
Vocational Qualifications and Higher Education: some policy issues

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ABSTRACT This article reviews the reactions to higher-level National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the United Kingdom in the context of certification levels by level and subject. The most successful higher NVQs are linked to professional qualifying routes, have generic application across a range of sectors or fill gaps where qualifications were not previously established. Research among the main stakeholders to gauge their attitudes towards higher NVQs shows that, among positive aspects, some adverse attitudes still exist surrounding issues of comparability, the assessment experience and the design of occupational standards. Suggestions for overcoming these issues are given. However, the wider picture shows that support for occupational standards is strong and it is the use of standards, which may or may not involve NVQs, that will help to drive forward new policy initiatives addressing participation in the sector.

Introduction

Historical Perspective

By the 1970s the United Kingdom economy faced strong competition from low labour-cost producers with access to similar technologies in many manufacturing sectors. Concern about falling competitiveness led to a report by the then Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1981) that emphasised the need for a flexible and skilled workforce that could respond to global economic changes. To achieve and sustain the levels of flexibility and skill needed, the importance of occupational competence was extolled and qualifications were advocated in vocations not well served by the education sector. Criticisms were also levelled against some existing qualifications for failing to meet the new

challenges and, following the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* (MSC, 1986), a nationally coordinated qualification framework was called for. This framework came about through industry lead bodies that coordinated the production of occupational standards and the creation of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in 1986 to oversee the development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) took over responsibility for quality assurance of NVQs in 1998. The main features of NVQs are that they should:

- incorporate the skills needed by employers and individuals;
- provide qualifications which reflect the achievement of clear standards of competence;
- identify common areas of competence across sectors and occupations;
- provide effective career and training routes for individuals;
- emphasise performance in the workplace in preference to passing knowledge-based examinations;
- be accessible to all sections of society without unnecessary barriers.

Five levels of NVQ were created ranging from the competence and knowledge required to perform 'routine and predictable' operations (level 1), through level 3 dealing with 'complex and non-routine' activities to level 5 dealing with 'a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts'. Level 4 broadly equates with undergraduate-level study and level 5 with postgraduate study. Definitions of the NVQ levels are given in Appendix 1.

Uptake of NVQs

As of March 2003 there were 758 separate current NVQ titles although their take-up has been uneven. For some NVQs no awards have been made whereas NVQ4 in Accounting is achieved by about 5000 people each year. One of the explanations for the patchy take-up is that industry lead bodies were encouraged to develop standards of occupational competence and NVQs to meet sector needs but the use of standards does not necessarily involve their use as an NVQ on a large scale. There are 11 competence (framework) areas housing all NVQs with the two most popular areas in terms of awards made being 'Providing Business Services' and 'Providing Goods and Services', which accounted for 62% of all awards up to September 2001. Combined with 'Providing Health, Social and Protective Services' and 'Engineering', these areas housed 82% of awards up to September 2001.

Over 4 million full NVQ certificates have now been awarded with, as of September 2002, about 17% at level 1, 59% at level 2, 20% at level 3, 3.2% at level 4 and 0.2% at level 5 (see Table I). These data exclude certification of NVQ units only, i.e. not full NVQs. Trends in awards by level are shown in Table II. Since 1997 awards at level 1 have fallen by 35% and by 13% at level 2. Awards at level 3 have grown by 15% and by 68% at level 4 but have declined by 31% at level 5. However, since 2000 the numbers of awards at levels 3 to 5 have been broadly stable while at levels 1 and 2 there is evidence of a

systematic fall. About 15,000 awards are made each year at levels 4 and 5, of which nearly 1000 are at level 5. In comparison about 284,000 students obtained a first degree or sub-degree in 2001-02.

NVQ level	Number awarded
1	673,783
2	2,275,992
3	786,432
4	124,457
5	9,028
Total	3,869,692

Table I. Cumulative totals of NVQs awarded by level (period 1986 to 31 September 2002. Figures count only people receiving a full NVQ and thus exclude unit certification).

Level	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
1	60,400	76,500	70,700	59,900	63,300	49,375	44,819
2	213,500	267,400	262,700	253,000	252,000	230,681	217,034
3	63,800	90,400	100,200	101,100	109,000	102,674	104,313
4	7,846	8,619	10,956	13,468	13,770	14,395	14,459
5	1,058	1,172	1,083	858	876	957	801
Total	346,604	444,091	445,639	428,326	438,946	398,082	381,426

Table II. NVQs awarded by level, 1996-2002. (Source: QCA, 2003. Year to 30 September.)

Appendix 2 shows the numbers of higher NVQs awarded by title. The most popular higher NVQs (levels 4/5) are in Accounting and Management and this is explained by the adoption of accounting NVQs as a qualifying route by the Association of Accounting Technicians and the Chartered Management Institute's use of NVQs in its professional entry route. The wide appeal of the generic management qualifications to a range of sectors is also a factor.

