

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Five important factors to consider before you start



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Making sense OF QUALIFICATIONS

I recently attended a seminar with the same name as this article. The speaker began the session by asking "Who here thinks they understand qualifications?" Approximately a third of the audience raised their hands. Then, an hour later, after a very informative and intense presentation on the subject, he asked again "Who thinks they understand qualifications now?"

Just one delegate put up her hand.

You can begin to appreciate the headache facing employers and potential students across the country when it comes to making sense of qualifications. The unenviable task of uniting a sprawling and fragmented network of UK qualifications under a common banner lies at the door of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). This they have done under the National Qualifications

Framework (NQF), a structure that aims to classify all recognised qualifications (see opposite page).

The important question – what's right for you?

This question is equally pertinent, by extension, to employers as well. If you're an HR or line manager responsible for the recruitment and development of staff within your department and/or organisation, then you'll want to know what academic and professional credentials you should look for when recruiting. You may also be wondering which programmes you should choose to develop your existing employees in a vocational capacity.

Considering the breadth of possible qualifications available – the QCA recognises 116 awarding bodies in England and Wales, offering a total of 5,729 separate qualifications - I couldn't possibly attempt to provide a diagnostic solution for your own situation within the this article. I will instead discuss some factors which should always be taken into account when selecting any qualification.

Experience of the candidate/s

It is your responsibility to choose a programme which will challenge you sufficiently and give you the recognition you desire, but at the same time be accessible to you in relation to the level of experience and knowledge you possess in the particular field.

Over say the past ten years, most awarding institutions have relaxed the formal entry routes into their programmes, and have demonstrated a readiness to recognise 'on-the-job' experience as equally acceptable as prior formal qualifications. If you are unsure of how to measure your own level of knowledge and experience, or that of your staff, then it is of vital importance to seek expert advice. In most cases, the best source to consult is the learning provider or institution themselves.

The commitment required

More often than not, this is an emotional and attitudinal issue beyond a resource one. Most institutions are very good at conveying, on initial enquiry, exactly how much time you will need to set aside to gain a decent grade in the qualification you are pursuing. As an indicator, someone studying for a postgraduate diploma or degree course should expect to put in at least 100 guided learning hours per module. Granted, these 100 hours will not all be in the classroom and the largest portion will normally consist of private study, but institutions do not come up with these figures just for a laugh. If the syllabus recommends 100 hours then you must realise that if you are not prepared, or genuinely unable, to put this time in then perhaps you should consider a less intensive programme.

Qualifications available

Our professional qualifications include programmes accredited by the following institutions. See p11 for full details.



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It is important to understand that by undertaking a qualification, and investing the commitment the programme requires, you are gaining professional or academic recognition for your competency (at the designated level) in your chosen specialism. You should therefore realise that embarking on such a bold undertaking requires a commensurate level of commitment, and there are never any shortcuts. A positive mental approach to your study is key.

The awarding institution

It pains me to say it, but there are many 'awarding' institutions out there who just want your money, and really couldn't give two hoots for your personal development or career success.

The good news though, is that these somewhat less than reputable seats of learning are very easy to weed out from your search at the early stages. Simply ensure that you adhere to the following three-point checklist, and you can't go wrong.

1. Quality check – Look out for published recognition (accreditation or endorsement)

from quality assurance institutions (such as the QAA) or accrediting bodies. If a professional association has 'chartered' status, this is also a good indicator of high standards and popular recognition of their programmes.

2. Common sense – OK, there's no such thing as a free lunch, right? So if you receive an email saying 'Gain a degree online in just four weeks – no coursework required!' you're going to be suspicious, right? I thought so.

So if you are still unsure of the reputation of an institution or awarding body after carrying out your initial quality check, it's time to start asking those probing questions. Good ones to try are "when were you founded?", "how many students do you have?" and "what papers have your trainers/lecturers published?" But I think the best thing overall is asking to go and visit them. A reputable establishment will always welcome you with open arms (either by appointment or at the next public open day), whereas if the person on the other end of the phone suddenly becomes very busy then it's time to smell a rat.

3. Word of mouth – This is perhaps the most important point on the checklist. The best impartial advice on an institution and its suite of programmes you can get is likely to come from the previous buyers. In other words, graduates or members of that institution, or business contacts who have purchased learning products from them in the past.

Cost

From my experience, money is always an important decision factor for whoever is responsible for paying for the programme. MBA's, for example, can cost up to £50,000 per person to complete successfully, so you can see that just to enrol one candidate can impact significantly on financial resources.

It goes without saying that in researching various suitable qualifications, a thorough investigation should be undertaken into external funding sources (sponsorships / grants and so on) that may be available to you. In keeping with the 'minefield' theme of this article though, sources of funding are disparate and often confusing.

If funding is important to you, a good place to start is the Direct Gov website (www.directgov.uk) which provides initial information on both private sources of funding and organisational training grants for SME's.

The currency, or 'worth' of the qualification

This is the tricky bit, as what programmes are 'in' one year, may well be 'out' the next. This is largely due to the evolving needs of employers and the ever-changing skill sets of most professions.

At Reed Learning, we offer a range of up-to-date and well-recognised qualifications in areas such as management, recruitment, sales and secretarial skills. Our consultants are always on hand to discuss your needs, and even if we can't provide the right programme for you, we would be more than happy to offer impartial advice on the various routes available as you consider embarking on a qualification, or selecting a programme for your staff. See page 11 for details.

National Qualifications Framework NQF (new levels)

Examples of qualifications

Level 8	D (doctoral degrees) doctorates
Level 7	M (masters) masters degrees, postgraduate certificates & diplomas
Level 6	H (honours) bachelors degrees, graduate certificates & diplomas
Level 5	I (Intermediate) diplomas of higher education and further education, foundation degrees, higher national diplomas
Level 4	C (certificate) certificates of higher education
Level 3	NVQ level 3/A-levels
Level 2	NVQ level 2/GCSE (A*- C)
Level 1	NVQ level 1/NVQ1 GCSE (D-G)
Entry	Entry level certificate level

The framework in Scotland (the SCQF) is different again & has 12 levels.

What the NQF illustrates

is the academic 'level' of each qualification and the parity between academic and vocational programmes, but what it is unable to do is give a better picture of 'worth'. It doesn't provide answers to the burning questions that are probably important to you: "what do I get out of it?"; "how much work is involved?"; "will it help me develop in my industry?"