

Would you credit it!

Kathryn Benzine, Head of Education and Training at Dyslexia Action provides a summary guide to current qualifications considering how credit and level can define and clarify the qualifications marketplace.

In the Training department we are often asked about the 'value' of current qualifications as well as 'legacy' qualifications (i.e. those no longer offered). In this short article I will explain some important concepts that may help when considering if the much-loved and well-used qualifications you hold are still as valid today in the field of specialist teaching and assessment as they were when you first qualified.

Continuing Professional Development

Firstly and importantly, qualifications do not date, IF you keep up the specialist knowledge first gained through them with recent and relevant continuing professional development (CPD). Furthermore the skills acquired through qualifications, particularly those in higher education, transcend content knowledge in terms of the transferable skills that are applied to the workplace; these are not only retained through life but are usually built upon and further developed. Transferable skills at degree level include cognitive and intellectual skills (critical thinking, data analysis and synthesis, advanced literacy and numeracy); practical and professional skills, (researching and analysing, problem solving and decision making, planning and organising); interpersonal skills (communication, teamwork, leadership); and self-management skills (learning, improving and achieving, resilience, adaptability and drive, digital skills). These skills will be further enhanced at postgraduate level and may include others such as constructive self and peer evaluation, project management and report writing, presentation, academic writing, strategic and quality management, autonomy and initiative.

So will a one-day or short course further enhance these skills? Undoubtedly, critical self-awareness and an ability to analyse and question (the status quo and self), professional updating in terminology and content and re-evaluation of current and best practice



can all be achieved through exposure to ideas circulated in a peer network. This may mostly be through good CPD for those whose qualifications are complete. The annual Dyslexia Guild Conference is an example of just such an opportunity where ideas abound and discussion enables all participants to reflect and improve their professional awareness. Dyslexia Action is also a leading provider of specialist teaching and assessment CPD courses at levels 4, 5 and 7 and Guild members are able to update their professional practice and obtain discounts on some of these specialist courses. Fellows are able to take advantage of a free course each year. The Guild requires its members to undertake a minimum of 30 hours of CPD a year and this is checked on a sampling basis.

Defining Qualifications

So on to defining qualifications. We are often asked to describe how specialist teaching and assessment qualifications differ. It is not surprising that many people are confused, as there are many examples of awards available in the specialist teaching and assessment

arena where a clear determination of credit and level is not provided. In addition, if nationally defined course descriptors are not adhered to there may be added concern about the validity of such awards. There are three important criteria that facilitate this understanding, level and level descriptors, and credit, all of which underpin our nationally recognised qualification frameworks.

Understanding level

Level is determined by providing reference points that enable those who undertake qualifications to understand where their programme sits in relation to other awards. QAA notes that Level Descriptors are used 'to determine the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement'. (QAA 2008 p7)

Compare the two descriptors on the following page from the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA 2014) and from Qualification and Component Levels (Ofqual 2015b).

Descriptor for a qualification at level 7 (QAA). The holder will have demonstrated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice • a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship • originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline • conceptual understanding that enables the student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline • to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses. 	Descriptor for a qualification at level 7 (Ofqual). The holder: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reformulates and uses practical, conceptual or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to create ways forward in contexts where there are many interacting factors. • critically analyses, interprets and evaluates complex information, concepts and theories to produce modified conceptions. • understands the wider contexts in which the area of study or work is located. Understands current developments in the area of study or work. • understands different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how they affect the area of study or work.
Descriptor for a qualification at level 5 (QAA). The holder will have demonstrated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed • ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context • knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study • an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge. 	Descriptor for a qualification at level 5 (Ofqual). The holder: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has practical, theoretical or technological knowledge and understanding of a subject or field of work to find ways forward in broadly defined, complex contexts. • can analyse, interpret and evaluate relevant information, concepts and ideas. • is aware of the nature and scope of the area of study or work. • understands different perspectives, approaches or schools of thought and the reasoning behind them.

The complexity and depth of a level 7 qualification should enable the individual to critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information and ideas, reformulate, modify and produce change in areas of strategic activity. Level 7 or Master's level study is characterised by sustained and intensive work. It is intellectually demanding and requires critical and deeply-applied thinking skills. It does not necessarily provide answers but enables you to arrive at solutions through intellectual challenge and application.

A level 5 qualification will develop cognitive and performance skills, based on practical, theoretical, technological and applied knowledge and facilitate progression to higher level awards. Level 5 study enables the individual to formulate responses to well-defined problems and to exercise judgement and accept responsibility for personal and group outcomes. (SEEC 2016).

Inevitably it is not that simple, however level descriptors do provide a clear benchmark for course providers, learners and employers.

Qualification Frameworks

Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are mapped against the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). This is maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which is the body that monitors and advises on quality and standards across UK Higher Education. This framework provides the qualification descriptors for higher education qualifications at levels, 4,5,6,7 and 8. Qualification descriptors describe the outcomes (which are assessed by the course provider) and the attributes of learning (the capabilities of the holder of the qualification) at higher education level. At most levels there will be more than one type of qualification that can be achieved but the outcomes and attributes will not be the same. So for example the first year of a master's degree course (level 7) will usually achieve a Postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education (60 credits) and the second year a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (90 - 120 credits) but a Master's degree (180 credits) will only be awarded when the learner achieves all the outcomes and attributes associated with a qualification at that level.