Across all levels of NVQ, 43% of awards in 2001-02 were by centres in further education and tertiary colleges, 30% in private training providers and 9% from centres in employers. Centres in universities and other higher education institutions made 1% of the awards. At level 4, further education and tertiary colleges provide 55% of awards, private training providers 25%, employers 11%, overseas centres 3% and higher education institutions 2%. At level 5, further education and tertiary provide 36%, private providers 39%, employers 16% and higher education institutions 8% (source: QCA, 2003).

While Accounting and Management are the most popular higher NVQs, other areas where growth is occurring are Care, Guidance, Occupational Health and Safety Practice, Building Site Management, Procurement, Waste Management and Treatment, and Community Justice. Further growth can be expected in areas regulated by public authorities such as social services. Adoption rates for NVQs increase with organisation size with about 25% of medium to large businesses using them (Matlay, 1999, 2000). This is explained

through the greater resources available to larger organisations to implement staff development programmes.

Advocates of NVQs can point to over 4 million people in work gaining a qualification over the past 15 years, many of whom would not normally have undertaken further or higher education. Critics can rebut these figures claiming that it is a small proportion of the employed workforce, it is mostly low level in areas that are removed from the problem areas of manufacturing and engineering and will make little impact on workforce flexibility (Hyland & Matlay, 1998, p. 407). However, regardless of the view taken, qualifying 4 million people to national standards is a major achievement not least for the individuals involved.

About 23% of higher education institutions (HEIs) offered NVQs either standalone or in combination with other awards (University Vocational Awards Council [UVAC], 2000), although the number of students registered on NVQ programmes in HEIs in 2001-02 was less than 1000 (source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2003). Possible barriers to NVQ adoption in universities are the requirement to work with external awarding bodies and implement additional quality assurance procedures, and a lack of financial support since 'straight' NVQ programmes cannot be funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Funding policies are more favourable in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Wheeler (1997) noted a widespread ambivalence in universities towards competency-based education at the higher levels. Most of the HEIs offering NVQs are post-1992 universities and the NVQ concept 'generally remains unclear in many institutions' (UVAC, 2000, p. 27).

Recent policy developments, however, strongly encourage HEIs to extend their provision into vocational areas. The White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) sets out a vision for two-year, work-focused courses to fill skills gaps, collaboration between Sector Skills Councils and universities to ensure they have up-to-date knowledge in each vocational area, and a need for traditional academic disciplines to integrate the skills and attributes needed by employers into programmes. Higher education is expected to develop more 'work-related and employer-focused' education to meet skills gaps (Little et al, 2003, p. 1).

The structure of a higher NVQ can be seen through the NVQ in Management. The standards consist of three main parts: units, elements and performance criteria. The Management NVQ contains 13 units of performance competence, of which six are compulsory and three optional units are taken from the remaining seven. The units of performance competence deal with competence in areas such as contributing to improvements at work, personnel selection and managing finance. Each unit is divided into two or more elements, for example, 'identify personnel requirements' and 'recommend improvements to organisational plans'. Each element is divided into 'performance criteria' (typically six to eight), for example 'the [personnel] specifications you develop are clear, accurate and comply with legal and

organisational requirements'. Elements also contain knowledge requirements, for example, an understanding of 'the work objectives and constraints which have a bearing on identifying personnel requirements'. Evidence for competence should be taken from normal work activities, not simulated activities, and should cover a range of selection situations. Each unit is underpinned by a statement of personal competencies such as 'acting assertively' and 'behaving ethically', for which evidence should be provided. People working towards an NVQ collect evidence in a portfolio that is assessed, either as a whole or unit by unit, by an occupationally competent assessor.

Although degree and diploma qualifications vary enormously in terms of learning outcomes, content and learning/teaching strategies, the broad differences between higher NVQs and academic programmes are illustrated in Table III. The table is modelled on differences observed in management and business qualifications but has application to other areas.

During the 1990s several universities introduced programmes that would take cohorts through to an NVQ. These were often designed for individual corporate clients but some open courses were introduced (Swales, 1997a, b; Swales & Brown, 1999). For several reasons, including the decision by the HEFCE to withdraw funding for NVQ programmes, this mode of delivery has fallen sharply. NVQs are still to be found in higher education, however, often in programmes where two or more institutions network to provide their own distinctive competence. This model is followed in a joint programme to deliver management training for the National Health Service (NHS) in which the University of Birmingham provides a Masters in Health Management and DeMontfort University provides an NVQ4 in Management with a Certificate in Reflective Management. The NVQ is a mandatory part of the training programme for NHS management trainees and both the NVQ and the Certificate derive from the portfolio with the Certificate deriving from reflections on practice and theory undertaken for each NVQ unit. Similarly, the Probation Service has contracted with a group of HEIs to provide a programme for probation officers on a regional basis. The Diploma in Probation Studies, for example, is built upon an NVQ4 and a BA in Community Justice. The Prison Service is the main employer. NVQs are now emerging in apprenticeship programmes such as the Graduate Apprenticeship linked to a Hospitality Business Management degree (Thomas & Grimes, 2003) and Foundation Degrees.

