to consult on the draft functional skills standards, both via the web-based consultation and the consultation events planned for February and March 2006.

What are functional skills?

The term 'functional skills' is used to describe the English, maths and ICT skills needed for young people and adults for participation in life, learning and work. They will range from Entry level to at least level 3. The vision set by both the *14–19* and *Skills* White Papers is about creating for the first time a single, standard and a cumulative ladder of achievement in these critical skills that will be available for both young people and adults.

Why are functional skills being introduced?

The functional skills reforms have been developed to strengthen and bring consistency to learning routes for young people to ensure that they achieve a firm grounding in the basics of English, mathematics and ICT. The reforms in the *14–19 Education and Skills* White Paper sets out plans for much greater coherence across age groups and learning contexts needed for further learning, and for life and work.

The development of functional skills also responds to concern from employers that young people are leaving school without the foundation in the basics they need in the workplace. Functional skills will be incorporated into GCSEs, will be a component of the new Specialised Diplomas and will also be offered as a stand-alone qualification for adults. (A timeline for development of these qualifications is included at the end of this paper.)

What progress have we made?

QCA undertook an initial consultation about the development of functional skills qualifications in November/December 2005, and is now consulting on more detailed issues about the content of functional skills.

In all aspects of the development we are working closely with our regulatory partners in the devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland (ACCAC and CCEA), key stakeholders including awarding

bodies, practitioners and national organisations. We are also working alongside interdependent projects that are strands of the 11–19 education reform work.

This consultation is aimed at those involved in implementation including practitioners, teachers, assessors, awarding bodies and those offering guidance and support for implementation.

We will continue to discuss with employers and employer groups to explore their perspectives, in particular with those three sector skills councils (SSCs) that are lead contributors for English (Asset Skills), ICT (E-skills) and mathematics (SEMTA) and with the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA).

Stages in the development of functional skills

The first stage of development has been to define a set of draft standards.

What are standards?

Writing a set of standards is the initial stage in the process of defining a qualification. They are not developed to be used for teaching and learning and do not ‘stand alone’ for the purposes of teaching, learning or assessment. They are developed as an initial stage for the purposes of ensuring that the content of knowledge, understanding and skills development is captured. They allow the scope, content, level of demand and parameters of the area of knowledge, understanding and skills to be defined.

The development of a set of standards at entry level 1 provides the stepping stone for the development of the next level up and so on. Defining a standard at a level and then defining it at the next level up ensures smooth progression. It also allows for the inclusion of all the content of one level to the next level. Thus, level 2 standards are assumed to encompass everything that is included in the levels below. In practice, a set of standards at a mid-point is often defined, and the next level up and down are then developed. For functional skills there has been a requirement to also align the content, level of demand and scope of the content to the national curriculum levels and also to other existing qualification content in the Adult Skills for Life qualifications and the key skills qualifications (communication, application of number, and ICT), as well as the Skills for Life ICT standards and the National Occupational Standards for ICT.

The table below shows – in broad terms – the relationship between these four areas:

Relationships between the functional skills are related				
Level of demand and content	Functional skills	National curriculum	Adult Skills for Life	Key skills
NQF entry level 1	Entry level 1	Level 1	Entry level 1	
NQF entry level 2	Entry level 2	Level 2	Entry level 2	
NQF entry level 3	Entry level 3	Level 3	Entry level 3	
NQF level 1	Level 1	Level 4/5	Level 1	Level 1
NQF level 2	Level 2	Level 6	Level 2	Level 2

Standards are useful statements of the requirements of competence in knowledge and skills in a particular area of work or study. They can be used for benchmarking working practices or can be used as the starting point for the content of qualifications. They allow for the development of assessment criteria, assessment regimes and thus the shape, size and structure of qualifications.

The purpose of these consultation events and the web-based consultation is to look in some detail with practitioners and those directly involved in implementation to ensure that we have the following aspects of functional skills correct and that:

- 1) we have defined functional skills in a way that matches both the generic definition and the subject specific definitions
- 2) we have identified the correct levels of demand, suitable content and relevant coverage
- 3) we have aligned the standards for functional skills correctly with the National Curriculum and Skills for Life qualifications and key skills qualifications
- 4) the content will support the needs of employers for each of the subject areas
- 5) the standards will form a sound beginning for the process of identifying the assessment regime for functional skills
- 6) candidates who are required to take the functional skills, including GCSE candidates, Specialised Diploma candidates, apprentices and adult learners will find them relevant and rewarding
- 7) teachers, assessors, and candidates will be able to use them in ways that support the development of the skills in real-life situations.

Next steps

We are consulting via the web until the end of March 2006, and a report of the feedback from the web and revised standards will be produced as a result of this exercise and also based on the feedback and comments received at the three consultation days being held in February and March 2006. As a result of this work, revised standards will be produced incorporating the feedback from the consultation.

Functional skills will be available for all candidates, young people and adults. Centres will need to prepare for the introduction of these new qualifications that will require candidates to be able to show that they have the knowledge covered in the functional skills, but also be able to apply those skills in everyday life. For instance candidates will need to be taught and prepared in such a way that they will be able to demonstrate their competence to both know and understand the knowledge covered in functional English but also be able to demonstrate their ability to apply that knowledge, for instance by listening and speaking in a way that shows meaningful communication skills.

Experience to date of implementing these sorts of “competence based “ programmes of learning suggests that a good lead in time is needed for preparation to ensure candidates understand the requirements of

the qualifications. Preparation based on projects and tasks that allow the candidate to demonstrate the skill will be important in the preparation for these qualifications.

Findings from the consultation events and the web-based questionnaire

We will publish the results of our findings in a report, and publish the revised draft standards on our website in May 2006 at www.qca.org.uk/functionalskills/ and on the functional skills pages at www.totallyskilled.org.uk.

Timeline for the development of functional skills qualifications

- QCA consults on a draft set of functional skills standards in spring 2006.
- QCA will trial the draft standards and assessment approaches with a small selection of providers in 2006/7
- As part of the phased implementation, a pilot for GCSE candidates will run from September 2007 for two years in English and ICT. A pilot for GCSE candidates in mathematics will also begin in 2007 and will be completed in 2010.
- The pilot will also include those schools and colleges involved in the first phase of Specialised Diplomas introduction. Functional skills will then be incorporated into Specialised Diplomas from September 2008.
- Schools and colleges will introduce the revised GCSEs in English and ICT including functional skills in September 2009.
- Schools and colleges will introduce the revised GCSEs in mathematics including functional skills in September 2010.
- National awarding of General Diploma will begin for those beginning GCSE programmes in 2009.
- In order to maintain momentum towards the introduction of the new functional skills qualifications, as well as provide for the increasing number of achievers and support progress for the Skills for Life strategy. The Adult Literacy, Adult Numeracy and key skills qualifications will remain in use until at least 2010.

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