National Vocational qualifications are those that sit on the Ofqual Register of Regulated Qualifications and map against the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) in the UK (Ofqual 2015). The RQF has replaced earlier frameworks the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The RQF recognises qualifications **by level** (8 levels supported by 3 entry levels) and **by size** expressed as Total Qualification Time which is the amount of time that it will typically take a learner to complete the qualification. This is different from Guided Learning Hours which is the time typically spent being taught or supervised in study. Total Qualification Time is expressed in credit as described in the next section.

These frameworks are not exhaustive, there are other frameworks including those in Scotland, Wales and, yes,

Europe! To find out more about these, see Qualifications can Cross Boundaries (QAA 2017).

Understanding Credit

The establishment of credit as a means of measuring the volume of qualifications and for recognising the equivalence of learning is a relatively recent thing. SEEC (a consortium of UK universities and HE providers) was established in 1985 and published the first **Credit and level descriptors** for higher education in 1996 and more recently in 2016. The latest QAA credit guidance was published in 2014 and that of Ofqual for vocational qualifications in 2015.

What is credit?

Providing a credit rating to a qualification is a way of describing and quantifying learning that has taken

place. It is also a way of providing a value to a qualification based on the level at which study has taken place.

One credit is allocated to 10 notional hours of learning or, as described by Ofqual (2015a) as Total Qualification Time (TQT). The notional learning hours or TQT are the typical amount of time it will take to achieve a qualification. So a 10 credit course will have taken around 100 hours to achieve or about 4 full time days of learning whereas a 60 credit course will take about 600 hours or 25 days of full time learning. This learning will of course be spread out over a few hours a week for those undertaking it on a part-time or work-based basis and in practice may take longer depending on the individual's personal time/study allowance. The following table describes some typical credit and level ratings for UK qualifications.

Type of qualification	Framework Mapping	Level	Credits	Notes
Award	RQF	Entry to level 7	1 -12	All levels Minimum of 37
Certificate			13 - 36	All levels
Diploma			37+	All levels
Foundation Degree	HEQF	5	240	A minimum of 90 credits must be at level 5
Bachelor's Degree		6	360 Minimum	A minimum of 90 credits must be at Level 6
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE teaching)		6	120	20 or less credits at level 7
Postgraduate/ Professional Certificate		7	60	First 60 credits of a Master's qualification
Postgraduate/ Professional Diploma		7	90 - 120	Second 60 credits of a Master's qualification
Master's Degree		7	180	Final 60 credits of a Master's (usually a dissertation)
Doctorate		8	n/a	Doctoral degrees are not usually credit rated because of their basis in original research

Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes (CATS)

In theory credit can be gained across different qualifications and accumulated towards a specific goal. So for example 60 HE credits may be taken forward to a Master's degree **where the university recognises and allows such credit to be brought forward**. In practice this is easier in some areas of academic study where subject knowledge is similar or contributes towards a specific pathway. It is more difficult in subject areas where specific competencies are

being examined at the same time such as in specialist teaching and specialist assessment.

A specialist teaching Diploma at Level 7, may however, be recognised by a university as contributing to a more generic award in Education Studies in Special Needs. However cross-disciplinary CATS is rarely possible. For example 60 HE credits in Specialist Teaching at Level 7 cannot be put together with 60 HE credits in French Literature to make a Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching of

French Literature! Separately though these qualifications will contribute to a professional portfolio, for example as part of a profile for a Study Skills Support Tutor.

Accreditation or Recognition of Prior Learning

There is however renewed enthusiasm in the possibilities for greater flexibility in where and what people study; the provision of transferring credit having recently been reviewed as a part of the government reforms for Higher Education in the shape of the Higher

Education and Research Act (2017). Most training providers and membership bodies will consider prior learning experience, known variously as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) recognising that the diversity of qualifications and experience brings further knowledge and professional development. If it isn't offered, the advice is to ask but be prepared to provide a transcript of what you have studied and some detail on the content such as a course syllabus or brochure which the Awarding Organisation may still retain.

Accreditation

So how does the accreditation of qualifications and awards fit into the picture? Accrediting Bodies should concern themselves with standards and provide acceptable benchmarks against which providers of professional qualifications can measure their quality of provision. Accrediting bodies include generic ones and specialist ones.

Generic bodies include the British Accreditation Council and the CPD Standards Office and are concerned with, amongst other things, standards of teaching and learning; course management and administration; learner support and advice; assessment of performance and progress; material content and delivery; technological support and accessibility.

Specialist teaching and assessment accreditation bodies include the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) and the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC); each of which have formulated a set of criteria to guide course providers. It is assumed that the criteria will ensure that accredited courses will therefore be fit for purpose and thereby ensure standards are met in terms of the practitioner's professional competence and practice. They should however also refer to the relevant national qualification frameworks, accepted level and credit rating criteria in providing these competency standards. For most professional bodies there will be benchmark criteria that sit around undergraduate or postgraduate levels of education.