Given the background to vocational qualifications in higher education and new policy drives to raise the vocational relevance of higher education provision, the aims of this article are to revisit the literature on barriers to NVQ adoption and to present the outcomes of fresh research into the attitudes of the main stakeholders.

Criteria	NVQ	Academic programme
Assessment format	A portfolio containing evidence for competence and knowledge. Units may be assessed independently	A series of independently assessed assignments and examinations – possibly with practical work e.g. laboratory based
Assessment criteria and learning outcomes	Extensive detailed criteria contained in an occupational standard used by all students. The NVQ is structured around units, elements and performance criteria	Typically modules containing fewer but broader criteria that are set by the awarding institution. Criteria and outcomes may be influenced by occupational standards
Assessment focus	Primarily concerned with demonstration of competence using evidence that is produced naturally in the student's job	Emphasises theory and concepts rather than competence although practical skills, e.g. laboratory techniques or engineering construction may be included and assessed
Assessment audit trail	Portfolio is assessed by an occupationally competent assessor whose decisions are sampled by an internal verifier with sample assessment by an external verifier	Assessed by many module tutors, sample double marking, sampling by an external examiner
Awarding body	A national awarding body	The academic institution that designs and validates the award
Admissions criteria	Primarily based on occupational competence	Primarily based on prior academic achievement
Completion time	Open-ended	G geared to academic year cycles
Student support	Normally through an adviser	Through many module and personal tutors
Philosophy	Continual progress towards demonstration of competence	Restricted number of attempts at passing individual modules
Mode of support	Regular one-to-one supervision meetings. Possibly regular part-time attendance at an educational institution or on an in-company programme	Regular attendance in part-time or full-time teaching mode
Role of the workplace	To provide naturally occurring evidence and opportunities for competence development and assessment	Often no workplace involvement. May be simulated work experience or work placement

Table III. Comparison of higher NVQs with traditional academic programmes. (Note: this table is for illustration only and is not intended to represent all the types of programme that exist.)

Barriers to NVQs – perceptions or reality?*Structure, Standards and the Learning Experience*

Hyland (1996) rejected claims that NVQs are employer led and drew on Beaumont's finding that most managers would prefer to recognise NVQs awarded by other employers. He recommended that NVQs 'should be returned to the workplace and removed from all courses in schools, colleges and non-workplace training institutions' (1996, p. 359). Standards, after all, represent an assessment regime not a programme model of learning. This idea may have merit for lower NVQs but whether it is a viable structure for higher NVQs is questionable. Given the important contribution by the universities to vocational education (e.g. medicine, law, engineering) there seems no overriding reason why they should not be successful in other areas (Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, 1995; Randall, 1995).

The management standards, a relative success story in terms of NVQ awards made, offer a good illustration of the criticisms surrounding standards of occupational competence. The management standards are based on four key roles: managing activities, managing people, managing finance and managing information. The standards portray management as a generalisable and value-free activity and ignore the micro-politics of organisations and the contingent nature of management (Loan-Clarke, 1996; Grugulis, 2000). The exhaustive performance criteria and evidence requirements foster a 'suffocating' assessment experience 'devoid of critical engagement with the social and political issues which determine much professional activity' (Ecclestone, 1997, p. 77). Content and style of standards were noted by Beaumont (1996, p. 13) and employers have reported that the language and format of standards can be inappropriate (Employment Department, 1995). Despite regular reviews of their content and structure, calls for simplification have not been heeded and the design and content of standards presents a barrier to acceptance by some candidates. A question arising is whether it is better to have exhaustive and detailed standards or simpler, holistic standards that concentrate on the critical aspects of assessment (Eraut, 2001, p. 97).

The classic approach to NVQ assessment requires the production of a portfolio of evidence for the skills and knowledge specified in the standards. The process of portfolio building however is not well known and students can struggle to understand what evidence they can use and how to link it to the standards (Hillier, 1999). This problem is related to the precise content and structure of occupational standards and their evidence requirements (Grugulis, 1997a, b). Higher NVQs have a poor reputation for developing skills and knowledge (Hillier, 1999). Students pursuing management NVQs, for example, have reported that they are not learning much that is new and are only being accredited for what they know they can do already (Fuller, 1994; Holman & Hall, 1997). One caveat regarding studies of the learning experiences (Hillier, 1999; Grugulis, 2000) is that they may not have separated problems stemming from the design of standards and aspects of the learning/teaching methods

used by providers, for example, tutors with little knowledge of the NVQ philosophy and good practice.

Low completion rates are often a sign of a poor learning experience and national data for NVQs in Management show that completions were running at about 30% of registrations even allowing for generous completion times (Swailes & Brown, 1999). Low completion rates should be seen in context, however, since NVQs adopt a lifelong learning ethos and comparison with programmes in the normal academic cycle should be made with caution as NVQs were not designed to fit into such systems.

