

Structural barriers to the take-up of Higher Level NVQ's

Research Report

Stephen Swailes

March 2002

Commissioned by
Professor Simon Roodhouse
Chief Operating Officer
University Vocational Awards Council
on behalf of Edexcel

UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

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University College Northampton, March 2002**

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Foreword

The University Vocational Awards Council is delighted to be working in a strategic partnership with Edexcel and, in particular, to commission the research from Dr. Stephen Swailes, University College Northampton for this report. It is a timely contribution to the higher-level vocational education and training debates associated with the introduction of foundation degrees, graduate apprenticeships and increased emphasis on graduate employability.

In particular, it reminds us of a national system which was introduced in 1986, with support from the CBI, TUC and successive governments to combat the lack of skills in the workforce and contribute towards improving competitiveness, which has provided opportunities for those in work to achieve recognition by meeting national standards of competence. Over three million people have gained formal qualifications, which are work based and occupationally specific.

There is now a case for re-evaluating the NVQ system at the higher levels as a tool in workforce development to strengthen and enhance entry to higher education, enriching foundation degree frameworks and supporting continuous professional development. In order to do this it is necessary to understand the structural barriers to the use of higher-level NVQs.

We recommend this report to those responsible for the future of the vocational qualifications as an informative contribution to meeting the needs of learners in the workplace.

Professor Simon Roodhouse
Chief Operating Officer

April 2003

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Executive Overview

The uptake of NVQs

By September 2001 about 3.5 million full NVQ certificates had been awarded of which about 118,000 were at the higher levels 4 and 5. Take-up at the higher levels is growing slowly and is now about 15,000 full NVQs a year. Compared to the total uptake of sub-degree, first degree and postgraduate qualifications (equivalents of levels 4 and 5 in the national framework) the uptake of NVQs is low in most areas, Accounting and Management being notable exceptions.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research was to examine the views of a range of stakeholders' in the NVQ process to help identify:

- a) their perceptions of higher level NVQs,
- b) structural barriers to take-up, and
- c) recommendations for the future development of higher level NVQs.

Research Methods

An extensive review of the literature was completed. Over 80 telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of the key stakeholders including, National Training Organisations, Small Business Services, Learning and Skills Councils, awarding bodies, employers, and former students. Eight case studies were constructed across a range of organisations to produce detailed accounts of attitudes towards NVQs.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The most successful higher level NVQs are boosted by either linkage to a professional qualifying route (Accounting and Management), where there is generic application across a range of sectors (Management), or where qualifications were not previously available or established (Guidance, Counselling, Waste Management).

The image of higher level NVQs is tarnished in terms of their credibility compared to certificates, diplomas and degrees. There is no clear view of 'what a high-level NVQ is' as both accreditational and developmental approaches exist. Awarding bodies can influence providers in this regard. A major marketing communications effort is needed to alter perceptions of higher level NVQs. This effort needs to consider the relative positions of lower level (1-3) and higher level (4-5) qualifications in terms of the learning experiences that candidates derive from them.

Better marketing of NVQs by awarding bodies and training providers is needed in an effort to raise demand, although other factors need resolving before this happens. To counteract brand image problems, qualifications should be built around higher NVQs but not necessarily marketed as such.

While there is strong support for the idea of occupational standards in general, some of the weaknesses attributed to higher level NVQs can be traced to the content and design of the standards, which have a strong influence on the overall learning experience. Higher level NVQs should move away from reductionist standards towards more holistic descriptions of work that emphasise best practice in their field and reflective learning.

The quality of service given by NVQ providers has been variable and accounts in part for the tarnished image. To help delivery standards improve, awarding bodies need to assess the learning experience that will be obtained through a particular provider as much as their quality systems and resources. Examples of good practice in delivery and assessment should be identified and disseminated.

Awarding bodies should work more closely with further and higher education providers to formally map the learning achieved in academic programmes onto the skills, knowledge and understanding specifications in occupational standards. Accrediting knowledge and understanding should help people who subsequently work towards a higher NVQ.

Funding mechanisms for further and higher education appear to disadvantage higher level NVQs. With few exceptions, higher education funders do not fund 'straight' NVQ programmes although funding is available in further education. There is little incentive to foster NVQs in the university sector partly because it is not seen as a provider of vocational awards and partly because NVQs would compete with academic awards. Since NVQ take-up is strong in some areas and growing in areas not well-served with traditional qualifications, reforms to funding mechanisms seem unlikely in the near future.

Employers perceive higher NVQs to be relatively costly yet no direct evidence was found to substantiate this view. Further research is needed to produce more reliable information in this area to inform better marketing communications.

Part 1 Structural Barriers to Higher Level NVQs

INTRODUCTION

Following several reviews of education and training, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) entered the UK's education and training arena in 1986. Competence-based qualifications have since been created to cover a wide range of occupations. Perhaps never in the history of education and training has opinion been so polarised and so passionate as it has about this particular initiative. One vocal opponent of NVQs 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'. Leading 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 effectively the economy would benefit.

With hindsight, it is clear that higher education was not threatened by NVQs since most NVQ provision (levels 1-3) equates to further education and the high-level NVQ activity that has occurred has been supported by the university sector. In 2001, the number of NVQ certificates awarded passed 3 million and yet serious concerns remain over their usefulness and status. While the absolute number of certificates awarded is high, there are concerns about the effectiveness of the NVQ movement in relation to its aims. One such concern relates to the relatively low levels of NVQ adoption at the higher levels, 4 and 5. On the premise that structural barriers to the adoption of high-level NVQs exist, this literature review attempts to identify barriers as a prelude to considering ways around them. The review begins with a summary of the history of NVQs and statistical trends. Key criticisms of NVQs from the literature are then considered.

THE UK COMPETENCY MOVEMENT

A Brief History

By the 1970s, both the British and US economies were facing strong competition from nations using the same production technologies but which operated at much lower levels of manufacturing costs. One of the responses to this crisis of competition was to awaken interest in the idea of competence and in the UK the seeds of a competency movement were sown. Government concern about Britain's falling competitiveness stimulated reviews by the then Manpower Services Commission (MSC, 1981) which underlined the need for a reform of skills training for young people, greater work-based training opportunities and greater training opportunities for adults. In sum, the MSC pointed to the need for a flexible and skilled workforce that could respond to global economic changes. Of course, the connections between training and economic performance are in practice highly complex (Murphy, 1993) but to expand on them further is beyond the scope of this review.

The importance of occupational competence was championed and qualifications were deemed necessary in vocations that historically had not been well served by the education sector. Following the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* in 1985-1986 and the creation of Industry Lead Bodies to oversee the creation of occupational standards, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was created 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. For detailed accounts of the background to NVQs see Franklin (1997) and Hargraves (1998, 2000).

Five levels of NVQ were created capturing the competence, knowledge and personal competence required to perform basic operations (level 1) up to complex, strategic level tasks (level 5). Level 4 broadly equates with undergraduate level study and level 5 equates with postgraduate level study. Williams (1999) shows convincingly that NVQs were 'skewed in a low skill direction' by a political imperative to deal with rising youth unemployment following the recession of the early 1980s.

The ethos of the competence movement has extended beyond a qualification framework, however. Its principles of describing performance outcomes and then determining whether or not outcomes are achieved have permeated thinking on assessment and evaluation. From SATS tests for schoolchildren to the mechanisms for assessing the quality of public sector services and the resulting 'league tables', the principles of setting measurable outcomes and then evaluating evidence for those outcomes are endemic in the UK.

As this study is about high-level NVQs, and since most high-level NVQ awards have been in business services, a brief comment on the wider competency movement relating to management is included (see Antonacopoulou and FitzGerald, 1996). Several studies have attempted to identify and describe the competence of managers who give superior performance. Among the best known is Boyatzis' (1982) Integrated Competency Model of 21 competencies that included threshold competencies and competencies associated with superior performance. Competence frameworks such as Boyatzis, Saville and Holdsworth and the MCI can all be challenged strongly. At high levels at least, there are problems defining what competence entails and there are real methodological difficulties in measuring competence (Burgoyne, 1989; Holmes and Joyce, 1993; Jubb and Robotham, 1997). One issue concerns achieving a balance between threshold competence relating to the efficient discharge of routine work and meta-competence that brings about high performance for individuals and organisations (Brown, 1993; Swailes and Brown, 1999). Problems then arise in determining the extent to which competence is transferable between organisations, since if competence has low portability, then competence-based education and training has little meaning except in the context of a particular organisation.

