

# Quality Assurance in Vocational Qualifications

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Vocational qualifications are designed to accredit knowledge, understanding and skills that are acquired by a competent person doing their normal job. Most of the assessment is carried out within the workplace. Unlike school examinations, where the assessment is largely undertaken by examiners with no knowledge of the individual candidates they are assessing, workplace assessment relies heavily upon people who are colleagues of the candidate. Even where part of the assessment is overseen by personnel from a college, they are likely to have been involved in supporting the candidate. Also, in comparison with the numbers of candidates taking school examinations, the candidature for many vocational qualifications is small and therefore likely to be more variable. It is therefore important that the systems that are put in place to ensure the reliability of the assessments are robust. The paper examines these processes and considers whether they are sufficient to guarantee the quality of the assessments made.

## 1. What is a vocational qualification?

In the 2007 Report on progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training, it states that Vocational Education and Training (VET) “comprises all more or less organised or structured activities that aim to provide people with the knowledge, skills and competences necessary to perform a job or a set of jobs, whether or not they lead to a formal qualification. VET is independent of venue, age or other characteristics of participants and previous level of qualifications. VET may be job-specific or directed at a broader range of occupations.” (EU 2007 pp112-3)<sup>1</sup> It is a complex area including prevocational training - not geared to a specific occupation but preparing the student for transfer to a more focused course; initial training - probably based in schools and colleges and helping to prepare the student for a specific occupation; and continuing vocational training (CVT) – which can range from short training sessions to large scale qualifications. It is this vast array of different types of course with their associated qualifications that makes the quality assurance of vocational qualifications difficult to manage.

In the UK, we tend to distinguish a few types of qualification within the general term *vocational* qualifications. There are National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), which were introduced in 1988 (check) as part of a drive to simplify and rationalise the system but there are still a host of other vocational qualifications including BTEC certificates and diplomas, Ordinary National certificates and diplomas, technical certificates and occupational qualifications. The distinction

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/progress06/report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/progress06/report_en.pdf)

between these different types is blurred but crucially, they cater for different candidates in a wide variety of settings. Quality assurance processes need to be tailored to the individual qualification type, if not even to the individual qualification.

All external qualifications (i.e. qualifications that are certificated by a body other than the institution at which the candidate is studying or working) are subject to statutory regulation. This is carried out by the regulatory bodies: in England by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – shortly to be replaced in this function by the Office of Quality in Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual) – and there are parallel bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland.

## 2. National Vocational Qualifications

The majority of NVQs are taken in workplaces which are approved as centres for undertaking the assessment. Whereas in General qualifications, there is a clear syllabus that sets out what is to be covered in the course leading to the qualification, NVQs are defined by specifications of the competences to be demonstrated in the assessment. They are intended to accredit the skills and competences that a competent person would be expected to have in order to do the job. It does not assume, therefore, that a candidate will have to complete a course of training in order to acquire those competences. They may already have acquired them by virtue of doing the job. The assessment is intended only to certificate their achievement and can take place at any time that suits the needs of the centre, provided the necessary verification processes are in place.

Currently the operation is covered by the *NVQ Code of Practice*<sup>2</sup> which, like the Unified Code of Practice lays down the requirements for the whole process: resources; equality of opportunity, expertise, centre registration/approval, data requirements, awards outside England, Wales and Northern Ireland, issue of certificates, enquiries and appeals procedures, customer service statements, monitoring and evaluation, use of languages in assessment, application of assessment methodology and dealing with malpractice.

Most of the requirements reflect those in the *Unified Code of Practice* and are linked to and expand upon those in the *Statutory Regulation of External Qualifications* but because the assessment is usually wholly internal, the emphasis is on the role of the internal assessor, the internal verifier and the external verifier. Responsibility for appointing, training and monitoring external verifiers lies with the awarding body; the internal assessor and internal verifier, however, are the responsibility of the centre with the awarding body monitoring their suitability through the centre approval process. In Appendix 1 of the Code, criteria for approval are listed under the headings

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-06-2888\\_nvq\\_code\\_of\\_practice\\_r06.pdf](http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-06-2888_nvq_code_of_practice_r06.pdf)

management systems, resources, candidate support, assessment and verification, and records.