Reputation

The cumulative effects of negative publicity about NVQs 'were very damaging' to their reputation (Matlay, 2000). The Beaumont report also acknowledged a perceived lack of credibility and image (NCVQ, 1996). Having added to a qualifications 'jungle' (Williams, 1999) and in the absence of promised reforms and simplifications of vocational training (NCVQ, 1987, p. 5), employers were confused by the framework and with other aspects of NVQ provision, to the extent that the Government announced an extensive review of operations (Beaumont, 1996). The need for a review pointed to structural weaknesses in the institutional arrangements for vocational education such as the requirement for employers and universities to deal with several awarding bodies in order to offer a range of NVQs, adding cost and confusion to NVQ programmes (Beaumont, 1996, p. 24). Qualifications have two important dimensions: 'use' value or relevance to actual work and tasks and 'exchange' value, which is the enabling ability of holders to get a better job (Fuller, 1994). The literature suggests that higher NVQs can have limitations in terms of both use and exchange dimensions.

These criticisms stem in part from an inability of successive governments to bring the national education and training systems closer together or support the rationalisation of national qualifications in the interests of clarity. Moreover, a new national qualification structure takes time to become recognised and adopted by employers and become an established feature on the qualification landscape.

Costs and Returns to Qualifications

The Employment Department (1994) found that the costs of NVQs differ through large variations in the time required for assessment, the costs of assessor training, differing approaches to quality assurance and differences in the competence of people doing NVQs that affect process costs. Income from workplace improvements and which could offset training costs was highly variable and employers struggled to calculate how NVQ-based training led to savings and/or more efficient working practices.

Hyland & Matlay (1998, p. 407) reported that the costs of work-based NVQs, in general, are high compared to other forms of training. This deters small firms who are also discouraged by views of NVQs as top-down, prescriptive and with little evidence that they lead to improvements (Welsh, 1996). In terms of the returns to students of particular qualifications, Dearden et al (2000) found that men with an NVQ3-5 earn around a 6-9% return whereas women earn around a 1-5% return. In comparison, A (advanced) levels gave around a 16-17% return for men and 18-23% for women. First degrees gave between a 16-28% return for men and 21-25% for women. (Returns represent the percentage above average earnings typically associated with possession of a particular qualification.)

Benefits of Higher NVQs

To balance this review it is necessary to note some positive aspects that have been reported in independent research. Students entering taught postgraduate management programmes from a competence route performed just as well as traditional-entry students in a majority of assessments (Taylor, 1996). Personal confidence rises as a result of NVQ programmes (Swales, 1997a; Hillier, 1999) and management development based on the management standards can lead to improved individual and organisational performance (Winterton & Winterton, 1997). NVQs have featured in in-company training programmes (Brown, 1999). Standards have many uses beyond qualifications, including helping to raise skills levels and help improve systems and procedures for recruitment and selection, and performance review.

The Research Study

Fresh information on attitudes to higher NVQs was collected from over 80 organisations in 2002. Telephone interview protocols explored stakeholder perceptions using a semi-structured approach built around key themes. Summaries of interviews written immediately after the completion of each telephone interview were analysed in order to draw out the main perceptions. The sample covered England, Wales and Northern Ireland and included 17 universities, 12 awarding bodies and National Training Organisations (NTOs), 12 Small Business Services (SBSs), 12 Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), 10 private and 10 public sector employers, and 10 students that had completed a full NVQ at level 4 or 5. The university sample included universities currently running higher NVQ programmes, those that had ceased delivering high-level programmes, and those not involved with NVQ provision. The subjects covered included management, cultural heritage, guidance, engineering, training and development, health and social services, and veterinary nursing practice. NTOs were selected on the basis that they had developed higher NVQs in their field. For consistency, the SBSs were mostly located in the same region as served by the LSCs contacted. They were geographically dispersed

and covered rural, urban and mixed economies. The 10 students surveyed had completed NVQs in Management or Business Administration. All had been registered with the same centre although they were from different cohorts. Each had undertaken workshops and other taught inputs as part of their NVQ programme. In addition, face-to-face interviews were held with managers in a range of organisations including a theatre company, a small electronics manufacturer, a medium-sized chemicals manufacturer, a large retailer, an NHS trust, a professional body, a county council and a professional institution. Eight short case studies were written reflecting the stance of these organisations towards NVQs and were returned to the originators for comments and corrections before being finalised.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Higher NVQs

The main issues, themes and suggestions arising from interviews are given below.

Public Sector Employers

Public organisations were conscious of a stigma attached to NVQs stemming from the 'bad press' following their introduction. NVQs can struggle to be recognised as professional qualifications since employees often need a recognised certificate or diploma to practice but they are seen differently to academic qualifications. Despite the ethos that evidence for portfolios should stem from naturally occurring work activities, portfolio production is burdensome for people with demanding jobs and the portfolio was seen by some as an administrative nightmare. Fixed times and targets surrounding assessment and completion were preferred in order to improve completion rates – the open-ended ethos has a downside.

