

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Statistics on Vocational Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Office of Qualifications  
and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual))*

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### **About the UK Statistics Authority**

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

### **Contact us**

Tel: 0845 604 1857

Email: [authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk)

Website: [www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk](http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk)

UK Statistics Authority  
1 Drummond Gate  
London  
SW1V 2QQ

# **Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics**

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## ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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# 1 Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act allows an appropriate authority<sup>3</sup> to request an assessment of official statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>4</sup> in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request. The report covers the sets of statistics referred to in this report as vocational qualification statistics, produced by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and reported in:

- *Vocational and Other Qualifications Quarterly*<sup>5</sup> (*Vocational Quarterly*)
- *Higher Level Qualifications Quarterly*<sup>6</sup> (*Higher Level Quarterly*)

1.1.2 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Assessment Committee on behalf of the Board of the Statistics Authority, based on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

## 1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.1 can be designated as new National Statistics products, subject to Ofqual implementing the Requirements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by September 2014.

1.2.2 Ofqual has informed the Assessment team that it has started to implement the Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

## 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The vocational qualification statistics are the first of Ofqual's official statistics to be assessed against the *Code*. Ofqual has demonstrated a strong commitment to strengthening existing statistical policies, and to developing new ones where needed. The Assessment team has identified some areas where further improvements are required, mainly to outline in more detail how Ofqual delivers those policies in practice. This relates particularly to policies about protecting confidentiality and assuring the quality of the statistics.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Subsection 12(7) of the Act defines 'appropriate authority' as Ministers of the Crown, Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers, Northern Ireland departments or the National Statistician

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/vocational-and-other-qualifications/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/higher-qualifications/>

1.3.2 The Ofqual statistics team engages well with users from within Ofqual, from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and from the Awarding Organisations (AOs) that both supply and use the data that are used to produce the statistics. However, we consider that these statistics potentially have a wider audience, for example, business and employer organisations, and that by widening its dialogue with users, Ofqual could produce more insightful analysis to appeal to those users, thereby extracting more public value from its investment in producing these statistics.

## 1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where Ofqual should improve the production and presentation of the vocational qualification statistics. Those which are essential for Ofqual to address in order to strengthen its compliance with the *Code* and to enable designation as National Statistics are listed – as Requirements – in section 1.5, alongside a short summary of the key findings that led to each Requirement being made. Other recommended changes, which the Assessment team considers would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation as National Statistics, are listed – as Suggestions – in section 1.6.

## 1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

1.5.1 This section includes those improvements that Ofqual is required to make in respect of its vocational qualification statistics in order to comply fully with the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, and to enable designation as National Statistics.

Finding	Requirement	
Ofqual is building its dialogue with users, but does not sufficiently engage users outside the main stakeholder group and has not communicated what it has learned about user needs. Ofqual should:	<b>1</b>	a) Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the vocational qualification statistics and to document more fully the types of decision they inform  b) update its user engagement strategy to outline clearly how it will strengthen its two-way dialogue with users  c) publish the information that it has gathered about user experiences of the statistics and explain how it is responding to what it has learned  (para 3.3).
Ofqual does not have a transparent, systematic statistical planning process. Ofqual should:	<b>2</b>	Publish details about its statistical planning process, including how it takes into account the needs of users external to the organisation when setting priorities; and

		publish its statistical plan (para 3.4).
Statistical reports and policy documents run the risk of blurring the lines between operational and statistical policy. Ofqual should:	<b>3</b>	Ensure that a clear distinction is drawn between statistical and corporate identity in statistical publications and in corporate publications that comment on statistical issues (para 3.6).
Ofqual highlights revisions made to the statistics but does not explain their nature and extent. Ofqual should:	<b>4</b>	Publish information to users about the nature and extent of any revisions at the same time that the revised statistics are released (para 3.8).
Ofqual does not provide sufficient information about the methods used to produce the statistics or their strengths and limitations. Ofqual should:	<b>5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Provide more information to users about the sources and methods used to produce <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i>, and about their strengths and limitations in relation to use</li> <li>b) provide more information the possible sources of variability, errors and bias that might impact on the use of the vocational qualification statistics, in particular in regard to AOs interpretation and coding of qualification type</li> </ul> (para 3.16).
Ofqual publishes insufficient information about how it assures itself of the quality of the statistics. Ofqual should:	<b>6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Update its published quality assurance framework document to explain how it delivers quality in line with the principles that it sets out</li> <li>b) publish information about how it assures the quality of <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i></li> </ul> (para 3.17).
Ofqual publishes only very high level information about the principles of protecting confidentiality. Ofqual should:	<b>7</b>	Review its <i>Statement on Confidentiality</i> and publish sufficient information to provide assurance about its confidentiality arrangements in respect of all aspects required by the <i>Code</i> (para 3.20).

<p>Ofqual could present clearer and more insightful commentary. Ofqual should:</p>	<p><b>8</b></p>	<p>Improve the commentary in <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i>, and in particular, provide an overall framework to aid user interpretation of the statistics(para 3.36).</p> <p>As part of meeting this Requirement, Ofqual should consider the points detailed in annex 1 and annex 2.</p>
<p>Ofqual could do more to support analysis and re-use of the statistics. Ofqual should:</p>	<p><b>9</b></p>	<p>a) Present a longer time series of summary statistics in the Excel tables</p> <p>b) improve the signposting of the vocational qualifications dataset from the web pages for <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i> and from the associated Excel tables</p> <p>c) explain clearly in the statistical reports how the dataset relates to the official statistics, when it is updated and what is updated</p> <p>d) advise users about plans for making data available in open formats consistent with the official statistics</p> <p>(para 3.38).</p>
<p>Ofqual is reviewing its audit and quality assurance arrangements for the administrative data that it uses in light of the Authority's Statement <i>Administrative Data and Official Statistics</i>. Ofqual should:</p>	<p><b>10</b></p>	<p>Publish its Statement of Administrative Sources, reflecting its strengthened arrangements for audit and quality assurance (para 3.46).</p>