The Industry Lead Body responsible for creating the UK's management standards undertook a functional analysis of managers' jobs to capture the essence of what they contain. This is not the same as attempting to identify those factors that give superior performance. Moreover, the occupational standards for management reflect the ability to perform the activities within an occupation, to the standard expected in employment (MCI, 1990, p.1).

The British view of competence that has influenced NVQs is one of satisfactory, efficient, acceptable, normal performance. The key difference between this and the wider management competency movement is that the latter seeks to describe superior or super-normal performance.

This review has identified a large literature dealing with attitudes towards NVQs. This literature abounds with rhetoric contrasting a pro-NVQ perspective, often from representatives of government bodies, and the anti-NVQ perspective often portrayed by educational researchers. One characteristic however is that, in all this literature, relatively little empirical research has been undertaken to examine the reactions of employers, candidates and intermediaries such as education providers and awarding bodies. This review therefore concentrates on literature based upon field research at the expense of papers that have perpetuated arguments but with little or no empirical justification.

STATISTICAL AND MARKET OVERVIEW

In June 2001, there were 776 current NVQ titles of which 141 were in Constructing, 124 were in Providing Goods and Services, 89 in Engineering and 81 in Manufacturing. It is clear, however, that the take-up of NVQ titles is far from evenly distributed. In the popular area Providing Business Services, prior to October 2000, 85 of the 165 defunct and current NVQ titles had achieved less than 100 awards each. Of these, 27 had attracted no awards at all. It is worth noting, however, that occupational standards have several uses and are not solely designed for use as qualifications. The conversion of a set of standards into a qualification does imply, however, that there is some demand for such a product.

The most popular framework areas are, at level 1, Providing Goods and Services and Providing Business Services. At level 2, Providing Goods and Services and Engineering. At level 3, Providing Business Services and Engineering. At levels 4 and 5, Providing Business Services is comfortably the most popular area and almost all the awards at level 5 have been in subjects related to Management.

Table 1: Total NVQs Awarded by Level, 2001

NVQ level	Number awarded
1	628,979
2	2,007,863
3	682,176
4	109,998
5	8,227
Total	3,488,656

(As at 31 September 2001)

By the end of September 2001, of the 3.5 million NVQ certificates awarded, 95.1% had been at levels 1-3 and well over half of these were at level 2. Of the remainder, about 110,000 awards had been made at level 4 and 8,200 awards had been made at level 5 (see *Table 1*). According to the QCA, these figures relate only to people receiving a full NVQ qualification and thus exclude awards of unit certification. The number of people awarded NVQ unit certificates is not small and so the total number of people that have achieved all or part of an NVQ is likely to be substantially above 3.5 million. The many assessors and verifiers who have achieved D units are examples.

Table 2 shows the numbers of NVQ certificates awarded at each level. There was a sharp drop in the numbers of awards at levels 1 and 2 in 2001. Annual increases in the numbers of level 4 awards have risen slowly but steadily to 13,770 in 2000 and 14,395 in 2001. Awards at level 5 have been steady at around 1,000 each year; in 2001, 957 were awarded compared to 876 in 2000. Awards at level 4 and 5 (combined) grew steadily from 8,904 in 1996 to 14,376 in 1999, 14,596 in 2000 and 15,353 in 2001.

Table 2: Numbers of NVQ Certificates Awarded by Level, 1996–2001

Level	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
1	60,400	76,500	70,700	59,900	63,300	49,400
2	213,500	267,400	262,700	253,000	252,000	179,400
3	63,800	90,400	100,200	101,100	109,000	102,600
4	7,846	8,619	10,956	13,468	13,770	14,395
5	1,058	1,172	1,083	858	876	957
Total	346,604	444,091	445,639	428,326	438,946	346,752

(Source QCA. Year to 30 September)

Table 3: The Ten Most Popular High-level NVQs

NVQ Title	Level	Number awarded
Accounting (Accounting practice/ industry and commerce/public sector)	4	29,036
Management	4	28,216
Accounting	4	27,360
Management	5	8,052
Training and Development (Learning Development)	4	4,469
Engineering Manufacture	4	2,948
Administration	4	2,336
Training and Development (Human Resource Development)	4	1,575
Care	4	1,026
Managing Transfer Operations (Clinical or special waste)	4	955
Total		105,973

(Source: QCA. Cumulative awards to 30 September 2001. Management level 5 combines the old Management and the new Operations Management and Strategic Management)

Table 4: UK Employment by Highest Qualification Level (000)

	1991	1998	2004	2009
Higher degrees (NVQ level 5)	354	1,101	1,321	1,566
First degrees and sub-degree (NVQ level 4)	4,337	5,549	6,301	7,181

Source Wilson (2000, p.14)

Table 3 shows the top ten most popular high-level NVQs and is headed by accounting and management, which represent 87% of the total certificates awarded. This success represents the adoption of accounting NVQs as a qualifying route by the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), the inclusion of management NVQs in the Institute of Management's professional entry route and the wide appeal of the generic management qualifications to a range of sectors.

The AAT has 480 approved assessment centres in the UK that include colleges, universities, managing agents and employers. Their level 4 NVQ comprises 8 units of which 3 are assessed by assessments set and marked by the AAT (central assessment) and 5 cover workplace evidence assessed in an assessment centre (devolved assessment). Achievement of level 4 gives partial exemption from the early stages of professional accounting bodies such as CIPFA, CIMA and ACCA.

Forecasts for numbers in employment by NVQ level (Wilson, 2000) are shown in Table 4. The projections are for levels of qualification, not NVQs *per se*. Between 1991 and 1998, the numbers of people in the employed workforce with a postgraduate level qualification grew by 747,000 and is projected to grow by another 465,000 to 2009. The number holding a level 4 qualification (first degree, HND, nursing, teaching) grew by 1.2 million from 1991 to 1998 and is projected to grow by a further 1.6 million to 2009. Given that about 5,500 level 5 and about 70,000 level 4 NVQs were awarded up to the end of 1998, then NVQs *per se* had a small share of the market; about 0.7% of postgraduate level qualifications and 5.8% at the sub-degree and first degree level between 1991 and 1998.

Table 5 (page 10) shows the higher education qualifications obtained in 1999–2000. The award of 13,720 level 4 NVQs in the year to September 2000 represents 4.3% of the total market for level 4 equivalent qualifications (first degrees and sub-degree qualifications) awarded. However, assuming that all NVQ4 are completed part time, they represent 18.1% of the market for part-time level 4 awards. The 876 NVQ5 awarded in the year to September 2000 represent 1% of all level 5 awards and 1.7% of the part-time market for all level 5 awards (doctorates, masters and other postgraduate awards).

Table 5: HE Qualifications by level and mode of study, 1999–2000

	First degrees	Doctorates	Masters degrees	Other postgraduate (eg. CertEd)	Other undergraduate (eg HND)
Full-time students	212,340	1,490	14,490	24,580	30,030
Part-time students	24,190	6,090	21,490	21,810	37,750
Total	236,530	7,580	35,980	46,390	67,780

(Source: HESA. Figures exclude awards to students resident overseas)

Another relevant factor concerns the type of centre at which candidates complete an NVQ. For NVQ4, further education and tertiary colleges provide 55% of 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 1999–2000 academic year). For levels 4 and 5 combined, the higher education sector held only 2.5% of all awards and so has a minimal involvement in their provision.

Trends in the take-up of NVQs by title are shown in Appendix 1. Accounting leads the table with 5,744 awards in 2000. Management level 4 is holding at about 3,200 awards, whereas level 5 is growing. Other titles showing notable growth 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. Managers of residential care homes are required to have achieved NVQ4 by 2005 and others working in care, social services or management will require competence-based qualifications. New NVQ standards are being developed for a range of social services areas such as inspection and children's homes.