The correlation between occupational standards and the content of individual jobs could be improved. The lack of a strong correlation can create barriers for some candidates who cannot produce sufficient naturally occurring evidence. An example of NVQs being out of alignment came from a government department where most staff were either too well qualified on entry to be interested in NVQs or too junior to do higher NVQs. High staff turnover within the department also depressed demand.

Cost was an issue as without external funding NVQ costs can be prohibitive. Employers reported difficulty finding internal assessors for higher NVQs due to the diverse content of standards. Employers called for more publicity to raise awareness and favourable perceptions. To overcome concerns about the value of NVQs, universities were called upon to clarify the position of NVQs as entrance qualifications and to dual NVQs with certificates and diplomas in order to emphasise parity.

Private Sector Employers

Senior managers lacked understanding about the ethos and processes that accompany NVQs. Some evidence for an academic versus vocational divide was noted in that NVQs were not thought to be rigorous enough for senior managers. These views diminish the quality and value of the awards compared to alternatives. Conversely, in two small firms, attitudes to NVQs were positive but there was no history of higher NVQ usage nor were there any plans to use them. NVQs were thought to be time-consuming although this would not prevent some employers giving students release from work to provide evidence. A poor fit between standards and typical jobs was noted such that providing evidence for some units is difficult or impossible. Their content was described by one as 'petty, antiquated and long-winded'. In-house training was considered more effective because it can be more tailored. One small manufacturer pointed to the decision by a large retailer to drop NVQ training programmes as off-putting on the basis that if the retailer could not make NVQs effective then neither could they. A public relations exercise was suggested to promote NVQs and alter the views held by senior managers. The perceived value of NVQs needs to be raised and more flexibility, e.g. through more optional units, would help. In the private sector it was suggested that higher NVQs are not widely sought among job applicants and this helps create a 'vicious circle' of depressed demand.

Learning and Skills Councils

Learning and Skills Councils reported a barrier arising from the perceptions of NVQs as lower-level qualifications by both employers and employees. These perceptions were thought to stem from a lack of knowledge and experience of NVQs and their value on the part of careers officers, parents and teachers. Negative perceptions were also attributed to professional bodies and universities – some snobbery around the academic/vocational distinction was suggested. NVQs were not seen by users or by employers as being equivalent to degree-level qualifications with traditional qualifications seen as having greater credibility.

Small firms in particular were worried about completion times and the support infrastructure needed that consumes the time of other employees. Higher NVQs were seen as 'greedy' in terms of time requirements compared to other qualifications at the same level. Public perceptions of NVQs need addressing, making clear how they relate to other qualifications and demonstrating 'parity of esteem'. Government funding of NVQ levels 2 and 3 had increased demand at those levels although LSCs had funded higher NVQs when approached to do so. Funding mechanisms for higher levels need changing as LSCs do not have a responsibility to fund NVQs in higher education institutions. Professional bodies should be encouraged to integrate

NVQs more with their entrance qualifications. NVQs also need to be more flexible to better fit individual jobs and ease the evidencing process.

Small Business Services (Business Links)

Small firms have low training budgets and SBSs were not always able to help with funding. Completion times were seen by some as a higher barrier than costs. Small firms preferred short courses that are less expensive in terms of the time lost to employers while training occurs. Small businesses were thought to have poor perceptions of higher NVQs and at all levels saw NVQs as lacking flexibility and 'particularity' which was perceived as a feature of tailored qualifications. Small businesses also saw the portfolio process as isolating while short courses enabled trainees to work with others with similar problems. Bad experiences with NVQ providers fuelled poor perceptions although this may say more about the providers than about NVQs. Small firms lacked knowledge about NVQs and how they could be used and this view was coupled with concerns that NVQs are saturated with impenetrable jargon. NVQs need to be marketed differently showing their relevance to small businesses with an emphasis on the 'business case' for them. One SBS called for the confusion around funding, advice, guidance and the number of providers to be tackled to give greater uniformity.

Universities

After a flurry of activity in the mid-1990s, delivery of higher NVQs has fallen in response to demand. Many universities had seen NVQs as 'peripheral' to core activities and their survival was through committed staff perhaps with little support from the centre. In management studies the sector is 'crowded' with qualifications and NVQs lack a distinctive competence or unique selling point in a free market. Lack of demand was partly due to funding problems which make NVQ programmes relatively costly although not all felt that this was a barrier. Corporate clients, however, can easily find lower-cost providers of training qualifications. Decreasing demand also stems from the internalisation of NVQ frameworks into organisations that have used them to develop competence in preference to opting for full qualifications.

Relations with awarding bodies were generally good. Key criticisms were that NVQs require too much administration, have unfriendly jargon, are mechanistic, reductionist in their approach to describing competence, tedious to complete, are not sufficiently developmental and have a poor image associated with low-level qualifications. Students often completed NVQs only because they were a mandatory requirement. While this may also be true of other qualifications it seems a common reason to undertake an NVQ. Difficulties for students finding and providing evidence were part of the decision to drop NVQs at some centres. Bodies responsible for promoting NVQs need to focus on the real learning benefits and their potential for skill

development. Universities involved in NVQs felt that NVQs were beset by 'snobbery' towards the competence movement. Those not providing NVQs felt that the further education sector was their rightful place citing a need to separate vocational and academic awards.