## 1.6 Suggestions for extracting maximum value from the statistics

1.6.1 This section includes some suggestions for improvement to Ofqual's statistics on vocational qualifications, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

We suggest that Ofqual:

<p><b>1</b></p>	<p>Draw on examples of good practice from across the Government Statistical Service; it could also explore taking advantage of</p>
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	StatsUserNet to facilitate user discussions (para 3.3).
2	Consider referring to 'Ofqual' rather than 'we' when presenting information about Ofqual's operational policy (para 3.6).
3	a) Provide a link from the statistical reports to the revisions policy b) update the revisions policy to explain how users are alerted to corrections (para 3.8).
4	Produce a short guidance document setting out procedures to be followed in the event that any political pressures arise (para 3.11).
5	Refer to the Authority's Statement <i>Administrative Data and Official Statistics</i> and to the National Statistician's recently published guidance when establishing appropriate quality assurance and audit arrangements (para 3.17).
6	Consider reviewing any outstanding issues from its Government Statistical Service Quality, Methods and Harmonisation Tool evaluation as part of its systematic statistical planning process, and publishing any resulting actions as part of a prioritised development plan (para 3.18).
7	Consider presenting some comparisons with equivalent statistics for Scotland in <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i> (para 3.19).
8	Publish the outcomes of its review of Ofqual's need for candidate-level data and make it clear to AOs, when it collects this data, that both Ofqual and the AOs must comply with relevant legislation and guidance, including relevant requirements of the Data Protection Act (para 3.22).
9	Publish information about the rationale behind the rounding conventions applied in <i>Vocational Quarterly</i> and <i>Higher Level Quarterly</i> and the related datasets (para 3.24).
10	Publish the outcomes of its deliberations when seeking to balance emerging data needs with the cost and time burden on data suppliers (para 3.28).
11	Review the published pre-release access lists to clarify the confusion around pre-release access practice (para 3.44).

## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) was established on 1 April 2010 under the provisions of the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009*<sup>7</sup>, subsequently amended by the *Education Act 2011*<sup>8</sup>. Ofqual is a non-ministerial government department, reporting directly to Parliament usually through the Education Select Committee<sup>9</sup>. Its primary purpose is to maintain standards and confidence in qualifications.
- 2.2 Ofqual regulates General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level (GCE A level) qualifications<sup>10</sup> in England and a wide range of vocational qualifications in England and Northern Ireland. Ofqual also regulates National Assessments<sup>11</sup> in England. Ofqual does not regulate higher education qualifications such as bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctorates<sup>12</sup>.
- 2.3 Ofqual maintains a Register of Regulated Qualifications<sup>13</sup> (Register) which contains details of Recognised Awarding Organisations (AOs) and Regulated Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Ofqual does not regulate qualifications in Wales but includes them in the Register and has an informal agreement with the Welsh Government to publish related official statistics for Wales. Equivalent statistics for Scotland are published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority<sup>14</sup>.
- 2.4 AOs are subject to ongoing General Conditions of Recognition<sup>15</sup> and must submit new qualifications that meet these conditions to Ofqual for accreditation. Once approved, the qualification is added to the Regulatory IT System<sup>16</sup> (RITS), an on-line system that allows AOs to manage their regulated qualifications listings.
- 2.5 Ofqual produces regular official statistics about regulated qualifications. The vocational qualification statistics, the subjects of this report, are reported in *Vocational and Other Qualifications Quarterly (Vocational Quarterly)* and *Higher Level Qualifications Quarterly (Higher Level Quarterly)*. These are the first sets of official statistics to be put forward by Ofqual for assessment against the *Code*. They include information about numbers of available qualifications and numbers of certificates issued with breakdowns presented by type, level and subject matter of qualification, AO, and country.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/22/contents>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/contents>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/>

<sup>10</sup> For more information about GCSEs and GCE A levels see: <http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-types/gcses/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/national-assessments/>

<sup>12</sup> Higher education qualifications are regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education which is responsible for *The Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England-Wales-and-Northern-Ireland.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> <http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/48172.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/how-we-regulate/regulatory-documents/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/help-and-advice/rits/>

- 2.6 Ofqual uses administrative data sources to produce the vocational qualification statistics. The data are in two parts, recognised qualifications and achievement data.
- 2.7 Having recorded each qualification, AOs are subject to prescribed data requirements<sup>17</sup>, including submitting achievement data for each of their regulated qualifications on a quarterly basis. AOs can report via a data collection tool within RITS or they can submit datasheets via email. Ofqual does not require AOs to submit candidate level data.
- 2.8 Accredited qualifications are classified as one of 18 qualification types. *Vocational Quarterly* presents statistics about available regulated qualifications and certificates awarded for 12 of these types and *Higher Level Quarterly* for 7.

**Table 2.1: Qualifications types included in *Vocational Quarterly* (VQ) and *Higher Level Quarterly* (HQ)**

Qualification type	V Q	H Q	Qualification type	V Q	H Q	Qualification type	V Q	H Q
Basic Skills	✓		Key Skills	✓	✓	GCSEs		
English for speakers of other languages	✓	✓	National Vocational Qualifications	✓	✓	AS Levels		
Entry Level	✓		Occupational Qualifications	✓	✓	A Levels  Diploma components		
Free-Standing Mathematics	✓		Other General Qualifications	✓				
Functional Skills	✓		Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)	✓	✓			
Higher Level	✓	✓	Vocationally Related Qualifications	✓	✓			