Whereas awareness levels of NVQs are high, adoption rates for NVQs vary from less than 1% in micro business (1-10 employees), 3.4% in small business (11-49), 15.2% in medium-sized business (50-250) and 25.8% in businesses over 250 employees (Matlay, 1999, 2000). These findings call into question claims that the NVQ movement is employer-led or that it has been particularly successful.

While the award of 3.5 million certificates seems impressive, this should be measured against a UK workforce of about 25 million. The figures provide comfort to both sides. Advocates of NVQs can point to over 3 million people gaining a qualification over the past 15 years. Critics can claim that this represents a small proportion of the jobs market, it is mostly low level and in areas that are far removed from the problem areas of manufacturing and engineering and will make little impact on workforce flexibility (Hyland and Matlay, 1998, p.407).

A survey for the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC, 2000) found that about 23% of higher education institutions (HEIs) offered NVQs either stand-alone or in combination with other awards. A possible barrier to NVQ adoption in universities is the need to deal with external awarding bodies and implement additional quality assurance procedures. Exceptionally, the Open University is in itself an NVQ awarding body and has perhaps had the greatest impact on NVQs in the sector. Wheeler (1997) observed that there was widespread ambivalence in universities towards competency-based education at the higher levels. Two thirds of the HEIs offering NVQs were post-1992 universities and the NVQ concept 'generally remains unclear in many institutions' (UVAC, 2000, p.27).

KEY CRITICISMS OF NVQS

The Standards

Although occupational standards are lauded by their designers for encapsulating 'real' work outcomes that enhance organisational competitiveness, the management standards in particular have been criticised for portraying management as a neutral, generalisable, value-free activity in which competence is used in rational ways to achieve objectives (Grugulis, 2000; Loan-Clarke, 1996). This is a simple view of managerial work that fails to capture either the contingency view of management or the reality that organisations are political arenas, at least for people holding high levels of responsibility.

Another criticism related to the content of standards, generally, is that they foster a 'suffocating' assessment experience which is 'devoid of critical engagement with the social and political issues which determine and define much professional activity' (Ecclestone, 1997, p.77). The consequence of using standards, which in essence represent a giant set of assessment criteria, that portray a highly rational view of managerial work and which require little critical reflection is that they will have little meaning to candidates or to employers. Factors such as this can be used to explain the low and slow completion rates that are often observed (e.g. Hillier, 1997).

In addition to their content, the way in which standards are written is seen by some as a serious problem (e.g. Beaumont, 1995, p.13). An Employment Department study of all levels (ED, 1995) found that a majority of employers felt that the language and format were inappropriate. Calls for a simplification using plain language have not been heeded and the unwelcoming design and content of standards can be a barrier to acceptance by candidates.

Brown (1999) in a survey of large employers found a further barrier that may be linked to the design of standards. The potential for designing and tailoring training programmes around clients' needs is limited due to their stipulations governing assessment and the danger of long completion times. Clients seek tailored programmes to address particular training and development needs and yet standards restrict the scope for learning strategies built around investigative project work and parts of the standards may not resonate with organisational priorities. Traditional Certificate and Diploma programmes allow much more tailoring around actual priorities in terms of content, learning/teaching strategies and assessment methods.

The Review of Vocational Qualifications (RVQ), that led directly to NVQs and the NCVQ, made four substantive recommendations (Hargraves, 2000, p.296). These covered the creation of sectoral bodies to set standards, a classification scheme for qualifications based on levels of competence, the creation of the NVQ as a national framework, and the creation of the NCVQ as a regulatory body. The RVQ did not, however, recommend that an entirely new system of qualifications should be created and assumed that existing vocational qualifications would be embraced by a national framework (Hargraves, 2000, p.301). The responsibility for the structure and content of occupational standards and many of the qualifications that exist today lies largely with the NCVQ. The design of new standards is of course within the remit of the QCA.

Reputation

Although 'all publicity is good publicity' to some, this appears not to be the case with NVQs. Matlay (2000) reasoned that the cumulative effects of negative publicity about NVQs had left its mark upon owner-managers and training managers. In particular, well-publicised cases of failure and shoddy practices 'were very damaging' to the NVQ movement. This problem of perceived lack of credibility and image was acknowledged following the Beaumont report (NCVQ, 1996).

The NVQ movement added to the qualifications 'jungle' (Williams, 1999) and, as noted above, the RVQ had never intended for there to be another layer of qualifications introduced to the UK. The promised reforms and simplifications of vocational training in the UK with awarding and examining bodies (NCVQ, 1987, p.5) never happened. 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, 1995). The need for a review pointed to structural weaknesses in the institutional arrangements for vocational education. One specific factor identified by Beaumont (1995, p.24) is the need for employers, and universities, to deal with several awarding bodies in order to offer a range of NVQs. This adds costs and confusion to the management of NVQ programmes.

The Learning Experience

To complete an NVQ, candidates build a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate that they possess the necessary occupational competence embracing skills, personal competence and subject knowledge. This process is not intuitively obvious and candidates can struggle to understand both the nature of evidence and ways of relating it to standards (Hillier, 1999). This problem is linked directly to the precise content and structure of occupational standards, their exacting demands for evidence and the consequent requirements for assessment which drive candidates' activities (Grugulis, 1997a, 1997b). The Employment Department study (ED, 1995) also found that a majority of employers were bothered about excessive administration and bureaucracy.

High-level NVQs have a poor reputation in terms of being able to develop skills and knowledge (Hillier, 1999) although see below for evidence that they can be effective in this regard. In management NVQs, a recurring problem is that candidates feel they are not learning much that is new and are only being accredited for what they know they can do already (Fuller, 1994; Holman and Hall, 1996). There seems to be a genuine paradox here that is aptly illustrated by NVQ5 in Strategic Management. If managers are senior enough to be able to gather evidence for the various units of competence (they would need to be involved in top-level strategy making and resource allocation) then it is hard to see reasons why such managers would benefit from doing so given that they will probably have received substantial education and training and enjoy a reasonable income. One such reason would be confirmation that they have strategic level competence but in the current climate position and academic qualifications serve as a proxy for confirmation in many sectors.

One caveat concerning studies of candidates' experiences (Grugulis, 2000; Hillier, 1999) is that they may not have distinguished between any genuine problems created by NVQ standards and assessment processes on one hand, and aspects of the specific delivery and assessment methods used by a particular provider on the other. It is easy to imagine that candidates would report negative attitudes towards NVQs because their particular programme was uninspiring or made unnecessarily bureaucratic by tutors who were neither committed to nor knowledgeable about NVQs. Because these two facets cannot easily be untangled, this problem hangs over most studies of candidates' experiences.

Another difficulty with high-level NVQs concerns low completion rates. Analysis of national data for NVQs in management shows that completions were running at about 30% of registrations (Swailles and Brown, 1999). This is a remarkably high non-completion rate and would seem to reflect candidates' problems with the overall learning experience. Factors associated with completion include relatively high levels of personal competence for leadership, good written communication skills and inter-personal sensitivity; support from line managers and home life; strong motivation to improve work performance and inflexible submission dates (Hooper, 2000).

The apparently low completion rate should be seen, however, in context. Traditional college-based, part-time courses can have high withdrawal rates although they would not normally be as great as the 70% noted on some NVQs. More important, NVQs are intended to fit a lifelong learning ethos in which more open-ended learning is necessary. While high completion rates within bounded time periods such as semesters and academic years is convenient for education colleges, it is arguably an unfair criticism of NVQs since they were not designed to fit into such systems. The key issue here is to identify whether any aspects of NVQs are deterring students from completing them.

Fuller (1994) proposed that qualifications can be seen as having two important dimensions. 'Use' value (relevance to actual work and tasks) and 'exchange' value (enabling holders to use their qualifications to get a better job for instance). While their proponents have made claims that NVQs score highly on both dimensions, there is substantial evidence that they struggle in terms of both use and exchange.

Costs and Returns

There has been relatively little work done on the real costs of NVQs. Individuals paying for NVQs or programmes leading to NVQs could at one time claim tax relief but this benefit has been withdrawn. The Employment Department (ED, 1995) noted that the costs of NVQs differed widely and the main reasons were:

- Large variations in the required time for assessment.
- Some training regimes were more expensive than others.
- The need to train assessors and the differing approaches to quality assurance.
- The income generated from improvements to working practices, and thus to offset training costs, was highly variable.
- Differences in the relative competence of people doing NVQs such that the costs of the process differed widely across candidates.
- Costs from awarding bodies for registration and certification were small.
- Employers struggled to calculate how NVQ-based training led to savings and/or more efficient working practices.

