

Qualifying the Construction Workforce for 2030

It is appreciated that for just one awarding organisation¹ operating in construction there are 256 existing NVQs and 87 existing VQs on the Ofqual register, making a total of 343 qualifications² at level 2 and below in the CITB footprint³ – see attached spreadsheet. Many of these are similar to those offered by several awarding organisations. Accordingly, the number of qualifications as recorded in the Ofqual figure will be much higher [1,500 no. in total on the register at level 2 and below in the CITB footprint; a proportion of which will have no achievements over a two-year period].

These NVQ qualifications are still used by CSCS, and its 38 partner schemes, as the primary evidence for issuing a card for people to work in the construction industry. The industry considers that the cards issued by CSCS/partner schemes are currently the best assurance available to the industry for competency and safety.

The Wolfe Report of 2011 understandably stated that this large number of regulated qualifications was too confusing for employers, parents/guardians and learners. Since then, for England, the DfE have been implementing a programme of reforms which has reduced the numbers of qualifications and progressively updated occupational/apprenticeship standards in all sectors including construction.

For England, in 2018, the DfE started replacing the old NVQs/VQs with new 'modern' better quality standards/qualifications. It established IfATE and its construction employers route panel as the main authority for occupational/apprenticeship standards with Ofqual as the external quality assurance regulatory governmental body. Wales is taking a similar, but different approach and Scotland has now started a series of working groups to also replace the old NOS/SVQs with more up to date and better-quality qualifications and apprenticeships.

The present position in construction is that IfATE's route panel has approved occupational/apprenticeship standards for the main trades at level 2 but has not approved any level 1 feeder traineeships or foundation courses. The standards do not cover all the occupations and pathways covered by the 343 registered Ofqual qualifications, nor do they provide a basis for up-skilling adults and the existing workforce in areas such as greening, digitisation and modern methods such as off-site manufacturing. From the attached spreadsheet we see that:

- 343+ are still needed for upskilling and attracting people into the industry, via CSCS carding, who are not taking an apprenticeship – **note some 80% of recruits into the industry do not come through an apprenticeship route;**
- 312+ qualifications need upgrading for green skills;

¹ NOCN which has the largest coverage and inherited many of these from CITB with the acquisition of Cskills Awards

² There were 345, but level 2 NVQs for chimney occupations have been withdrawn as they do not comply with the Building Safety Act

³ The CITB footprint does not include the wide range of construction qualifications that come under ECITB such as construction engineering, electrical and plumbing

- 343+ qualifications need upgrading for digitisation and modern methods of construction; and
- 149+ of these qualifications are for occupations/pathways not in the IfATE approved list.

[The + represents the fact that in the Ofqual number of qualifications there are other awarding organisations qualifications included which means the number is much larger. It is appreciated that some qualifications will be defunded because they have no registrations]

DfE has announced that they intend to further reduce the numbers of qualifications by reforming all construction qualifications at level 2 and below ready for delivery in September 2025.

It has also announced major changes to occupational traineeship and study programmes.

We have been given to understand that this will be achieved by a process of defunding qualifications with IfATE, then approving new qualifications for funding through the construction route panel process. The most recent timescales we have been given currently are that all awarding organisations will need to complete a spreadsheet around Easter/early summer 2023 of all the qualifications they wish DfE to continue to fund from the public purse. Bearing in mind the scale of work needed to undertake this process we believe the timescale is unrealistic.

It is further understood that ESFA and others, including inputs from Ofqual, will then judge, using a set of criteria, to establish whether government funding will be retained. In his letter of 18 November, the Skills Minister gives the outline criteria as:

- *Align to employer-led occupational standards, the same standards that already underpin apprenticeships and T Levels:*
The challenge here is that not all trades have an IfATE approved occupational/apprenticeship standard and even where they do the apprenticeships standard does not provide a basis for upskilling the existing workforce. The T Level is currently not recognised as a route to competency, CSCS carding or employment. The T Level does not include trades for civil engineering, infrastructure and specialist skills (50% of the existing workforce); and
- *Every qualification approved for public funding is of high quality, necessary, has a distinct purpose, and supports progression to good outcomes:*
Considering this aspect, all existing NVQs and VQs are based on the NOS [which DfE moved away from in 2018] developed by CITB with construction employers. Accordingly, NVQs/VQs would not match the DfE view of “high quality, necessary, has a distinct purpose, and supports progression to good outcomes” criteria. As mentioned, NVQs are still the mainstay of the CSCS and partner schemes.

These criteria do not consider the upskilling required for the existing workforce nor the move to greener, digitised and modern methods of working.

We recommend that the process for the reform of level 2 and below qualifications in construction is not driven by awarding organisations submitting spreadsheets of qualifications to ESFA/DfE funding approval, matched against stated criteria. An alternative approach, we believe, would mitigate the inherent risks of the blunt defunding mechanism and produce a better more future proof set of qualifications.

Our alternative approach is for the CLC to prepare proposals for IfATE to approve which modernises construction standards and qualifications ready for 2030, including the changes needed for greening, digitisation and modern methods of construction. A taskforce would be formed by CLC, with support from CITB, CSCS and other key stakeholders, which would include inputs from awarding organisations.

The CLC programme of activity of this taskforce, supported by CITB with input from CSCS would:

- Review and rationalise all the existing NOS and pathways to produce a coherent set of occupations and pathways for the industry. This needs to recognise the requirement for both 'full' and 'partial/foundation' competencies as we do not necessarily need everyone to be 'fully' competent at everything.
- Establish a clear agreement with CSCS on the definition of competency and how we evidence and ensure such competency is kept up to date. This would embrace the work CITB is due to commence in April 2023 on routes to competency and greening of skills, which needs to embrace how occupational traineeships, study programmes and bootcamps for feeder training provision into apprenticeship or qualifications and hence competency for employment.
- Agree a modularised structure for the training curriculum/standards that allows parts to be separated out that will provide the basis for up-skilling the existing workforce.
- Identify the priorities for upgrading and reforming all the occupations with their inherent modules.
- Review the qualifications and the modules with a view to designing new ones to replace the current 343+ qualifications in a staged and managed way for IfATE approval. This would include CLC identifying an early set of qualifications that could be defunded as they are no longer needed.
- Advise DfE on the appropriate time at which funding can be switched off for the existing qualifications.

We urge earnest consideration of the points raised in this correspondence. It is our unshakeable contention that the adoption of the alternative can form the basis of a coherent, robust, meaningful and progressive solution to the skills demands moving forward. It will reduce the risks in managing a reform of construction qualifications.

The ambition of achieving a competent, skilled and progressive workforce in the UK, and the construction sector in particular is a shared vision. Successfully navigating a pathway benefiting all stakeholders must be the way to achieve this.

Martyn Price, CCATF and Graham Hasting-Evans, President of BACH

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