While not producing a syllabus, NVQ awarding bodies must provide an assessment specification of each NVQ it offers. "This specification must set out the scope and principles of assessment and external quality control established by the relevant sector body. It must also ensure that assessment requirements can be consistently interpreted". (NVQ Code of Practice, §18)

The most significantly different section of the Code sets out the application of the assessment methodology, which is based upon the application of the occupational standards for the relevant industry. This section of the Code covers assessment, internal verification, external verification, sampling, and external verifier reports.

### **Assessment**

The assessment process relies on the internal assessor judging the evidence of the candidate's competence against the relevant national occupational standards. The assessors are expected to have (or be in the process of obtaining) a recognised qualification in assessment. Responsibility for training and monitoring assessors lies with the centre, though the awarding bodies must also assure themselves of the adequacy of those systems.

### **Internal verification**

This part of the process is carried out by another member of the staff of the centre, who has a qualification in internal verification. The purpose of internal verification, like that of internal moderation of coursework in general qualifications, is to ensure that all assessors in the centre are correctly applying the required occupational standards. The City and Guilds *Guidance on Internal Verification of N/SVQs*<sup>3</sup> lists four aspects of the role:

- operate and evaluate internal assessment and quality assurance systems
- supporting assessors
- monitor the quality of assessor performance
- meet external quality assurance requirements. (op cit page 7)

The first of these requirements places the internal verifier at the heart of the systems of quality assurance "This includes having plans in place that identify criteria for selecting assessors, comprehensive internal auditing and recording processes, coherent internal verification sampling strategy development, management of

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[http://www.cityandguilds.com/documents/ind\\_generic\\_docs\\_policydocs/Guidance\\_on\\_internal\\_verification\\_of\\_NSVQs.pdf](http://www.cityandguilds.com/documents/ind_generic_docs_policydocs/Guidance_on_internal_verification_of_NSVQs.pdf)

accessible candidate appeals and complaints systems, sampling assessments, standardising assessment judgements [and the] implementation and evaluation of continuous improvement.” (op cit page 9)

The second aspect, supporting assessors is a quality assurance role, ensuring that new assessors are properly trained, keeping up to date with changes and making sure that all assessors are informed, and taking appropriate action after an external verifier’s visit. Standardising assessment on a continuing basis allows the centre to be reassured that all its assessors are operating in line with national standards.

Monitoring the quality of assessors is a continuous process “literally observing assessors in action, looking at how they conduct the assessment process and giving them feedback on their performance”. (op cit page 17) Candidates themselves are included in the process: “Monitoring also creates an opportunity to liaise with candidates to ensure that their assessment needs are being properly met.” (ibid) The guidance warns against relying wholly on the portfolio of evidence:

“Poor practice is where sampling is interpreted as exclusively reviewing summative assessment decisions on portfolio evidence. Too often this is left until candidates have completed most if not all of the qualification. This ‘end-loaded’ sampling often constitutes little more than adding a second signatory to a sign-off sheet ‘for the records’, or a reassessment of the evidence. This is not an appropriate use of internal verification resources and often happens too late in the evidence gathering process to rectify poor assessment practice.

It is also emphasised that the sampling strategy for internal verification must look across a wide variety of different aspects: candidates with different backgrounds, assessors with different levels of experience or from different contexts, different methods of assessment such as observation, prior learning simulation or questioning, particular issues relating to elements within the NVQ, records including the candidates portfolios, reports from the Internal verifier, and different assessment locations – workplace or college. All these add to the validity and reliability of the overall assessment.

The final aspect is that of facilitating the external verification process by having available all the necessary data and documents that the external verifier will need when visiting the centre. This includes details about the centre, records of the internal verification meetings and feedback to assessors and candidates as well as the candidates’ portfolios.