Hyland and Matlay (1998, p.407) reported that the costs of work-based NVQs, in general, are much higher than college-based routes and this seems likely to be one of the barriers to adoption particularly in small and medium sized companies. Welsh (1996) found a predominance of negative views about NVQs among managers of small businesses based on NVQs being top-down, prescriptive and with little evidence that they lead to improvements. Over and above perceptions, key factors affecting training in small firms are market position (Hyland and Matlay, 1997) and the presence of a culture and infrastructure for training (Hales *et al*, 1996). Market position in this context means that firms in high technology sectors are compelled to engage in training far more than firms in low technology sectors.

Using very large national survey samples, Dearden *et al* (2000) examined the financial returns to people with particular levels of qualification. They found that men with an NVQ3-5 earn around a 6-9% return whereas women earn around a 1-5% return. In comparison, 'A' 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.)

The NVQ Infrastructure

Claims by the NCVQ that NVQs are employer-led and have strong backing from employers are dismissed by Hyland (1996) in a passionate review of faults in vocational education. Hyland raises the issue of NVQ delivery (at all levels) and, drawing on Beaumont's finding that most respondents would only recognise NVQs awarded by other employers, recommends that NVQs 'should be returned to the workplace and removed from all courses in schools, colleges and non-workplace training institutions' (1996, p.359). This idea has an appeal for low-level NVQs but whether the market would support similar views of high-level NVQs must surely be open to question. Given the universities' historic role in vocational education (e.g. medicine, law, engineering) there seems no overriding reason why they should not be successful in other areas (CVCP, 1995; Randall, 1995). In addition to endorsing concerns about the ineffectiveness of NVQs, Hyland (1996) also points to structural problems present in the arrangements for overseeing NVQs. He proposed radical changes to vocational education arrangements in preference to adjustments to a system that retains NVQs.

Factors Having Little or No Effect as Barriers

In addition to the criticisms of NVQs, it is worth commenting on factors that do not pose major barriers.

Awareness of NVQs among owner-managers is generally high (Matlay, 2000). This is thought to stem from 'relentless' publicity about NVQs but is offset by the perceived relevance of NVQs to small firms and issues surrounding their reputation.

While there has been some publicity surrounding shoddy assessment practices, far more influential are the details of what is being assessed (the standards) and the actual quality assurance procedures for advice, assessment and verification. Beaumont (1995, p.17) concluded that 'the quality of assessment needs to be improved and the costs reduced'. His point about costs of assessment can be expected to have some barrier effect since they are transferred to candidates or employers. However, concerns about the validity and reliability of assessment (Konrad, 2000) do not seem to have created a major barrier.

Putting aside the problems of cross-matching academic and competence-based programmes, there seems to be little evidence that candidates seek to use credits gained through an NVQ to help gain admission to other programmes. Thus, difficulties credit-rating NVQs in line with degrees and diplomas (Hillier, 1999) do not appear to present a barrier.

Benefits of High-level NVQs

This review is concerned with structural barriers to high-level NVQs. In pursuing this aim, the literature that was selected tends to consider their negative aspects. Research evidence was also found, however, for a positive side of high-level NVQs and this is summarised here. Students entering DMS and MBA programmes at the University of Glamorgan from a non-traditional competence route performed just as well as traditional-entry students in a majority of assessments (Taylor, 1996). This finding lends weight to the idea of credit rating NVQ qualifications in higher education (see ED, 1995; Lloyd-Langton and Portwood, 1994) although the practical benefit of doing so is questionable (see above). Candidates who complete their NVQ report growth in personal confidence (Hillier, 1999). Swailes (1997) also found growth in confidence along with similar self-perceptions of enhanced management development when NVQ candidates were compared with traditional Diploma students. Winterton and Winterton (1997) found that management development based on the MCI's standards can lead to improved individual and organisational performance.

Because successful NVQ candidates have the skills to interpret standards and build portfolios they develop an improved ability to help others get NVQs (Hillier, 1999). Over time, this accumulation of experience should smooth the way for other candidates.

The national occupational standards do not just exist for the purpose of the qualifications. They are generally seen as a way of upskilling the workforce and are used to help improve systems and procedures in organisations such as recruitment and selection or information management (Hillier, 1999) and as a basis for designing the content of academic degrees and diplomas. It is possible that, in time, the distinction between the standards *per se* and their use as qualifications will diverge. Put differently, while standards seem set to play an important role in training and development it does not necessarily follow that more and more candidates will register for whole NVQs.

Part 2 Research Design

Samples

To further investigate barriers to high-level NVQs, telephone surveys were conducted among stakeholder groups. These included; pre and post 1992 universities, awarding bodies and National Training Organisations (NTO), Small Business Services (SBS), Learning and Skills Councils (LSC), private and public sector employers, and students that had completed a full NVQ at level 4 or 5. The NTOs were selected on the basis that they had developed high-level NVQs in their field. For consistency, the SBS were mostly located in the same region as served by the LSC. LSC were geographically dispersed and covered rural, urban and mixed economies.

Telephone interview protocols were designed to explore perceptions of barriers held by each group. The protocols adopted a semi-structured approach built around key themes rather than impose a pre-set list of closed questions. About ten interviews were arranged within each group and the organisations that participated in the study are listed in Appendix 2. Three researchers were employed. One surveyed the universities, LSCs, Small Firms Services and completed the case studies. The second completed interviews with employers and awarding bodies. The third interviewed students. This approach to data collection ensures a level of independence for each set of stakeholder views obtained.

Case studies were written reflecting the stance towards NVQs of small, medium and large employers and an awarding body. Cases were written following face-to-face interviews and returned to the originators for comments and corrections.

Data Analysis

An interview summary was written shortly after the completion of each telephone interview. Summaries were then compared for each stakeholder group in order to draw out the main perceptions.

Part 3 Stakeholder Perceptions of Barriers

LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCILS

Interviews were carried out with 12 LSCs dispersed throughout the UK.

Barriers

Perceptions

A frequently mentioned barrier concerned perceptions of NVQs, which were seen as being associated with lower level qualifications by both employers and individuals. Negative perceptions were thought to be based upon a lack of knowledge of NVQs and the value they can bring. Careers officers, parents, teachers and others involved in career guidance were thought to lack knowledge about NVQs and thus be discouraging in their attitudes. Negative perceptions were also attributed to professional bodies and universities – some snobbery around the academic/vocational distinction was suggested.

Linked to this, NVQs were not seen by users or employers as being on a par with degree-level qualifications. At high levels, it was felt that people prefer traditional certificates and diplomas as they are thought to be more credible.

Funding

Some LSCs made use of European funding to make up the shortfall in their budgets for funding NVQ levels 4 and 5. Others felt that high-level NVQs were not a funding priority although none had refused training at this level. Government funding of NVQs at lower levels had increased demand for levels 2 and 3, which took priority.

Time

The time involved to complete NVQs was seen as a problem, particularly in small firms. This arises because they require an infrastructure of support with host companies, which takes up the time of other employees. high-level NVQs were said to be particularly 'greedy' in terms of time requirements compared to other qualifications at the same level.

Changes

Public perceptions of NVQs need to be addressed, making clear how they relate to other qualifications and demonstrating 'parity of esteem'. Funding mechanisms at levels 4 and 5 need changing. Professional bodies should be encouraged to integrate NVQs more with their entrance qualifications. NVQs also need to be more flexible. They were criticised for being too generic such that parts of a job were left uncovered by an NVQ or it was not possible to provide evidence for some competences.

SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES (Business Links)

Interviews were carried out with 12 Business Links. These were selected from the same geographical locations as the Learning Skills Councils. In all cases, participants had direct experience of the training needs of small firms.

Barriers

Costs and Financing

It was generally accepted that small firms could not afford to spend much on training. SBS were not always able to help with funding and, even when this was possible, sources of funding could be hard to locate.