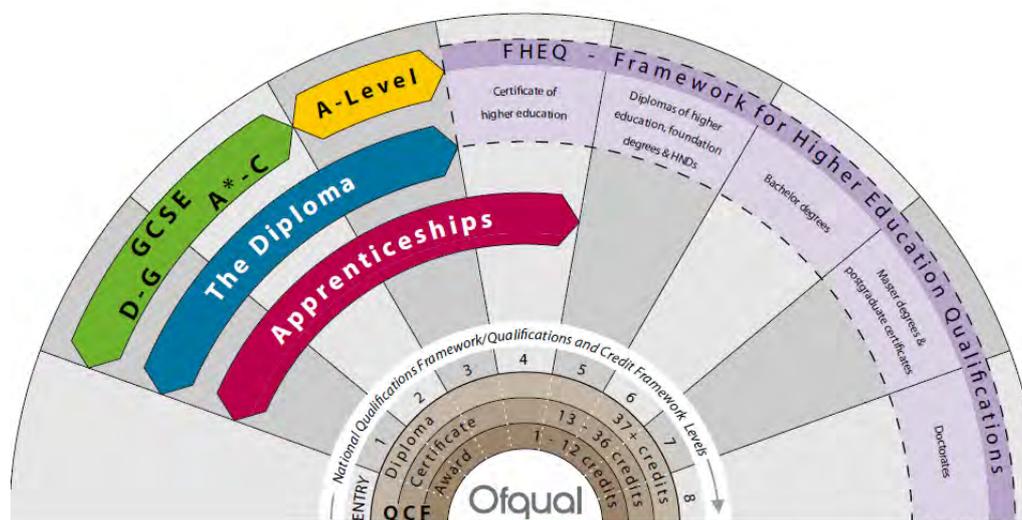
In 2013, for those qualifications reported in *Vocational Quarterly*, almost 70 per cent of the certificates awarded were for regulated qualifications that meet the rules of the Qualifications and Credit Framework<sup>18</sup> (QCF).

<sup>17</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/documents/awarding-organisation-data-requirements/all-versions/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks/>

- 2.9 All regulated qualifications are assigned a level – entry or levels 1 to 8. The subset of higher level qualifications reported in *Higher Level Quarterly* represent those classified as level 4 and above, equivalent to post GCE A level.

**Figure 2.1: Ofqual diagram – Qualification levels**<sup>19</sup>



- 2.10 Ofqual publishes *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* on the same day, approximately eight weeks after the end of the quarter to which they relate.
- 2.11 Ofqual publishes *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* in PDF with supplementary tables and charts in Excel format. Ofqual also provides access to the raw data that underpin the statistics in Excel and csv formats<sup>20</sup>. This equates to a level of three stars under the Five Star Scheme that forms part of the Open Standards Principles proposed in the *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential*<sup>21</sup> and adopted as government policy in November 2012<sup>22</sup>. Five stars represents the highest star rating within the Scheme.
- 2.12 *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, and the data that underpin them, are used by Ofqual and central government to monitor the regulated qualifications market and, respectively, to target Ofqual’s resources and government funding for vocational qualifications. For example, on 5 March 2014, BIS published *Getting the job done: the Government’s reform plan for vocational qualifications*<sup>23</sup> setting out the government’s priorities for the vocational qualifications system for England. Ofqual published a response<sup>24</sup> the same day. This is discussed further in paragraph 3.15 of this report. BIS also includes Ofqual statistics about vocational qualifications in *Further Education & Skills: Learner Participation, Outcomes and Level of Highest Qualification*

<sup>19</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/help-and-advice/comparing-qualifications/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/vocational-data>

<sup>21</sup> [http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open\\_data\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open_data_White_Paper.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-standards-principles/open-standards-principles>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vocational-qualification-reform-plan>

<sup>24</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/ofqual-statement-role-regulation-driving-quality-vocational-qualifications/>

*Held*<sup>25</sup>, which were assessed in Assessment report 78<sup>26</sup>, that it publishes every quarter, on the same day as the two Ofqual reports.

- 2.13 AOs are also key users of these statistics, as they provide them with market intelligence which they use to monitor their market share, and to understand more about their competitors and product availability. Other users include trade associations and sector skills councils.
- 2.14 Ofqual told the Assessment team that the annual cost of producing the vocational qualification statistics is £40,000.

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<sup>25</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/298321/learner-participation-outcomes-and-level-of-highest-qualification-release-march14.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/298321/learner-participation-outcomes-and-level-of-highest-qualification-release-march14.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-78---further-education-and-skills.pdf>

### 3 Assessment findings

#### Principle 1: Meeting user needs

**The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.**

- 3.1 Ofqual has published a user engagement strategy for its official statistics<sup>27</sup> that it commits to reviewing annually. The strategy outlines Ofqual's objective for a 'continuous and open dialogue' with users and presents a brief list of known users. The Ofqual statistics team engages well with users within Ofqual, with BIS and with AOs but not with the broader range of potential users, such as business and employer organisations.
- 3.2 Ofqual's strategy focuses mainly on communications from Ofqual to the user. For example, Ofqual has established a Statistics User Group to which it invites open membership. As at January 2014, the group had 32 members although almost all are AOs and the main form of contact has been email alerts. Ofqual told the Assessment team that it has not yet established a working two-way dialogue with this group but said that it has consulted the National Statistician's Good Practice Team for advice about implementing proportionate user engagement.
- 3.3 Ofqual runs user satisfaction surveys for each of its statistical outputs but it does not explain how it uses these surveys to understand the different uses of the statistics, which are not documented in any detail, or to respond to user needs. Ofqual told the Assessment team that it has received a small number of responses to the surveys, and that it reflects on these responses in developing its statistics. We consider that publishing some summary information from these survey responses would be a simple way to begin a more helpful dialogue with users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should:
- a) take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the vocational qualification statistics and to document more fully the types of decision they inform
  - b) update its user engagement strategy to outline clearly how it will strengthen its two-way dialogue with users
  - c) publish the information that it has gathered about user experiences of the statistics and explain how it is responding to what it has learned<sup>28</sup>
- (Requirement 1).

We suggest that in meeting this requirement Ofqual draw on examples of good practice from across the Government Statistical Service (GSS); it could also explore taking advantage of StatsUserNet<sup>29</sup> to facilitate user discussions.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

<sup>28</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.statsusernet.org.uk/Home/>

- 3.4 The statistics team maintains a prioritised statistical work programme that it told the Assessment team is linked to Ofqual’s Corporate Plan<sup>30</sup>. However, Ofqual has not published any information about its statistical plans and it is not clear how users outside Ofqual are consulted about priorities. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should publish details about its statistical planning process, including how it takes into account the needs of users external to the organisation when setting priorities; and publish its statistical plan<sup>31</sup> (Requirement 2).