Better marketing by universities should clarify how enquirers can get good advice and should better differentiate between higher and lower NVQs. Commitment from senior university managers is needed, however, before NVQs can raise their profile. NVQ provision occurs 'opportunistically' with provision occurring through contracting out or through peripheral departments. Stronger links between mainstream courses and NVQs would help to 'embed' NVQs. They need to be seen more in the context of structured development programmes. The public sector has been the most effective in achieving this.

Awarding Bodies

No specific barriers were identified when NVQs are mandatory although awarding bodies felt that there was a general lack of understanding about NVQs and how they work. Association with low-level qualifications was again mentioned and candidates for higher NVQs were assumed to want developmental higher-status qualifications. Academic qualifications were thought to offer more scope and provide better value to students and employers in the longer term. Employers could value them more highly, the issue of recognition posing a significant barrier. Awarding bodies felt that universities did not see NVQs as equivalent to academic qualifications and greater parity of vocational and academic qualifications was needed.

Funding was seen as a major issue. The Modern Apprenticeship Framework has boosted level 3 NVQs and the relative absence of funding for levels 4/5 is a barrier as it pushes up costs of higher NVQs to employers. The time needed to build portfolios from normal work activities is problematic and taught qualifications built around regular time slots are easier to manage and complete. The approach to assessment used at lower levels is less compatible with higher-level NVQs.

There are difficulties finding assessors for higher NVQs because of the knowledge and competence required. A Welsh awarding body cited difficulties finding Welsh speaking assessors to work with Welsh speaking candidates as affecting completion rates. Two awarding bodies wanted to see some specific new higher NVQs in Accountancy and Care Services. A rebranding of higher-level awards together with better promotion and funding arrangements were suggested to improve take-up and perceptions. Standards were criticised for being rigid, complex and jargonised. Again, some NVQs were thought to fit specific jobs poorly and more optional units were called for to increase flexibility.

Former NVQ Students

A strong theme was that an NVQ had helped to gain the theory underpinning practice or by giving a benchmark for students' managerial performance. The NVQ portfolio enabled students to reflect on their work and management skills and most saw the benefits of highlighting management skills that they had not previously considered or used and which could be applied at work. The portfolio process asks, 'how effective am I as a manager', and self-development areas were identified by looking at things from different viewpoints. The NVQ had helped some students obtain new jobs. Only two said they had not benefited from the NVQ and felt that NVQs carried no recognition despite the work undertaken to gain them. One of the students omits the NVQ from her curriculum vitae.

Nine students felt that their NVQ had been developmental and had increased their confidence and overall awareness of other aspects of management and personal skills. The NVQ raised the ability for self-reflection as well as to think about relationships with other members of staff and improve communication overall, leading to stress reduction in some. The volume of evidence needed had impeded portfolio production as had trying to match evidence from their normal work to the standards. Some students felt that the standards were unclear and finding the time to complete a portfolio had been a major problem, putting pressure on their personal lives. The barrier cited most often was the view that NVQs did not carry the same recognition as degrees. Less portfolio work was the main suggestion to improve the process along with standards that are clearer about the evidence needed. More flexible evidencing strategies are needed as not all jobs can provide the required evidence through the course of normally occurring activities. NVQs need to improve their image. Some students saw NVQs as the sort of qualification completed by those who are not academic enough to do something better.

Funding Mechanisms

The HEFCE cannot fund NVQs as they are not among the courses defined as eligible for funding by the Education Reform Act 1988. The HEFCW (Wales) has a more relaxed policy towards NVQ funding. The LSC can fund higher-level NVQs through Work Based Learning if students: are under 25 and do not have a degree; attend an LSC-contracted, work-based learning provider and attempt an NVQ on a list of NVQs approved in the provider's contract with the LSC; and undertake a 'straight' NVQ, i.e. not an NVQ as part of another qualification. Outside the Work Based Learning context, the LSC funds students on higher-level NVQs in further education. One strategy used by some universities to overcome the funding barrier is to incorporate a higher NVQ into an academic award that attracts funding. Prudent programme design allows students to complete the requirements of both the NVQ and the university's award with a single assessment strategy.

Discussion

The volume of higher NVQs awarded is substantial at around 15,000 per year although less than 1000 are at level 5; most of these are in Management. The numbers of people achieving higher NVQs vary widely by subject. Many higher NVQ titles attract no awards at all and others attract single or double-figure certification annually. The most popular higher NVQs in Accounting, Management, Training and Development and Wastes Management saw fairly static certification levels from 1998-2002. The areas showing substantial growth were Care and Guidance. Reasons for high take-up are varied and include mandatory requirements in areas such as waste management and care, the absence of alternative qualifications in areas such as guidance, links to professional body membership as in accounting and the generic nature of management NVQs.