Specialist Teaching Qualifications and Awards

How does this all impact upon the plethora of qualifications that sit around specialist teaching and qualifications you may ask? A knotty and not easily answered question when it comes to some of the awards and qualifications available in the UK today. A careful review of the **Level and Credit Rating** of a course will answer some of these questions. You can be assured that Dyslexia Action qualifications are all carefully credit-rated and levelled against the relevant descriptors as follows.

Mapped against	Qualification Title	Guild Member Grade	Level	Credits	Notes
RQF	Dyslexia Action Units: (e.g. DACPD51 Dyslexia and Co-occurring Difficulties)	Pathway to Membership	4/5	3	A unit is 30 hours of Total Qualification Time (about 6 weeks of part-time learning. Some units are at level 4 and some at level 5
	Dyslexia Action Awards: (e.g. DAAWD51 Perspectives on Dyslexia)		4/5	9	Each Award is made up of 3 units about 18 weeks of part-time learning. Some awards are at level 4 and some at level 5.
	Certificate in Supporting Literacy in Learners with Dyslexia		4	18	Comprises 2 Awards (About 36 weeks of part-time learning.)
	Certificate in Supporting Adults with Dyslexia and Co-occurring Difficulties	ADG FE/HE	5	18	Comprises 2 Awards
	Diploma in Strategic Teaching Support for Dyslexia and Literacy	ADG	5	37	Comprises 3 units (Two theory and one practical). About 10 months of part-time learning.
HEQF	Professional Certificate in Structured Teaching Intervention	ADG	7	60	Comprises Modules A, B and C
	Professional Certificate in Assessment Practice for Dyslexia and Literacy	MDG	7	60	Comprises Modules B, D and E
	Professional Diploma in Dyslexia and Literacy	MDG FDG	7	120	Comprises Modules A, B, C, D, E and F. Each module is 20 HE credits. Progression available to Master's award.

Legacy Qualifications

In the Training Department we receive many calls from individuals who have undertaken qualifications before credit and level rating of qualifications was available. This does not invalidate these awards; it means we have to be cautious about how we describe them in terms of current programmes. Qualifications such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Studies in Education (Kingston

University), the Hornsby Diploma in the teaching of students with SpLD/Dyslexia (Qualified Teachers) as well as some early Dyslexia Institute (Dyslexia Action) qualifications fall within this category and we can recognise them as broadly level 7 equivalent today at either Certificate or Diploma level depending on course content.

So how do I know if my qualifications are still valid? At this point you may like to read again the opening paragraph on

Continuing Professional Development. For those working in Specialist Teaching and Assessment or Student Support you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I been working continuously in my specialist field since graduating from my professional training course (excluding any career break periods)?
- Have I regularly undertaken at least 30 hours of CPD a year and is this evidenced?
- How has professional specialist teaching and assessment practice changed since I qualified and have I updated my knowledge?
- What work-based training and development have I undertaken that contributes to the updating of my professional practice?
- Am I familiar with the latest specialist teaching programmes and resources?
- Have I undertaken at least one relevant level 7 CPD course within the last five years?
- Am I qualified to use appropriate and recognised tests for the assessment of dyslexia/SpLD?
- Have I obtained the latest information from the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC)?
- Have I updated my Guild CPD Log (available on the Guild Member's website) to show this continuation and progression?

If the answer to all of these questions is yes then you are indeed meeting the requirements for Guild membership in full. If there are some grey areas you can update at any time by visiting our CPD course section for qualified professionals at: www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/courses-qualified-spld-professionals

Professional Body Membership

Membership of a professional body should also act as a reference point for qualifications but is also based on combination of qualifications and experience. Dyslexia Action Membership Grades are as follows:

Affiliate Grade does not confer post nominals but is a grade suitable for student and aspirant members as well as other professionals with an interest in dyslexia/SpLD.

ADG FE/HE Study Skills Support Tutors (normally hold Master's level qualifications and specialist study skills support qualifications at level 5 or higher)

ADG Specialist Teachers (normally hold Level 5 or Level 7 Specialist teaching qualifications)

MDG Specialist Teacher Assessors (normally hold a level 5 or level 7 specialist teaching qualification and level 7 Specialist assessment qualifications (minimum of 60 credits)

FDG Fellows of the Dyslexia Guild (are normally fully qualified specialist teacher assessors with extensive professional experience in the field of dyslexia/SpLD).

References

Dyslexia Guild: <https://dyslexiaaction.org.uk/da-guild/>

Higher Education and Research Act 2017

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted/data.htm>

Ofqual (2015a) The Regulated Qualifications Framework: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461298/RQF_Bookcase.pdf

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QAA (2009) Academic credit in higher education in England – an introduction

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www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2843#.WunYk4gvzmZ

QAA (2017) Qualifications can Cross Boundaries – A guide to Comparing Qualifications in the UK and Ireland.

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=165#.WunYP4gvzmZ>

SEEC Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education 2016:

<http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf>

SpLD Assessment Standards Committee: www.sasc.org.uk