Time

Given the small numbers employed, the time taken to complete an NVQ was regarded by some as a higher barrier than costs and financing. Small firms were said to prefer short (non NVQ) courses delivered through workshops and which are less expensive in terms of the time lost to employers while training occurs.

Perceptions

The small business community was thought to have a poor perception of high-level NVQs. It was suggested that NVQs at all levels lacked both flexibility and "particularity". This refers to the specific requirements of small businesses for tailored qualifications. Small businesses also saw the process of completing an NVQ as isolating while short courses gave trainees the possibility of working with other people with similar problems.

Poor perceptions were based partly on bad experiences with NVQ providers during the nineties. SBS also recognised that small firms had a lack of knowledge about NVQs and how they could be used. This view was associated with the concern that small firms saw NVQs as being saturated with impenetrable jargon.

Changes

Marketing

NVQs need to be marketed differently showing their relevance to small businesses in particular. Any such campaign needs to emphasise the "business case" for NVQs.

Uniformity

To dispel the underlying confusion around the funding and provision of NVQs, it was suggested that some attempt at uniformity should be made in this area. One respondent stressed that the confusion around advice and guidance and the number of providers needed to be addressed.

Funding

At the moment there is no cost incentive for small firms to carry out this training.

UNIVERSITIES

Seventeen interviews were arranged with universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The contact for interviews differed since the extent and type of provision varied widely. Indeed, it was difficult to find the 'right' contact given the unique set-up in each university. The sample included 7 universities currently running high-level NVQ programmes, 3 that had ceased delivering high-level programmes, 1 that was considering setting up provision and 6 not involved NVQ provision. The subjects covered included management, cultural heritage, guidance, engineering, training and development, health and social services, veterinary nursing practice.

Reasons for Curtailing Delivery

Lack of demand was the main reason. NVQs had been 'peripheral' to the universities' core activities and their delivery depended upon committed individuals who had little support. Furthermore, in the management field, the market is 'crowded' with qualifications and there is little incentive, or need, for people to take NVQs in a free market. One university noted, however, that it is seeing growth in an NVQ in advice and guidance partly because there are no competing qualifications.

Lack of demand was said to be partly due to funding problems. 'Open' programmes would be too expensive without funding and corporate clients were not attracted to relatively high-cost programmes given that competing providers could deliver at lower cost. However, an alternative explanation for decreasing demand is that organisations have internalised the NVQ frameworks and used them to develop competence, rather than opt for full qualifications.

Awarding Bodies

Relations with awarding bodies were generally good. However, one body was heavily criticised for continuing with examinations and continuous assessment as part of a 'belt and braces' approach.

Costs

Although funding problems were mentioned, not all respondents found this a barrier.

Perceptions

There is still a view that NVQs involve too much paperwork compared to alternative qualifications and that the associated jargon deters candidates. They are perceived to be very mechanistic, reductionist, tedious to complete and not developmental. Difficulties experienced by candidates in finding and providing evidence for assessment were also linked to the decision to drop NVQs at some centres.

The real learning benefits of NVQs were not thought to be explicit enough and NVQs are not marketed properly. The potential that they have for skill development is not emphasised.

Several respondents noted the poor image of NVQs and their association with low-level qualifications. Students often completed NVQs because they were a mandatory part of their job; otherwise they would not have undertaken them. While this can be true of alternative qualifications, this factor may be more influential where NVQs are concerned.

Commitment from Universities

Universities involved in NVQs had the view that other universities resisted the competence approach and that much 'snobbery' surrounded them. Those not providing NVQs felt that the further education sector dealt with NVQs and that traditional universities need not consider them, citing a distinction between vocational and academic awards in the areas covered by NVQs.

Changes

To catalyse take-up, a more 'user-friendly' framework is needed to house NVQs in universities. NVQs do not have sufficient identity in the marketing undertaken by universities and it is unclear to enquirers how they can get good advice. Better marketing to students was also suggested to differentiate higher level NVQs from lower levels. However, a key change needed before NVQs would have higher profiles in universities concerned commitment from senior university managers. NVQ provision was seen to occur 'opportunistically' with provision occurring through contracting-out or through specific departments. Stronger links between other course provision and NVQs would help to 'embed' NVQs and they need to be seen more in the context of structured development programmes. This has been achieved to a point in the public sector where NVQs are more integrated into development programmes than in the private sector.

AWARDING BODIES

Twelve awarding bodies were interviewed. Where NVQs are mandatory, then no barriers were identified although this does not mean that they are unproblematic.

Barriers

Perceptions

A general lack of understanding about NVQs and how they work existed. The term 'NVQ' associated with a low-level qualification. Candidates for high-level NVQs were presumed to want a developmental qualification with higher kudos.

High-level qualifications need to be valuable to both candidates and employers. Academic qualifications were deemed to give more breadth and provide better value in the longer term than an NVQ. They were not thought to be valued highly by employers and the whole recognition issue was creating a barrier. Equal acceptance of vocational and academic qualifications is needed although awarding bodies felt that universities do not see NVQs as being equivalent to academic qualifications.

The standard approach to assessment does not fit as comfortably with high-level NVQs as it does at lower levels.

Funding and Costs

Funding was a fundamental issue. Level 3 NVQs have been boosted by being linked to the Modern Apprenticeship Framework and the relative absence of funding for levels 4–5 is thought to be containing them. Costs of high-level NVQs to employers was thought to be a barrier.

Time

The time needed to build an NVQ portfolio around normal work activities was cited as a barrier. Taught qualifications built around regular time slots are easier to manage and complete.

Getting Assessors

There are difficulties finding assessors for high-level NVQs because of the knowledge and competence required. Perhaps there is scope for awarding bodies to access a 'register' of higher level assessors in the same manner as databases of external examiners exist for academic qualifications. (UVAC might consider the implications of creating such a database of NVQ assessors.)

A Welsh awarding body noted difficulties finding Welsh-speaking assessors to work with Welsh-speaking candidates and this retarded completion rates.

Shortage of NVQ Titles

Two awarding bodies reported shortages of specific NVQ titles. For example, sufficient knowledge and practice exist to enable a level 5 award in accountancy and more qualifications in the care services area. The difficulty, noted by awarding bodies however, is that such awards would be partially redundant with existing qualifications such as the entry qualifications of the professional bodies in accounting.

Changes

Some re-branding of high-level awards together with increased promotion and funding by government were suggested to improve take-up and perceptions.

Standards were criticised for being too rigid, too complex and ridden with jargon. Ironically, while national occupational standards are designed to be generic (eg, NVQ4 Management should fit all middle managers), the standards were thought to fit actual jobs rather poorly. Qualifications contain too many core units and not enough options, hence more scope through optional units was suggested. This would enable NVQs to become more focused, more job-related and thus benefit candidates. However, it is necessary to alter the design of standards overall, rather than add more units made from the current mould.

PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYERS

Ten interviews were carried out with public sector organisations.

Barriers

Perception

There is an historical stigma attached to NVQs that stems from their introduction when they received a bad press. They were not thought to be recognised as professional qualifications since employees often need a recognised certificate or diploma to practice. They are not thought of in the same way as academic qualifications.

Time

Portfolio production is seen as an add-on in terms of workload. The demands of a normal job are a barrier to completion and the portfolio was thought by some to be an administrative nightmare.

Job-Role

A mismatch between the occupational standards and actual jobs was reported. This creates barriers since it is near impossible for candidates to provide evidence for some units given that simulation is often not allowed.

Costs

Cost to employers was an issue. Without external funding, the costs of NVQs are prohibitive and sources of external funding for NVQs have diminished in recent years.

Assessors

Because of the diverse content of standards, employers found difficulty getting internal assessors for high-level NVQs.

Qualifications not matching Jobs

A specific example of NVQs being out of alignment with an employer 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 high-level NVQs. A high turnover of staff within the department and to other government offices also depresses demand for NVQs.

Changes

Employers called for more publicity to raise awareness and favourable perceptions of NVQs. To overcome concerns about the value of NVQs in giving access to higher education, 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.

The open-ended structure of NVQs was thought to have an effect on completion rates and should be replaced with more fixed times and targets surrounding assessment and completion.