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<sup>30</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/documents/corporate-plan/>

<sup>31</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practice 3 of the *Code of Practice*

## Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

### Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.5 Ofqual publishes these statistics in an orderly and timely manner on its website, free of charge to users. Ofqual confirmed that it pre-announces any changes to the statistical reports.
- 3.6 The reports present the statistics themselves impartially and objectively. To avoid any perception that the presentation of the statistics is anything other than neutral and objective, the introductions to the reports need to clearly distinguish between the statistics that are the subject of the report and Ofqual's operational policy. Ofqual should distinguish statistical and corporate issues in all its statistical reports and in policy documents. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should ensure that a clear distinction is drawn between statistical and corporate identity in statistical publications and in corporate publications that comment on statistical issues<sup>32</sup> (Requirement 3). We suggest that in meeting this requirement Ofqual consider referring to 'Ofqual' rather than 'we' when presenting information about Ofqual's operational policy.
- 3.7 Ofqual has published a *Corrections and Revisions Policy for Official Statistics*<sup>33</sup> that outlines how it manages planned and unplanned revisions, and the correction of any errors identified in the published statistics. The policy could be improved by explaining how Ofqual alerts users to corrections and requiring that corrections notices present prominently the scale of any correction.
- 3.8 Ofqual outlines revisions in the statistical reports but does not present information about the scale and impact of these revisions and no links are provided to the revisions policy. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should publish information about the nature and extent of any revisions at the same time that the revised statistics are released<sup>34</sup> (Requirement 4).

We suggest that in meeting this requirement Ofqual:

- a) provide a link from the statistical reports to the revisions policy
- b) update the revisions policy to explain how users are alerted to corrections

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<sup>32</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>33</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

<sup>34</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

### Principle 3: Integrity

**At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.**

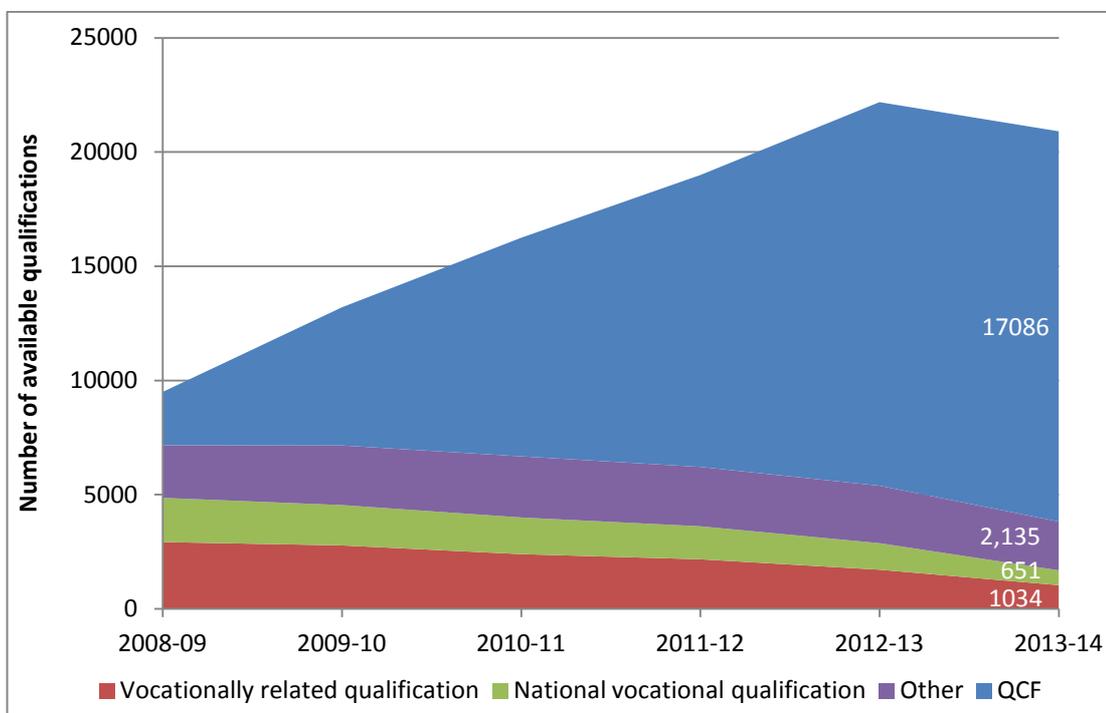
- 3.9 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.10 Compliance with the *Code* requires that the relevant statistical Head of Profession (HoP) has the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical reports. The HoP oversees all official statistics produced by Ofqual. A number of those statistics are produced outside the statistics team, but the HoP still has oversight. The HoP told the Assessment team that this arrangement is historical and it is likely that all official statistics will be produced by her team in future. Such consolidation would appear to give the opportunity to strengthen the role of the statistical function within Ofqual and ensure that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users. Ofqual's organisational structure is such that the HoP is managerially distinct from the senior management of the organisation. However, the HoP does have operational responsibilities in addition to those of producing official statistics. This is discussed further under Principle 6.
- 3.11 The HoP told the Assessment team that no documented procedures exist of what to do in case of political pressures being applied. However, she considered this a very low risk and told the Assessment team that she was confident that the statisticians in the team would know to escalate any such cases to her. We suggest that Ofqual produce a short guidance document setting out procedures to be followed in the event that any political pressures arise.

## Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

**Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.**

- 3.12 *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* present some information about the administrative data sources and methods used to produce the statistics. The statistical reports also provide links to more detailed information about the data collection process but this is written for data suppliers, rather than specifically to aid user interpretation. The statistical reports include some information about the quality of the statistics and their limitations, but do not sufficiently draw out the potential sources of error or bias in the data, or explain how Ofqual seeks to manage any limitations.
- 3.13 To illustrate this point, both reports acknowledge that the classification of qualification type, the main analytical variable, 'is not ideal, as very similar qualifications may appear under different qualification types' but do not go on to explain the potential impact on the interpretation and use of the statistics. Ofqual told the Assessment team that this is an area of some difficulty as the AOs have started to offer increasing numbers of qualifications under the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). Qualifications covered by the QCF now appear to dominate the market, as illustrated in the chart below.