### **External verification**

At least two external verification visits must be made to each centre each year. The sampling strategy is very much the same as that for internal verification, ensuring that

over time all assessors, all locations, all methods of assessment and all internal verifiers are covered as well as candidates at all stages of assessment and assessment records. The visit includes unannounced interviews with candidates, “to minimise the risk of unsubstantiated claims for certification”. (NVQ Code of Practice §66)

The quality of external verification must be constantly monitored by the awarding body.

“Awarding bodies must monitor the performance and judgements of their external verifiers for accuracy and consistency. This must include the use of performance review systems and supervised external verifier visits, plus the monitoring of centre feedback, external verifier reports and consistency in applying the tariff of sanctions.” (op cit §72)

### 3. Other vocational qualifications

There are no specific codes of practice to cover vocational qualifications other than NVQs but they are still covered by the *Statutory Regulation of External Qualifications*. These cover the criteria for awarding body procedures and the common criteria for all examinations. Many of the criteria are to do with provision of information about the qualification and its place in the market, its structure and the detail required in the specification but they include requirements in terms of quality:

The assessment for each unit and for the qualification as a whole must include assessment methods that are fit for purpose in that they:

- a) provide a valid measure of the required skills, knowledge, understanding and/or competence;
- b) provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their abilities to meet the full range of requirements;
- c) differentiate only on the basis of candidates' abilities to meet the requirements;
- d) are free from any covert or overt discrimination, either in wording or in content;
- e) are manageable and cost-effective for centres to operate with the minimum disruption and bureaucracy;
- f) will be undertaken using the minimum equipment and material, as specified by the awarding body in advance of the assessment taking place;
- g) have options that are comparable in terms of the nature and volume of work required and the level of intellectual demand, if the assessment includes options.(op cit § 58)

From the point of view of quality assurance, the assessment section is the most relevant. It indicates that the awarding bodies are required to undertake independent external assessment, which must be standardised. It specifies that there must be support to ensure that centres are able to carry out internal assessment and that the internal verified both internally and externally. This has to be carried out by “the minimum number of external moderators/verifiers consistent with high quality work”. (op cit §61c) Where internal assessment is found to be unsatisfactory, the awarding body must ensure that it is reassessed.

The awarding body has to have systems for awarding the qualification to ensure comparability across years, across centres and across qualifications with the same titles.

Individual awarding bodies publish their own documents to support their qualifications. For example, the Hospitality Awarding Body (HAB) publishes a Code of Practice for its vocationally related qualifications.<sup>4</sup> This includes requirements on the centre's responsibilities for external monitoring, the approval of tutors and test supervisors, how tests are to be conducted and the sanctions if they are not conducted properly, requirements to provide updates to the awarding body, registration of candidates, appeals, and the certification of candidates. HAB also produces a support manual for centres<sup>5</sup> and specific guidance on malpractice<sup>6</sup>, moderation<sup>7</sup>, re-marking<sup>8</sup> and unnamed candidates<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4. Issues

Vocational qualifications are, by their nature, largely assessed in the workplace or by internal assessment in colleges. This involves a much larger number of assessors than would be involved in school examinations, with each assessor likely to have a much smaller number of candidates. The danger of this is that of unreal expectations. It is common even for school teachers to come to believe that their classroom is a microcosm of the education system with the result that they spread their assessments across the full spectrum even though their students may be a highly selected group whether by design (selection procedures) or by accident (the skimming of higher quality students by other schools). In a workplace situation where there is only a small number of candidates and a limited number of assessors, this can lead to isolation. It is the responsibility of the awarding body to ensure that all assessors are working to the same standards.