PRIVATE SECTOR EMPLOYERS

Interviews were held with 10 companies ranging from a few hundred to several thousand employees.

Barriers

Perceptions

There was a lack of understanding, particularly among senior managers, about what NVQs are and how they work. Some evidence for the academic/vocational divisiveness was also noted such that they were not thought to be rigorous enough for senior managers. Such perceptions lead to the quality and value of the awards being considered less worthwhile than alternatives and the added value not being recognised. Conversely, in two small firms surveyed, the attitudes to NVQs were not negative but there was no history of high-level NVQ usage nor were there any plans to use them.

Time

NVQs were thought to be too time-consuming even though some employers would grant students some release from work in order to provide evidence.

The Standards

The standards were thought to have insufficient fit with typical job roles and so access to evidence for some units becomes difficult or impossible. Their content was described as 'petty, antiquated and long-winded' and, as such, off-putting to people particularly to students who are relatively isolated.

In-house training was considered to be better suited to training needs because it can be more tailored. One manufacturer cited the withdrawal of a large retailer from NVQ training programmes as very off-putting. This was based on the view that if the resources of the retailer could not make NVQs effective, then neither could the smaller manufacturer.

Changes

Employers felt that a public relations exercise is needed to promote NVQs and the views of NVQs held by senior managers needs to change. The perceived value of NVQs needs to be raised and more flexibility, eg, through greater choice of optional units, would help. In the private sector, NVQs are seldom a requirement to get a job and this helps create a 'vicious circle' of depressed demand for them.

FORMER STUDENTS

Of the 10 students contacted, 6 had completed a level 5 in Management, 3 had completed level 4 in Management and 1 had completed level 4 Business Administration. Four students had been required to complete the NVQ as part of their job. All students 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.

Has the NVQ helped you in your job?

Eight students said that the NVQ had helped in some aspect of their job. Some students had gained the theory that underpinned the practice in their job and also gave a benchmark for their performance as a manager. A beneficial aspect of NVQs was that they highlighted various management skills that students had not previously thought of or used and which could be applied in their business.

The NVQ portfolio enabled students to develop a personal reflection on their work and management skills. This process asked, how effective am I as a manager, and by looking at things from different viewpoints it highlighted weaknesses. Some students had gained a different job with the aid of the qualification.

Only 2 students said the qualification has not helped in their job. They felt that an NVQ carries no recognition even though a lot of work has to be undertaken to gain the qualification. One student felt that it carried no 'weight', unlike the MSc that she since obtained, to such an extent that she does not include the NVQ on her C.V.

Did you find the NVQ to be developmental qualification?

Nine former students said the NVQ was a developmental qualification. It seemed that the NVQ increased their confidence and overall awareness of other elements of management and personal skills. It also demonstrated how to manage workloads and ways of being efficient as well as the ability to recognise skills that students already possessed but which they undervalued. The NVQ gave students the ability to reflect on self as well as the relationships with other members of staff, while overall communication is improved – this combination has reduced stress in some students.

What were the main problems, if any, with putting the portfolio together?

Although students had advisers and workshops, portfolio compilation was a problem area. In particular the sheer volume of evidence needed and the photocopying that went with it. Managing to find the evidence and match it with the standards also seemed to be a problem, as it did not always tie in with their job at the time. Some students felt the standards were unclear. Time also seemed to be a major problem for some, little or no time was set aside for their NVQ during their working week and this put great pressure on their personal time.

What would you say is the biggest barrier to further take-up of high-level NVQs (on a national level)?

The most frequent answer here was clearly the fact that NVQs do not carry the recognition that a degree has. It appears that NVQs have some sort of 'stigma' attached to them because of their lack of recognition. Another important point was that candidates need to be in the right job in order to meet the performance criteria yet by the time they reach the right job they already have a full workload.

Costs and the time given to students to complete their studies can also be a problem. A surprising revelation, albeit from one interviewee, was that candidates in their organisation are only given the opportunity to study for level 3 as some managers feel that there is no significant difference between levels 3 and 4 and yet level 3 is easier to complete. By requiring employees to complete level 3 not 4, the organisation saves both employee

time and financial cost, since the programme is shorter, and believes that it is getting the same outcome in terms of staff development. This example brings out a possible problem with the relative 'distance' between NVQ levels in the same occupation.

What changes would you make to the NVQ system?

Less portfolio work was the main suggestion. The need to decrease the volume and get through the process a lot quicker would help to solve the time issue, which is a concern for many students and businesses alike.

The standards need to be clearer about the evidence is needed. NVQs need to become more flexible regarding evidence as not all jobs can provide the evidence that is required.

Lastly, NVQs need to improve their image to enable greater recognition for the award. Some students see an NVQ as the sort of qualification that is completed by those who are not academic enough to do something better such as a degree.

Part 4 Case Studies

CASE 1: A REGIONAL THEATRE TRUST

This charitable organisation employees 65 full-time and 100-150 part-time workers plus about 120 volunteers. Annual turnover is £6 million.

Training Priorities

Training priorities vary because they cover different skill areas. They have box office staff, engineers, administration staff, bar staff, and technicians. As a whole, they have a need for IT skills but this is at different levels. They have a process whereby individual training needs are picked up by line managers and passed on to the HR department.

Staff taking NVQs

The only staff on NVQ courses are two technical trainees. The theatre takes on one every year so that there are two at any time. The trainees do electrical installation backstage on a two-year placement and go to a college once a week. The training provider is a local FE and the training broker is a local District Council. They usually take NVQ level 2 or 3. One member of staff in the finance department is taking an NVQ that she started before joining the theatre and she is allowed to complete it. No assessment is done in-house; it is all done through college.

NVQs do not give the right level of knowledge and skills although there is nothing accredited that provides the knowledge or skills to work specifically in the theatre business. There is a new awarding body called Metier, which is working towards accreditation of courses for the theatre industry, but so far no awards are available. There is nothing local that the trainees can do, which is why they attend college and do electrical installation. For them, the work that they actually do at college has got nothing to do with theatre. This has caused problems in the past, which is why a good relationship has had to be built up with the college and the broker. Regular college attendance has conflicted with daytime performances in some seasons and this has caused friction. Students have attended for two evenings instead. Students learn things at college that are not applicable to work and they need to know things at work that they are not taught at college. Employees of the theatre, however, are looking to go on specifically to work in theatres.

The trainee who is doing an NVQ in finance works on the payroll but has had to ask if she can work in other areas of finance in order to get evidence for her NVQ. This is achievable in small organisations but might cause problems in a large one.

Assessment

Two staff went through assessor training about four years ago but they have never used it. One trainee left and the assessor did not get her D33 so it lapsed.

NVQ delivery at the college is mostly good, not too disruptive, but the amount of paperwork is a problem, as is the relevance. NVQs seem to be time-consuming and this leads to less commitment from staff who are part time and temporary. In order to create a base level of skills, the theatre uses a consultant to put together short courses. He is a good trainer, they know him, can get him afterwards to do a top-up and that works well.

The management training that they put on is not done as part of an NVQ. Because theatre management is not a 9 to 5 operation, and is also seasonal, it is easier to put on specific training courses when there are quieter times. As they say, 'when the theatre is dark'. It would be difficult to get the commitment to the large amount of time and paperwork involved in being assessed and producing the evidence in doing higher level NVQs.

The theatre uses national standards in the design of job descriptions.

Summary of Barriers

The case study indicates that short courses are preferred because they fit the time available to staff in an industry in which hours are long and irregular. This applies to staff at all levels from technicians to senior management. The NVQ format is not thought to fit into their normal working life and times. Short courses are also more easily tailored to meet the specific requirements of staff training. At the lower levels, absence of an industry-specific qualification causes problems for the organisation.

Costs are an issue with NVQ provision. The organisation feels it is more cost effective to provide tailored short courses, which will be well attended, require less commitment in time and are more easily administered.

CASE 2: A SMALL MANUFACTURING COMPANY

The Oxfordshire-based company employs 20 staff and has a turnover of £1 million designing and manufacturing custom made enclosures for electronic components.

Training Priorities

None of the training is certificated. Some short courses and personal development courses are taken by management and administrative staff but the shop-floor staff are trained in-house. They learn how to use the specific engineering drawings required by the company. Drawings are dedicated to the company so this is essential.