**Figure 3.1: Number of available regulated vocational and other qualifications showing apparent growth of QCF qualifications**



Source: Ofqual, *Vocational and Other Qualifications Quarterly*: October – December 2013

**Note** Other includes: Basic Skills, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Entry Level, Free-standing Mathematics, Functional Skills, Higher Level, Key Skills, Occupational Qualification, and Other General Qualification

- 3.14 Ofqual told us that it does not have the amount of information that it would like about the nature of QCF qualifications. The QCF structure includes three levels<sup>35</sup>. Ofqual told the Assessment team that the way QCF qualifications are recorded by AOs, either separately by level or combined, could mean that the increase is apparent rather than real, though this is difficult to determine. The subject matter of QCF qualifications also overlaps with other qualification types and while the recording system prevents double counting, coding variability is possible as AOs choose which classification type to apply.
- 3.15 The HoP told the Assessment team that Ofqual ideally would collect more information about QCF qualifications to improve analysis but that it is reluctant to change the data requirements radically while the published reform plan for vocational qualifications (described in paragraph 2.12) is being implemented. It is widely expected that the reform will lead to changes in the types of vocational qualifications offered. It is also likely to have implications for the way information about vocational qualifications and awards are recorded, with Ofqual and the Skills Funding Agency, in collaboration with the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, tasked to identify how their respective databases could be better connected.
- 3.16 The Authority supports the HoP's position but considers that in the meantime, more extensive explanations of the limitations of the data would help users interpret the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should:
- a) provide more information to users about the sources and methods used to produce *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, and about their strengths and limitations in relation to use
  - b) provide more information the possible sources of variability, errors and bias that might impact on the use of the vocational qualification statistics, in particular in regard to AOs interpretation and coding of qualification<sup>36</sup>
- (Requirement 5).
- 3.17 Ofqual has published a *Quality Assurance Framework for Statistical Publications*<sup>37</sup>. This framework document sets out the principles that Ofqual adopts for quality assurance around the five dimensions of quality for statistical outputs set out in the *Quality Assurance Framework of the European Statistical System*<sup>38</sup>. However, it does not set out clearly how Ofqual delivers these principles, and Ofqual has not published separate information about how it assures itself of the quality of the statistics published in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, or the administrative data that underpin those statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should:
- a) update its published quality assurance framework document to explain how it delivers quality in line with the principles that it sets out
  - b) publish information about how it assures the quality of *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See figure 2.1 in paragraph 2.9

<sup>36</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practices 1, 2 and 3 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>37</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

<sup>38</sup> [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_PUBLIC/QAF\\_2012/EN/QAF\\_2012-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/QAF_2012/EN/QAF_2012-EN.PDF)

<sup>39</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 4 and Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

(Requirement 6).

We suggest that in meeting this requirement Ofqual refer to the Authority's Statement *Administrative Data and Official Statistics*<sup>40</sup> and to the National Statistician's recently published guidance<sup>41</sup> when establishing appropriate quality assurance and audit arrangements.

- 3.18 Ofqual has assessed *Vocational Quarterly* against the GSS Quality Methods and Harmonisation Tool (QMHT)<sup>42</sup>. It is clear from the information shared with the Assessment team that Ofqual has started to address the issues that it identified, for example, by extending the information about the quality of the statistics in the notes of the statistical report, although the timing and prioritisation of further activity is unclear. We suggest that Ofqual consider reviewing any outstanding issues from its QMHT evaluation as part of its systematic statistical planning process and publishing any resulting actions as part of a prioritised development plan.
- 3.19 Ofqual told the Assessment team that there are no equivalent statistics published internationally. Ofqual provides links to equivalent statistics for Scotland in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, but does not present any comparisons. We suggest that Ofqual consider presenting some comparisons with equivalent statistics for Scotland in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/administrative-data-and-official-statistics/index.html>

<sup>41</sup> <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Interim-Admin-Data-guidance.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/harmonisation/index.html>

## Principle 5: Confidentiality

**Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.**

- 3.20 Ofqual published a *Statement on Confidentiality*<sup>43</sup> in February 2014. This statement discusses confidentiality in broad terms, demonstrating a commitment to the relevant principles and practices of the *Code*. However, it does not sufficiently describe Ofqual's legal obligations; any roles and responsibilities assigned for protecting information; nor explain its physical security arrangements or the disclosure rules it applies. Also, it does not set out clearly what confidential data Ofqual has access to in respect of producing official statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should review its *Statement on Confidentiality* and publish sufficient information to provide assurance about its confidentiality arrangements in respect of all aspects required by the *Code*<sup>44</sup> (Requirement 7).
- 3.21 Some AOs provide candidate-level data to the Department for Education (DfE). Ofqual told the Assessment team that it does not request or require candidate-level data, but it does accept data submitted in this form if this reduces the burden on AOs. Ofqual told the Assessment team that it holds the candidate-level data on a secure server and then uses it to calculate the aggregate level information that it requires to produce qualifications data. Published statistics are then compiled from data extracted from the aggregated qualifications site.
- 3.22 Ofqual told the Assessment team that, following a review, it is likely to formalise collection arrangements for candidate level data in future, having concluded that this would be less burdensome than the ad hoc data requests it currently makes to AOs. Ofqual needs to make it clear to AOs, when it accepts candidate-level data, that both Ofqual and the AOs must comply with relevant legislation and guidance, including relevant requirements of the Data Protection Act. While this would not be a requirement of the *Code*, as the data are collected for administrative reasons, we suggest that Ofqual publish the outcomes of its review of Ofqual's need for candidate-level data and make it clear to AOs, when it collects this data, that both Ofqual and the AOs must comply with relevant legislation and guidance, including relevant requirements of the Data Protection Act.
- 3.23 The rationale for the rounding conventions applied in the statistical reports is not clear. Ofqual's published *Rounding Policy*<sup>45</sup> states that rounding is applied to the statistics to ensure that they do not reveal the identity of individuals, and for the purpose of clearer presentation. *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* do not apply any rounding to the qualifications data, but round the numbers of certificates to the nearest 50.
- 3.24 Ofqual does not explain the basis for its decision consistently, or explain what sensitivity analysis was carried out to ensure that it delivers the optimum balance of protecting confidentiality whilst not restricting unduly the practical