Stakeholders expressed good support for the principle of NVQs and saw them as valuable qualifications even though the NVQ terrain is patchy. We found, consistent with Matlay (2000), evidence for a damaged reputation in some areas brought about by 'bad press' in the past. There was little support for the claimed equivalence of NVQ5 and postgraduate level and stronger evidence for claims of this kind are necessary. Whereas students and employers have a relatively clear idea of what it means to have a diploma or degree they are less clear about what it means to have an NVQ. This is explained by the contrasting ways in which NVQs can be obtained, which can be via a route that largely accredits existing competence or one involving individual development. This is a feature of NVQs since they are in effect an assessment regime that is silent about the route taken towards assessment. This intended advantage of NVQs appears to be creating confusion about them.

Despite the bad press that NVQs in general have attracted it is clear that higher NVQs are making an impact and in effect are 'toughing it out' on the grounds that time will show their positive effects and assuage their critics. Furthermore, much has changed in working and educational contexts since NVQs were introduced. There is a renewed focus on the role of skills in sector renewal and higher education expansion will come through widening participation, Foundation Degrees with a strong vocational aspect and lifelong learning. This context suggests that standards, the heart of NVQs, will play a major part in the realisation of higher education priorities and this is returned to below.

Our research also heard critical comments about the way standards are designed and there were instances where the standards were seen as too generic with a low correlation with job content. The requirement to meet a large set of performance criteria and evidence requirements appears to impede the learning experience although an important mediating influence on this effect is the way in which criteria are interpreted by assessors. Revisions to standards have not had much impact on the daunting prospect that they can set (Grugulis, 1998). There appears to be considerable scope for awarding bodies to develop clearer visions for the type of learning programme and evidencing

strategies that they wish to encourage on NVQs and operationalise these visions through their external verifiers.

Standards, as they appear in qualifications, need a strong correlation with a wide range of jobs, should be challenging and enjoyable to evidence and bring about lasting impressions of personal development. This research suggests that students favour holistic assessment in preference to a reductionist approach to competence and this connects to debates about threshold and best practice competence. In the field of management, for example, several studies have attempted to identify and describe the competence of managers who give superior performance. Among the best known is Boyatzis's (1982) Integrated Competency Model of 21 competencies, that includes threshold competencies and competencies associated with superior performance. At high levels there are problems defining what competence involves along with methodological problems in measuring competence (Burgoyne, 1993). One debate deals with the balance between threshold competence that relates to efficient routine work and meta-competence that leads to high performance for individuals and organisations (Brown, 1993). The issue of the transferability of competence between organisations is also pertinent here since competence-based education and training should develop competence that is portable.

To enable enjoyable learning experiences some providers are using creative interpretations of standards (Eraut et al, 2001) and this suggests that the stipulations and requirements of standards are being interpreted liberally or possibly even overlooked. One anecdotal example that we know of is from the Management NVQ4, which contains elements dealing with poor performance and conflict. The normal interpretation of this is competence in the application of an organisation's performance management and/or disciplinary procedures. However, in the work setting we encountered, students by the nature of their work were rarely if ever able to apply these procedures and the assessors accepted competence in the ability to manage change on the basis that change should be beneficial and thus act to reduce conflict. While managing change is a level 4 activity it did not seem to reflect the intended spirit of the standard dealing with conflict. While a liberal interpretation of standards is welcomed, indeed it is expected in order to interpret the standards in different work contexts, there appears to be a trade-off between the extent to which competence is specified (via performance criteria and the range of situations in which criteria should be demonstrated) and the extent to which the intended competence can be evidenced. There is perhaps scope for the standards to achieve a better balance between the need to specify competence at the level of performance criteria and the effects on the ability to generate evidence and on the learning experience.

Higher NVQs have a distinctive vocabulary and processes and, although they have been around for over 10 years, understanding their distinctive nature does not come easily to many students. Advisers and assessors have a big influence upon the learning experience which, in some cases, has been affected by advisers and assessors lacking a clear vision of NVQ processes. It is

important that centre approval decisions should strengthen their emphasis on the value-adding experience that students receive. Drawing on the cumulative experience of NVQ delivery, it is important to smooth out wide variations in NVQ practices by disseminating good practice.

Colleges and universities are in a good position to contribute to high-level vocational education by mapping the content of their programmes onto the knowledge requirements of NVQs. The recent introduction of Technical Certificates that embrace the knowledge and understanding contained in individual NVQ titles could be extended to other higher education courses as competence and knowledge do not have to be assessed together. This approach should stimulate the uptake of NVQs if graduates already have a substantial part of an NVQ accredited.

NVQs were considered to be relatively costly in terms of personal time and expenditure although the key issue is a cost-benefit consideration rather than their absolute cost. The added value in terms of individual development and utility of higher NVQs was seen generally as being disproportionate to the effort needed to achieve them. Both the added value derived and the NVQ infrastructure in terms of assessment methods and quality assurance mechanisms need reviewing to enhance the overall process.