No one has undertaken any NVQs. They are not considered to be relevant for the shop-floor staff although they may be relevant to the management but have not been considered so far. If someone expressed an interest in taking one they would be encouraged. The senior managers are engineers and none of the senior managers has any certificated management qualifications, although they have taken short courses at a local centre for small business training.

In a small company it is difficult to get the time for managers to have training. Director development management courses have been taken at a local centre for small business training. Occasionally, it was difficult to get the time and a day was missed. It also entailed coming in to work early to keep up with work before going to the centre some distance away. The course was very useful but not certificated.

The company has little information about NVQs, no clear ideas about the costs or what knowledge and skills they provide or their credibility. However, there is a feeling that they could be more accessible. If companies are not already used to them because they prefer the apprenticeship route then they are not inclined to take them up.

Because of their rural location, finding staff is difficult and recruitment tends to be by word of mouth. They find that staff often stay for a long time and sometimes do not want to do any formal training or learn different skills to those they use in their jobs.

Summary of Barriers to Take-up

In a small company it is difficult to allow time for training over a long period. Short courses are preferred. Very little is known about NVQs and what they might provide. Although there is a gap in management training, it is not seen as a priority.

CASE 3: MEDIUM SIZED MANUFACTURING COMPANY

The company employs about 320 employees and is a common ownership company as the shares are held in trust. The company manufactures and exports unsaturated polyester resins and the annual turnover in the UK is about £60 million.

Training Priorities

Training and development are key concepts in this IIP accredited company. Everyone has an annual appraisal that triggers a discussion of training needs. The highly technical nature of the business means that their chemists need to keep up-to-date. Other staff pursue training through short courses, conferences, distance learning and part-time study. Training requirements are assessed when people change roles internally. People take charge of their own careers and bring up issues about training.

The company is a registered NVQ Centre. The awarding body is VQSET. After six months, new entrants are registered for NVQ to level 2 in Process Operations. They have their own assessors and internal verifier and are externally verified. They also have ISO9001 and ISO14000 for which there are auditors and evaluators. They also train people in a variety of specialised health and self and safety related courses. Much of this training is in-house. They have good training facilities and bring in trainers to run tailored programmes.

One employee completed an NVQ in administration with support from a local college. This occurred when NVQs were introduced and the downside was that they did a great deal of simulation of tasks for assessment. The same employee, who worked in the sales office, was led to believe by the college that she could then go on to do an NVQ in sales. The company could not support this and it would have diminished the credibility of the NVQ, as the person was not working in a sales-related role. The idea that someone who did no selling could get an NVQ level 3 in sales would also have had a demoralising effect on the sales force.

Higher Level NVQs

The company has looked at NVQs for management at higher levels. The majority of managers have degrees and so if they want to take management qualifications, they usually do the CMS or DMS through the Open University. One member of staff did an NVQ level 4 linked with a management qualification. A few years ago they were looking at a programme for regional managers and were thinking of linking it into an NVQ. However, perceptions were that this would be time-consuming and managers did not have a positive view of NVQs. Eventually, they put together their own course, which was not certificated. Since people tend to use management training to broaden themselves, NVQs are unsuitable for this because it is often supervisory people who take up training to prepare themselves for management and they would not be able to provide evidence at level 4.

They also looked at levels 3 and 4 in sales. This would have required someone being trained as an assessor and they decided they could, if they wished, use the standards to get the competency levels needed without going down the route of a whole NVQ.

NVQs – Relevance and Effectiveness

While NVQs give the knowledge and skills needed, progress towards them can be slow. The company is generous with training budgets and people are not usually turned down. They have to show training is relevant and the knowledge must be transferable to the job. Some training purely for the purposes of personal development is funded.

They have good relations with the awarding body and no problems about accessibility of NVQs at the moment. Although registration is slow, it is not a problem. They have not quantified the benefits of NVQs but feel that the programme gives them a standard to work from. It has impacted on what they expect people to know. One criticism of the NVQ system is that it is too open-ended. There is no time limit on completion and people need a time constraint.

They do not use national occupational standards at the moment other than for NVQs but they are looking at them for management development. They have a set of skills and competences related to each job but have reached a stage where they need to be reviewed.

Summary of Barriers

Experienced managers can perceive NVQs as irrelevant. More traditional management courses are preferred, eg MBA, CMS, DMS.

The numbers involved in higher level NVQs would not warrant the time and trouble involved in training assessors who could work to that level in the workplace.

The company has a very particular outlook by nature of its unusual ownership structure and prefers more specific training, using its own facilities and external trainers who know the company and its aims.

Poor perceptions of NVQs in some areas have been fostered by experiences of less than satisfactory providers in the early days of NVQs. This is despite the overall success with NVQs at level 2.

CASE 4: LARGE RETAILER

This national London-based company employs around 4,000 staff and has a turnover of about £350 million. NVQs are used as a tool to reduce turnover. As part of their induction, new staff sign up to NVQ level 2 Retail. This has been very successful and the company would like to extend it to part-time staff but they do not have the assessment capacity, given the current assessment requirements, to do this. They use LCCI as an awarding body. Staff can progress to customer service at level 3 and may become a team-leader after that. Staff then do a Certificate of Management or follow professional routes e.g. finance. In-house qualifications may be built upon but there are areas where there are no NVQs at the moment, e.g. visual merchandising.

All training is done in-house, for which the company has written its own programmes. A training organisation once did the assessing but the company became concerned about how long it was taking to get people through NVQs. The NVQ standards have been matched to their own induction and this has gained a national training award.

Staff are reviewed by managers bi-weekly and the process is rich in feedback. They are the biggest provider of qualifications in central London and have worked hard to achieve this, including working with the awarding body to get centre approval.

The bureaucracy is very difficult to work with and obtaining funding has become more bureaucratic. Government changes to the funding rules caused some problems. Up until the change in arrangements they received about £20,000 a month whereas it is now around £4,000 a month.

Structures

The company recruits and trains its own assessors. This is a long process but provides a good basis from which to understand assessment and evaluation. They struggled with external verification initially and there is a problem with the amount of auditing that is carried out. They are externally verified and audited by the new funding provider every two weeks, which is too often. The funder seems unused to working in private sector organisations and the awarding body would pick up many of the things they look at. Assessment could be simpler and cheaper. There is too much assessment although it costs roughly the same as the income received. Training organisations were said to make a profit because they do not assess as thoroughly.

Successes

The use of (lower level) NVQs has improved staff retention and customer service. The standards have been a good benchmarking tool.

Higher Level NVQs

The company does not use management level NVQs. They feel that the competence approach prohibits them from inputting the material that is needed and as such prevents development to the extent that a certificate programme can develop them. An NVQ level 3 is being considered but, at management level, NVQs do not have the same credibility. Managers need to move their knowledge forward in big steps and then test it in their workplace. (The certificate in management and team leading certificate are provided by Institute of Management.)

For some employees, an NVQ is their first qualification. The company has a ceremony to award them and boost confidence. The managers, however, already have qualifications and this is where credibility issues arise. Most have degrees and need to be taken further. For them, NVQs are not as worthy as certificates. Some staff undertake diploma courses, professional routes and, in one case, a degree in psychology. The reasons for not doing management level NVQs are to do with meeting the business needs. A few years ago they decided to go down the certificate route which was piloted for two years and is now being launched on a bigger population. This will be followed by the team leader qualification through the IM. It is very important that people have high levels of stimulation and the company is concerned that NVQs can be paper-based and very onerous.

Regarding NVQ credibility, they are more acceptable up to level 3. Most of the decision-makers have not completed NVQs and the credibility issue may be a generational factor. It is also a question of inputs and outputs. At higher levels employers need to establish different ways of thinking. They could have duelled a certificate and an NVQ but the input/output balance would have been wrong, as the paperwork associated with a linked qualification would have been considerable. The assessment process needs to be made less bureaucratic. To help employers, it is important for the government and related bodies to clarify what NVQs are. The value of having in-house assessors is to give feedback to individuals. It is more important for their assessors to give feedback than to deal with bureaucracy.