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<sup>43</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

<sup>44</sup> In relation to Principle 5, Practices 2, 3 and 4 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>45</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

utility of the statistics. In the detailed datasets published alongside the statistics, the actual values of cells are not shown where one to nine achievements have been recorded. We suggest that Ofqual publish information about the rationale behind the rounding conventions applied in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* and the related datasets.

- 3.25 Ofqual names the AOs within its statistical reports. Ofqual told the Assessment team that AOs have never raised any concerns about this and said that this information is freely available from other sources, with the name of the AO often forming part of the titles of qualifications.

## Principle 6: Proportionate burden

### **The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.**

- 3.26 The HoP told the Assessment team that all of the data collected from AOs are required for operational purposes, and provide the evidence base to support Ofqual's business. The production of the official statistics published in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* is a secondary use of this administrative data source. However, Ofqual told the Assessment team that any data collected for operational purposes are reported in summary form as part of the official statistics.
- 3.27 In addition to producing the official statistics, the Data and Statistics team performs a wider function, overseeing the data requirements of Ofqual. When colleagues identify a potential new information need, the Data and Statistics team confirm the exact requirement and the business case, and assesses what data AOs can provide to meet that need.
- 3.28 Ofqual publishes *Awarding Organisation Data Requirements*<sup>46</sup> that makes it clear to AOs the data that it requires and how it will tell them about any new data requirements. This document explains why it requires the different data and provides a forward look to possible changes to its data requirements. It also sets out the principles it will apply when introducing those changes. AOs told the Assessment team, in response to the user consultation for this assessment, that they are given adequate time to prepare for meeting any new data requirements, although some said that they are not consulted in advance. While this would not be a requirement of the *Code*, as the data are collected for administrative reasons, we suggest that Ofqual publish the outcomes of its deliberations when seeking to balance emerging data needs with the cost and time burden on data suppliers.
- 3.29 As AOs are required to submit data for administrative reasons, Ofqual told the Assessment team that it has been at least three to four years since the official statistics have been based on less than 100 per cent coverage.

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<sup>46</sup> See footnote 17

## Principle 7: Resources

**The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.**

- 3.30 *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* are produced by Ofqual's Data and Statistics team, under the leadership of the HoP. Ofqual is recruiting a Deputy Director of Statistics and Research to further strengthen its statistical capability and, once appointed, the HoP will report to that post holder. The Data and Statistics team currently consists of five statisticians, three of whom are contractors. The HoP is advertising for a Senior Statistician to support her role. Beyond this, Ofqual recruitment is limited until the impact of the government's plans for reforming qualifications are clearer, but the HoP told the Assessment team that she has been able to use contractors effectively in the short term and is confident that the team will grow moving forward.
- 3.31 The HoP told the Assessment team that she maintains strong links with the professional network of official statisticians by attending the regular meetings of the GSS HoPs and active membership of the Education Statistics Committee. Ofqual uses the GSS competency framework to inform recruitment and the ongoing development of its statistical staff, using it to design job descriptions and identify gaps in skills.
- 3.32 The HoP confirmed that the production of regular official statistics is implicitly rather than explicitly 'ring-fenced' but that their production is prioritised when there are competing pressures on resources. The HoP regularly reviews the prioritised statistical work programme and the team is required to report monthly Key Performance Indicators to ensure progress is closely monitored. The HoP told the Assessment team that finding time for developing new areas of work, such as user consultation, is challenging and she said that she continuously reviews how to optimise the available resources.
- 3.33 For example, *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* are both published on the same day, based on the same data source. While the audiences for the statistics might be slightly different, with *Higher Level Quarterly* focusing more on professional qualifications, a lot of resources are tied up in the practicalities of producing two separate reports and information from the website shows the report focusing on higher level qualifications is accessed by few people.
- 3.34 The HoP told the Assessment team that she has been considering combining *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* into a single report so that she could divert the resources saved to providing users with a better insight into the statistics by strengthening the commentary. The HoP also said that Ofqual would consult users before taking the decision to merge the reports. The Authority appreciates the current resource constraints and welcomes this considered approach to optimising resources and consulting users, but also notes Ofqual's responsibility to provide appropriate resource to produce official statistics that will serve the public good.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

**Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.**

3.35 *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* are presented in a professionally sound manner and include some useful commentary to explain the statistics. The commentary includes helpful key points and contextual information about vocational qualifications. *Higher Level Quarterly* presents a subset of the statistics included in *Vocational Quarterly* and, as discussed under Principle 7 (paragraph 3.34), the Assessment team considers that combining these into one report would seem likely to facilitate a clearer presentation of the statistics. As also discussed under Principle 7 (paragraph 3.34) the HoP is already considering this.

3.36 Before a decision is taken on merging the publications, Ofqual told the Assessment team that it has started to review the content of the statistical reports and has taken advice from the National Statistician's Good Practice Team about aiding user interpretation. The Assessment team notes the resulting improvements made, in particular to *Vocational Quarterly*. Some of the areas where the Assessment team considers further improvements are most needed are as follows:

- a high level of understanding of the vocational qualifications market is assumed – the reports lack an overall description of how the statistics fit into the wider qualifications framework, a starting point for which might be Ofqual's diagram of qualification levels presented in paragraph 2.9. The titles and key points lack clarity about what is in and out of scope
- the concepts and language are often technical, making it difficult for inexperienced users to interpret the statistics – important terms are not explained the first time that they occur and the glossary is incomplete
- the commentary tends to focus on the AOs activity and does not provide users with sufficient insight about what patterns and trends in the statistics say about the qualifications market. The effect of operational and policy changes on the statistics are sometimes hinted at in the commentary, but not clearly explained

As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should improve the commentary in *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, and in particular, it should provide an overall framework to aid user interpretation of the statistics<sup>47</sup> (Requirement 8). As part of meeting this Requirement, Ofqual should consider the points detailed in annex 1 and annex 2.

