

The Training Managers Yearbook

Following several reviews of education and training, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) entered the UK's education and training arena in 1986 in response to the ad hoc vocational qualification landscape built up in a typically pragmatic British way since 1945, which was increasingly failing to deliver a highly skilled workforce and enabling the unemployed to acquire contemporary skills, employers wanted. However the introduction of a national scheme bringing education and training together has led to passionate and polarised reactions. One opponent claimed that the movement 'was perpetuating a disaster of epic proportions' (Smithers, 1993) and Hyland (1994, p.116) considered NVQs to be behind 'an utterly impoverished and dehumanised approach to vocational education'. Advocates of NVQs such as Hillier (1995) accused academics of running scared and argued that by concentrating on the true skills and knowledge needed to perform jobs the economy would benefit. It is time to reconsider the value of NVQs and in particular national occupational standards, particularly with the increased emphasis on employability as a result of the introduction of mass higher education.

The background to the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in 1986 is best described by an extract from the relevant White Paper, "Working Together, Education and Training" which focussed its attention on the need to co-ordinate training, education and qualifications for all people to ensure a competent workforce in Britain for the 21st century.

"Qualifications and high standards are not luxuries; they are necessities, central to securing a competent and adaptable workforce. Economic performance and individual job satisfaction both depend on maintaining and improving standards of performance. This applies from the boardroom to the shop floor. It applies as much to adult training and re-training as to young people starting off in life."

A recognition that the UK needed to raise levels of competence in the workforce, in order to maintain and enhance competitiveness and its position as a highly skilled, innovative and technologically advanced nation state, reinforced the requirement to reform an archaic 19th century training and qualification system which had lost touch with the needs of employers. By the 1970s, both the British and US economies faced strong competition from nations using the similar production technologies but with much lower manufacturing costs, particularly labour. Government concern about falling competitiveness stimulated reviews by the then Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1981) which underlined the need for a flexible and skilled workforce that could respond to global economic changes.

The importance of occupational competence was championed and qualifications were deemed necessary in vocations not well served by the education sector. It was also recognised that existing qualifications were failing to meet the new challenges. Following the *Review of Vocational Qualifications*, it was recognised that there was a need for nationally coordinated qualification framework and this was achieved by the creation of

Industry Lead Bodies to oversee the production of occupational standards, the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in 1986 to oversee the management of National Vocational Qualifications. The responsibility for quality assurance of NVQs passed from the NCVQ to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 1998.

The principles underpinning NVQ are as follows:

- (i) reflect the needs of employers and individuals**
- (ii) provide qualifications which reflect the achievements of clear standards of competence**
- (iii) provide more effective career and training routes for individuals**
- (iv) be less concerned about passing knowledge-based examinations, and more concerned with performance in the workplace**
- (v) be accessible to all sections of society without unnecessary barriers**
- (vi) identify common areas of competence across sectors and occupations.**

These principles are as relevant today to the current debates around employability as they were when created.

Five NVQ levels were created capturing the competence and knowledge required to perform basic operations (level 1) up to complex, unpredictable, strategic tasks (level 5). Level 4 broadly equates with undergraduate level study and level 5 with post graduate study. Two interpretations of 'competence' are worth noting. The NVQ model uses the term in the sense of satisfactory, efficient, acceptable and normal performance in a job as identified through functional analysis (MCI, 1990). Other models distinguish between threshold and superior performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Brown, 1993). The British model concerns itself with the efficient discharge of routine work but this is sometimes open to criticism for not reflecting high performance in individuals and for organisations.

The introduction of a national scheme bringing education and training together has led to passionate and polarised reactions. One opponent claimed that the movement 'was perpetuating a disaster of epic proportions' (Smithers, 1993) and Hyland (1994, p.116) considered NVQs to be behind 'an utterly impoverished and dehumanised approach to vocational education'. Advocates of NVQs such as Hillier (1995) accused academics of running scared and argued that by concentrating on the true skills and knowledge needed to perform jobs the economy would benefit. It is time to reconsider the value of NVQs and in particular national occupational standards, particularly with the increased emphasis on employability as a result of the introduction of mass higher education.

It is worth noting how successful the NVQ system has been in qualifying the workforce. The total number of NVQs awarded to 31 December 2002 was 3,957,464 (*an increase of 11% on the total awarded to 31 December 2001*).

The number of NVQ certificates awarded in the last 12 months to 31 December 2002 was 389,967 (*an increase of 1% on the 12 months ended 31 December 2001*).

The fastest growing Framework Areas were 3 (Constructing) and 8 (Providing Health, Social and Protective Services) where the numbers of NVQ certificates awarded in the year ended December 2002 were 8% and 18% higher respectively than the number awarded in the 12 months to December 2001. There were 738 NVQ titles 'current' in the Framework at the end of December 2002. (*source: QCA, 2003*)

The relationship of NVQs to higher education also needs to be understood in this debate and there are noticeable levels of activity in both further and higher education. 23% of higher education institutions (HEIs) offered NVQs either stand-alone or in combination with other awards (UVAC, 2000). Further education and tertiary colleges provide 55% of NVQ 4 awards, private training providers 25%, employers 11%, overseas centres 3% and higher education institutions, 2%. For NVQ5, FE and tertiary provide 36%, private providers 39%, employers 16% and higher education institutions 8%. (*Source: QCA, coverage 1999/00 academic year*).

So where does this leave us today in converging employer, employee, entry to work learners with further and higher education to deliver the knowledge economy?

Vocational learning including National occupational standards and NVQs should be built into both education and work systems. Over the last ten years the government has invested £100 million in the development of national occupational standards - detailing competences required by employers for people working at every level across a huge variety of sectors. Its time these we used effectively as the curriculum development tools they are to improve vocational learning at all levels and prepare school leavers for the workplace.

Universities already play a fundamental role in national, regional and the local economic development. In establishing a knowledge economy the role of higher education is critical and more support is needed to assist further and higher education deliver this agenda by greater use of national occupational standards, NVQs and increased development of employment oriented programmes such as graduate apprenticeships and foundation degrees.

There is then, a case for the adoption of National Occupational Standards and NVQ units in higher education programmes as a means of incorporating the relevant occupational skills and knowledge required by specific industrial sectors. This incidentally provides a formal and sustained interaction with the sector and its employers through Sector Skills Councils and Sector Skills Development Agency Expert Bodies. It also provides a common language for both the education and training systems when engaged in the employability debate.

The LSC should be given a key role in workforce development funding of higher education and lead on a greater collaboration between QAA and QCA.