This may be mitigated in assessments where the industry standards are clear but throws a great deal more responsibility on the internal and external verification procedures. In a competence based assessment, it is essential that there is a common understanding of what performance is required in order to demonstrate that competence and that these are embedded in the ethos of the centre, allowing candidates, assessors and verifiers to become members of the same "community of practice", with a mutual understanding of the competences required and the ways in which they can be demonstrated.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/VRQ%20centre%20code%20of%20practice.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/HAB%20VRQ%20support%20manual.pdf>

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<http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/HAB%20VRQ%20Malpractice%20and%20Suspected%20Malpractice%20policy.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/HAB%20VRQ%20Moderation%20Guide.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/HAB%20VRQ%20re-marking%20policy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hab.org.uk/habzone/documents/vrq/vrq%20flexible%20system%20ts%20and%20cs.pdf>

One of the key elements of this is the inclusion of the candidate in the assessment process. They should be aware of the requirements so that they can judge for themselves when they have met them. This cannot be done solely through the printed word. The criteria or performance statements are always open to interpretation and it is dangerous to rely on the interpretations of different individuals. They may well come to different – though equally legitimate – conclusions as to what is required.

One way of circumventing this problem is the use of examples and exemplars. In preparing for the assessment, students should be encouraged to compare their work with that of others. This can be done as part of a course, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of their own and colleagues' offerings. They also need to see and discuss work that has already been accepted as meeting the required standards and others that have been rejected. In discussing what led one piece to be regarded as acceptable whilst another is not, they will gradually refine their appreciation for the subtleties of the assessment criteria.

Awarding bodies have the responsibility of ensuring that the assessors and verifiers are themselves fully conversant with the requirements. The internal verifiers must ensure that all the assessors within their centre are applying the criteria consistently, fairly and in line with the common understandings. It is the last of these that is so difficult to achieve and again necessitates the frequent exposure to different examples. In workplace settings, the need to complete a task to the satisfaction of the client or customer creates a wider "community of practice" than can be achieved in the classroom. The supervisor will reject work that is not fit for purpose without the need to invoke the qualification's assessment criteria. A brick wall that does not comply with the relevant building regulations will not be acceptable. The community of practice in this area is very wide and it is easy for the candidate to identify with it. Success means acceptance into that community, which is the desired goal.

Sometimes the lack of experience of a tutor or assessor results in a task or assignment that does not give candidates the opportunity to demonstrate their full potential. This is an aspect that has dogged the assessment of coursework and many approaches have been tried to mitigate the problem, including requiring centres to submit details of internal assignments to the awarding body before us. However this was a time-consuming exercise and it did not guarantee high quality assignments – the information received by the awarding body was often insufficient to make more than a superficial judgement. In comparison with the massive checking procedures to ensure that external examination questions are valid, focused on the assessment objectives etc, internal assessment processes rely on the ability of the internal assessors and verifiers, and sometimes leave the candidate at a disadvantage. This is an element where the requirement that the internal verifier is involved in a continuing dialogue with assessors is most important. It is no use waiting until the assessment is complete before deciding that it is unacceptable.

A similar problem of validity arises, however, in contexts where the candidate is being assessed in the workplace but is not an employee – e.g. a student on work placement. In these circumstances the assessments can become artificial and contrived. For example, whereas it is wholly appropriate for an employee to undertake a customer profile survey for his employer. However, many companies would regard that information as commercially privileged and are unwilling to allow an external student to carry out the investigation of such sensitive matters.

Confidentiality is an issue that causes difficulty in certain areas such as health and care. Data protection will preclude the sharing of information with students, but without that information how can the student be assessed in the way they deal with people they are being asked to care for? The data can be simulated but the fact that they know that it is artificial makes it difficult to judge how they would deal with knowledge of the real data.

## **5. Conclusions**

A key element of vocational qualifications is that they derive from and reflect the requirements of the industry. These requirements establish a “community of practice” that extends beyond the narrow confines of an individual agency and embraces the practitioners and the customers of that industry. This is the great strength of the assessment – it embodies the criteria by which the industry itself is judged. A problem arises, however, when the assessment either takes place outside the industry itself (in school or college) or the candidate is not a full member of the workforce. At this point, the assessment becomes artificial and loses the validity that it had in its correct context.

Assessment of vocational competence may need to take place in environments that are not ideal. This must be accepted. However, it is important that we recognise the limitations of that assessment and do not equate it with assessment that takes place in the context of full involvement in the industry.

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