3.37 Ofqual's official statistics are easily accessible from a prominent link on the homepage of its website. The statistics page then provides clear links to the statistics and the statistical policies that underpin them. For both *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*, the latest and previous versions of the statistical reports and Excel tables are easily retrievable. The Excel tables reproduce the tables presented in the statistical reports but are heavily

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<sup>47</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

formatted, and do not present complete time series, limiting their usefulness for further analysis.

3.38 In the background notes to the statistical reports, Ofqual provides users with a link to a complete dataset for vocational qualifications back to 1988, supported by metadata, in a non-proprietary format<sup>48</sup>. However, this dataset is not updated to the same timetable as the official statistics and Ofqual advises that consistent statistics cannot be reproduced from the dataset because they do not revise earlier years where data have been revised. Ofqual told the Assessment team that it is pursuing a data warehousing solution that will offer more accessible and consistent datasets. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should:

- a) present a longer time series of summary statistics in the Excel tables
- b) improve the signposting of the complete vocational qualifications dataset from the web pages for *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* and from the associated Excel tables
- c) explain clearly in the statistical reports how the dataset relates to the official statistics, when it is updated, and what is updated
- d) advise users about plans for making data available in open formats consistent with the official statistics<sup>49</sup>

(Requirement 9).

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<sup>48</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/raw-data/>

<sup>49</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practices 4 and 6 of the *Code of Practice*

## **Protocol 1: User engagement**

**Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.**

3.39 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

## Protocol 2: Release practices

**Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.**

- 3.40 Ofqual publishes *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* via the National Statistics Publication Hub<sup>50</sup> at 9.30am, and also records there the timetable for releases twelve months ahead. Ofqual also presents a prominent twelve month rolling publication schedule for all its official statistics on its own website.
- 3.41 Ofqual has reported one breach of the *Code* to the National Statistician in respect of *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly*<sup>51</sup>. In November 2013, problems with accessing the appropriate publishing system meant that while the statistics were live on its own website at 9.30am, they were not available from the Publication Hub. Ofqual has since resolved this access problem.
- 3.42 Equality of access is a fundamental principle of statistical good practice, both in the UK and internationally. As far as possible, all the parties to public debate should have access to the same information at the same time. Only the absolute minimum number of people should see official statistics in their final form before they are published. The Authority supports the National Statistician's drive to reduce the degree and incidence of pre-release access to the fullest extent possible under the law.
- 3.43 Ofqual has published a *Pre-release Policy for Statistical Publications*<sup>52</sup> though this could be strengthened by providing a link to the *Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order 2008*<sup>53</sup>. Ofqual publishes lists of those people given restricted pre-release access to the statistics 24 hours before release alongside each new edition of the statistical reports.
- 3.44 These lists reflect what Ofqual told the Assessment team – that pre-release access is confined to Ofqual staff who need the reports in advance to prepare briefing and answer questions at 9.30am on the day of release and to statistical officers in BIS who produce a statistical report including these statistics published on the same day. No pre-release access is given to AOs. However, in addition to the pre-release access lists published alongside each of the quarterly releases, Ofqual also publishes a different list covering all editions of the same report that includes additional people, including from DfE, making it unclear exactly who is given pre-release access. We suggest that Ofqual review the published pre-release access lists to clarify the confusion around pre-release access practice.

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<sup>50</sup> [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/statistics-producers/publications/index.html?newquery=\\*%26source-agency=Office+of+Qualifications+and+Examinations+Regulation%26pagetype=release-landing-page](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/statistics-producers/publications/index.html?newquery=*%26source-agency=Office+of+Qualifications+and+Examinations+Regulation%26pagetype=release-landing-page)

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/breach-reports/vocation-and-other-qualifications-july---october-2013.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> [http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc\\_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/](http://ofqual.gov.uk/ofdoc_categories/statistics/policies-statistics/)

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/external-links/pre-release-access-to-official-statistics-order-2008.html>

### **Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes**

**Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.**

- 3.45 Ofqual has prepared a draft Statement of Administrative Sources for publication but is reviewing this in light of the Authority's Statement *Administrative Data and Official Statistics*<sup>54</sup> and to the National Statistician's recently published guidance<sup>55</sup>.
- 3.46 Ofqual told the Assessment team that while it carries out a series of checks to validate the aggregated data returns, it has previously placed the onus on AOs to record data accurately. Ofqual is now reviewing its arrangements for auditing and assuring the quality of the administrative data sources that it uses, applying a risk based approach. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Ofqual should publish its Statement of Administrative Sources, reflecting its strengthened arrangements for audit and quality assurance<sup>56</sup> (Requirement 10).

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<sup>54</sup> See footnote 40

<sup>55</sup> See footnote 41

<sup>56</sup> In relation to Protocol 3, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

## Annex 1: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Reports

- A1.1 In November 2012, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Reports*<sup>57</sup>. While this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical reports associated with Ofqual's Vocational Qualifications statistics, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A1.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical reports, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