Funding policy for higher NVQs is highly political and it seems clear that an unhelpful academic-vocational divide is perpetuated by funding mechanisms, at least in England. However, the most popular higher NVQs (Accounting and Management) are boosted by links to further qualifications and entry to professional bodies and neither of these areas appears to have been impeded by funding arrangements. Since we found little evidence of demand for 'pure' higher NVQs in the university sector, the lack of funding for them does not seem to present much of a barrier. Furthermore, institutions can access funding by combining an NVQ to a fundable qualification.

Strategies to increase the take-up of NVQs per se, however, are perhaps not the main issue to arise from this work. National Occupational Standards (NOS) have been developed for most sectors and it is the use of NOS in higher education that has the potential for a far greater impact. This impact would come about from the ability of NOS to function as a 'common language' that is used by the main stakeholders: education providers, employers and sector skills bodies. Evidence is growing for the benefits of linking NOS to qualifications and of the ways in which this can be achieved (UVAC, 2003). As well as Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships which should normally make strong use of NOS, qualifications in social work, forensic science, health information management, veterinary nursing and probation studies, among others, show how NOS can be incorporated. This helps to strengthen graduate employability by unequivocally meeting sector needs. Subject areas such as agriculture, building, computing, some branches of engineering, business and management, social work, publishing and creative arts have a range of NOS to draw on and it is worth noting some of the implications of doing so.

More effective ways of linking the main stakeholders will be necessary to raise the dialogue concerning qualification design and validation. Indeed, we suggest that programme validation events in vocational subjects give added emphasis to the ways that appropriate NOS have been incorporated into new programmes. The extended use of NOS will bring work-based learning approaches to learning into play much more and so there will be a development need across the sector in this regard. The principles and practice of work-based learning and the learning/teaching issues surrounding programme design will need disseminating and academic departments will need to seek ways of updating on professional practice. Given the wide range of NOS available it would be useful for the academic community to access a database of practice showing which standards have been linked to qualifications and in which ways.

In conclusion, we have presented fresh evidence from a range of stakeholders into attitudes and practices relating to higher NVQs. A starting point for the research was to find ways of boosting the take-up of NVQs in higher education and several distinctive barriers were identified. However, the general level of higher NVQ certification is high and recent developments in the sector have somewhat overtaken the original premise. National Vocational Qualifications are finding increasing use in higher education in collaborative arrangements, in the types of qualification that are helping to expand participation in the sector and as a result of the White Paper. The bigger issue is no longer more NVQs per se, but the design and promotion of qualifications based on National Occupational Standards.

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APPENDIX 1

Definitions of NVQ Levels (source: QCA, 2003)

Level 1

Competence which involves the application of knowledge and skills in the performance of a range of varied work activities, most of which may be routine or predictable.

Level 2

Competence which involves the application of knowledge and skills in a significant range of varied work activities, performed in a variety of contexts. Some of the activities are complex or non-routine and there is some individual responsibility and autonomy. Collaboration with others perhaps through membership of a work group or team may often be a requirement.

Level 3

Competence which involves the application of knowledge and skills in a broad range of varied work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts, most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy, and control or guidance of others is often required.

Level 4

Competence which involves the application of knowledge and skills in a broad range of complex, technical or professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and the allocation of resources is often present.

Level 5

Competence which involves the application of skills and a significant range of fundamental principles across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy and often significant responsibility for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountabilities for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

APPENDIX 2

Take-up of Leading NVQs by Title

NVQ title	Level	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998
Accounting	4	6085	5944	5744	6177	4148
Management	4	3416	3489	3282	3133	3356
Training & Development (Learning Development)	4	718	729	760	794	972
Operational Management	5	618	722	624	370	106
Administration	4	302	416	510	486	452
Care	4	919	541	366	178	81
Managing Transfer Operations – Clinical & Special Waste	4	200	214	331	379	91
Training & Development (HRD)	4	216	252	281	228	317
Guidance	4	402	354	240	146	135
Occupational H&S Practice	4	274	272	236	149	81
Registered Managers (adults)	4	102				
Managing Transfer Ops – Bio Waste	4	101	125	172	168	38
Engineering Manufacture	4	97	136	166	234	107
Building Site Management	4	126	213	160	37	20
Procurement	4	168	198	152	106	30
Managing Landfill Ops – Special Waste	4	108	98	152	37	62
Management (Superseded)	5		46	146	381	895
Strategic Management	5	107	107	144	52	20
Community Justice – Work with Offending Behaviours	4	244	248	136	0	0
Newspaper Journalism (writing)	4	52	109	116	146	109
Managing Treatment Ops – Clinical and Special Waste	4	49	70	107	123	37
Pensions Administration	4	62	79	100	61	29
Business Counselling	4	59	115	71	63	94
Quality Management	4	44	55	65	23	6
Kitchen and Larder Specialist	4	41	58			
Personnel Management	4	62	53			
School Administration	4	20	40	58	46	24

Note: the criterion for inclusion is the award of 50 or more certificates in 2000. Data are for academic years. Source: QCA, 2003.