### **Include an impartial narrative in plain English that draws out the main messages from the statistics**

- A1.3 Both *Vocational Quarterly* and *Higher Level Quarterly* include a useful summary of key points, alongside a contents section, on the front page. These include introductions that are short and clear. *Higher Level Quarterly* does not say that it excludes university qualifications on the front page, which could confuse inexperienced users. In the key points, the timeframe of an increase or decrease is not always made clear. Occasionally, the changes highlighted are relatively small. A diagram or other explanation early in the report that explains how these statistics fit into the overall qualifications framework would be helpful to users.
- A1.4 Both reports provide good explanations of what is driving some changes, though it would be useful to articulate possible underlying reasons further. At times, particularly later in *Vocational Quarterly*, trends are described without supporting commentary. It is difficult for an inexperienced user to understand the implications of some of the commentary; Some understanding of the vocational qualifications market is assumed.
- A1.5 Both reports acknowledge that the classification qualification type is not ideal, but neither fully explains the reasons for continuing to use it, or if and when Ofqual expects it to change. In the quarter October – December 2013, qualifications that are part of the QCF accounted for over 80 per cent of all available vocational and other qualifications and over 75 per cent of available higher level qualifications, further reducing the utility of qualification type as a framework for analysis. No further breakdown of QCF qualifications is provided in the analysis and neither the glossary in the reports or that available on Ofqual's website provides a clear explanation of QCF and how it relates to other qualification types.
- A1.6 Suitable comparisons over time are included. Geographical comparisons are included between England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the *Vocational Quarterly*, but not in *Higher Level Quarterly*. *Vocational Quarterly* also provides a link to a similar publication produced by the Scottish Qualification Authority and says comparisons are possible, though comparisons with Scotland are not provided.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-reports.html>

A1.7 The background information is ambiguous about rounding. The paragraph covering confidentiality says that all figures are rounded to nearest 50, while the one covering rounding practice says this is the case for certificates. The latter is consistent with the report, though it is unclear why certificates are treated differently from available qualifications. The two paragraphs suggest two different reasons for the rounding practices: confidentiality and reflecting inaccuracies inherent in any large scale data collection. A clear explanation of the rationale for the rounding policy would be helpful.

### **Include information about the context and likely uses of the statistics**

- A1.8 *Higher Level Quarterly* presents statistics for a subset of those presented in *Vocational Quarterly*. It is unclear why two separate reports are produced.
- A1.9 Use of 'we' when describing Ofqual's purpose and objectives in the introduction risks the perception of partiality.
- A1.10 The paragraph describing users of these statistics is relatively generic across the reports and does not describe how a number of the users listed use each publication.

### **Include information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to their potential use**

- A1.11 There are some references to the effect of operational and policy changes in the reports, although the limitations that these place on the statistics are not clearly explained. No explanation is provided about the main sources of potential errors in the statistics.
- A1.12 A section on limitations of the data in the background notes says Ofqual cannot guarantee the number of certificates sent by AOs is correct. More information about the actions that the statistics team takes to assure itself of the quality of the input data would be helpful to users.
- A1.13 A section in the background notes about revisions explains the circumstances under which figures are revised and explain what revisions have been made in this report. The revisions are not quantified and there is no indication of the extent to which this affects the data. No link is provided to the revisions policy.

### **Be professionally sound**

- A1.14 No assessment of uncertainty in the estimates is provided in either report. The word significant is used in *Vocational Quarterly* on occasion to describe changes over time, though it is unclear whether this indicates these are statistically significant or that other changes, not so described, are not.

A1.15 In the figures showing change over time, different scales are used for quarterly and annual percentage change in the same chart, which is visually confusing (for example figure 6, October – December 2013 *Vocational Quarterly*)<sup>58</sup>. Percentage changes are colour coded to indicate decrease (red) or increase (blue); these are indistinguishable when printed in black and white.

**Include, or link to, appropriate metadata**

A1.16 The report titles describe the subject and the period covered, though not the geographical coverage. The title of *Higher Level Quarterly* is confusing as 'higher level' is also used as a specific sub-group within qualification type as well as the generic title.

A1.17 Information is provided on what is new in the reports. A link is provided to the website publication schedule though no information is provided about the next publications in either report. The Ofqual logo and the name and contact details of the Head of Statistics (in this case the HoP) are provided on the front page.

A1.18 Some information is provided about the source of the statistics and a link is provided to a *Guide to the Data Collection Process: For Regulation Qualifications*<sup>59</sup>. This document provides some helpful information but is written with the data supplier in mind and is quite brief.

A1.19 Tables, including additional information, are provided at the end of the reports and in a separate Excel file. An index of tables is provided in the reports, but not in the Excel tables. A complete vocational qualifications dataset is provided in a non-proprietary (csv) format.

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<sup>58</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/documents/vocational-and-other-qualifications-quarterly/>

<sup>59</sup> <http://ofqual.gov.uk/standards/statistics/>

## Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from January to May 2014.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Pat Macleod and Donna Livesey – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of Ofqual in January. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 14 February. The Assessment team subsequently met Ofqual during March to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

### Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare Assessment reports.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 17 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Awarding Organisations	11
Ofqual	4
Central government	2

A2.5 Users internal to Ofqual told the Assessment team that they use the statistics to monitor the market, to target the organisation's resources, and for input into analysis and reports. Central government officials use the statistics for policy implementation and ministerial briefings about government-funded further education and to draw on for their own publications. The other main users are some of the AOs which also supply the data used to produce the statistics. These organisations use the statistics and underlying data as market intelligence – to monitor market share and to understand more about their competitors and product availability. Users from central government and Ofqual told the Assessment team that they focus on the detailed published data as did some AOs. Other AOs draw on the aggregate official statistics and commentary to provide context.

A2.6 Users told the Assessment team that they would like to see more explanation of trends in the commentary and more granular analysis, including of subjects and AOs. Users who have had contact with the Ofqual team were complimentary about the assistance given in response to queries.

A2.7 When supplying data, the AOs told the Assessment team that they are broadly satisfied with the data collection process, though a small number reported that they would not collect all of the information required by Ofqual for their own purposes in the format prescribed. Two suppliers expressed slight frustrations with the submission system. While most suppliers said that they are not

consulted about changes to data requirements in advance, they told the Assessment team that they are given time to implement them. One supplier suggested that it would be helpful if Ofqual could run seminars or workshops with suppliers to clarify requirements for upcoming changes. This would avoid possible ambiguities in requirements, which one supplier suspected. Suppliers varied in their knowledge of how Ofqual uses the data that they provide.

### **Key documents/links provided**

Written Evidence for Assessment document