Summary of Barriers

The preference for certificated courses in management stems partly from managers' own choices and partly because the courses are seen to provide more external and developmental input than NVQs can at that level. Issues around credibility still exist but these may lessen with time. NVQ systems are still too paper-based and bureaucratic. Although it works well at lower levels, programmes have to be customised to suit the business. Assessment and verification processes need simplifying.

CASE 5: NHS TRUST

Use of NVQs

The number of staff covered by the training remit is over 3,000. Bad experiences with college providers led them to become an accreditation centre for NVQs levels 2 and 3 in care, customer service and business administration. Programmes last 12 months and take a maximum of 12 candidates who attend workshops one day a month. Programmes commence every 3 or 4 months. Workplace assessors also spend half a day with the candidates to work on portfolios. This overcomes previous problems where candidates were left “high and dry” and were not given enough support.

They have candidates from other organisations, e.g. the RNIB, but cannot promote themselves too much as they have very few staff. They are looking to provide level 4 NVQ in care and Management NVQs. Despite the very poor image of NVQs stemming from bad experiences with providers, the centre has been very successful. No NVQs are compulsory. However, care support workers have been awarded a national pay-rise, which is related to the NVQ that they are doing. There is a ‘carrot’ there for them but it is not compulsory.

In care, there is a high withdrawal rate and this is usually related to assessor support. Given a bank of assessors, cover arrangements could be provided. This is not such an issue with customer service or business administration.

Problems

No problems except the paperwork. Support by external verifiers has been an issue. Despite making sure that people had full-time commitment to being external verifiers they have had some experiences where they have been let down by verifiers not turning up. This is especially problematic in care because it is difficult to organise the presence of patients and be sure it fits in with workplace arrangements. If the verifier does not attend at the arranged time it causes major problems. At the beginning it was difficult to get assessors on board and to appreciate that it was not just about photocopying as assessors thought that quantity was quality. Paperwork has since been cut back.

Costs

The training packs are reasonably priced at about £30 each. Registration and certification costs could be reduced. Public sector organisations should be given a contribution. At one time they could use funding from Individual Learning Accounts but that has gone. With experience, the Trust has been able to flexibly adapt NVQs to work for them and they have underpinned NVQs with development sessions.

Credibility

NVQs have had a bad press in the past and they have had an image of being for people who were not capable of doing other qualifications. The Trust has worked to dispel this image by presentations and making sure that people understand what they are about. Academically they are still seen as second best and this view needs to change. It was suggested that their local university provider is transferring its provision of levels 2 and 3 for NVQ in care to an FE provider leaving the university to deliver level 4 only. This was perceived as the university not wanting to be associated with lower level NVQs and sending a message that lower levels are devalued.

Standards

They have used occupational standards to write a 'Foundations of Management' course which has prompted thinking about doing more management development. In the past some staff completed an Institute of Health Services Management qualification through a nearby university. Financial constraints put a stop to this as it cost £1,200 per candidate and few managers had the budget to support it. The issue now is whether to move forward with a generic NVQ in management, ie, not specifically health-related.

Structures

There is still too much paperwork and too much scrutiny. Registration is time-consuming and they need dedicated administrative support deal with it.

Summary of Barriers

There is still a perception that NVQs have weak academic credibility. Work has to be done on overcoming the damage done by poor provision in the past. Funding is a problem in the public sector. Lack of funding means that the costs to individuals cannot be found from budgets and the replacement costs for staff are not met. This puts pressure on the whole system. Some problems still exist surrounding the amount of paperwork involved. This could be reduced less and the whole procedure could be streamlined to make it easier to set-up. Support systems are uneven and lack of support can mean the whole process fails to work properly.

CASE 6: PROFESSIONAL BODY AND AWARDING BODY

The Institute of Management (IM) is one of the largest professional bodies in the UK. It is a QCA accredited awarding body for several NVQs in areas related to management and has its own certificate and diploma awards. They offer an MBA accredited by the Open University for which an exemption route is being developed.

The IM offers dual registration such that candidates can register for both an NVQ and an IM qualification without extra cost and this is seen as a unique selling point. Their own qualifications deliver underpinning knowledge and understanding and candidates who take both qualifications develop one portfolio. The majority of candidates achieve the dual award. Student membership of the IM is granted when candidates register which gives them access to the Management Information Centre and to branch activities for the duration of their studies up to a maximum of three years for any one qualification. Completion of the award, coupled with appropriate working experience, gives eligibility to apply for full membership.

The IM competes with other qualification providers, including FE and HE, but as most business is with organisations rather than directly with individual students, funding is a major issue in determining competitiveness for only about 50% of approved centres. The remaining 50% of approved centres are private providers for whom funding is not necessarily the 'prime driver' as the centres deal directly with clients. Most NVQ business is with public rather than private organisations.

The IM encourages candidates to use assignments, projects and investigative approaches to generating evidence, which are developmental. The prices of NVQ programmes differ between providers and yet, at the end, the same qualification is achieved. Different employers, however, have different training priorities and these explain why routes to NVQs may be structured and costed differently. A further issue with higher level NVQs concerns the confidentiality and sensitivity of evidence, since candidates can be at reasonably high levels in organisations.

Issues and Barriers

Negative perceptions include NVQs as 'confirmational rather than developmental', as being more suited to apprentices or junior staff with long completion times and unattractive paperwork.

While there is good support for the underlying concept of NVQs, people do not like the way it is often packaged and monitored.

CASE 7: COUNTY COUNCIL

The case was obtained from the Strategic Organisation and Development Adviser.

Use of NVQs at Higher Levels

Three years ago the Council responded to the National Learning Targets. Before that time managers had preferred the academic route to qualifications such as the DMS or MBA. Several providers were used.

NVQs were looked upon as a “poor relation” and so they addressed this in a number of ways. The first initiative was a paper to the Employee Joint Consultative Committee. They encouraged higher level managers to take a more vocational route and the paper set the scene for their push towards more vocational qualifications for managers. They felt that these were more beneficial to the organisation as a whole but had to sell this to senior management. The managers wanted to know what the NVQs corresponded to. This was a difficult question to address as NVQs are too different to compare directly. There were problems with giving managers peace of mind about their value. They felt that NVQs fitted better with the intention to be a learning organisation and were more embedded in what managers are actually doing in the workplace.

Providers

They do not use a particular provider and are currently working with a local FE college to provide level 4 NVQs to managers and they are considering doing level 5 if enough staff to respond.

They recognise that NVQs are very time-consuming and slow. In the three years they have been promoting level 4 NVQs there has been a good uptake. The costs are not high at around £550 per candidate and for this a CMS is included from the Institute of Management (IM) as awarding body. They consider that the link with the IM gives credibility. They are hoping that more senior managers will be encouraged to take NVQ 5 because of the success of the scheme. The remit of the department is on corporate training so they are not directly involved at lower levels. With a budget of £174,000 and potentially large numbers of people to reach costs are important. Last year a total of 15 people did level 4. The feedback was poor. The provider was at fault for making the delivery too open-ended. They then used another provider who was much more expensive at £1,500 per candidate. However, the support was much better. They have decided that the key is to have a less open-ended system and now use the local FE college. Candidates will be managed more directly in the future and given tighter deadlines.

Status of NVQs

There has been corporate endorsement of NVQs to position them as the preferred route for learning. They are more acceptable in the public sector in general because they are used extensively at lower levels. Some criticisms of NVQs have been that they are not developmental. They found that the IM workbooks overcome this as they do provide extra learning and theory. They also found that assessors are variable and while paperwork is weighty it is accepted.

They have no problems accessing NVQ providers or dealing with the bureaucracy involved. They see it as a growth area and make it known throughout the Council that it is part of the competency development programme for all levels of staff. Standards are used as a template for internal management development. They are seeking IIP accreditation and find that they are useful as a part of their training strategy.

Summary of Barriers

There is a substantial job to be done to overcome initial resistance from higher level managers although this is less prevalent in the public sector. Poor provision can lead to lack of completions. Time limits should be set and careful monitoring should be carried out. Assessors are a key part of the successful completion of NVQs and they can be variable in quality.

CASE 8: INSTITUTE OF WASTE MANAGEMENT

The waste management industry is unique in its use of NVQs as they are written into statute. Regulations made under the Environmental Protection Act (1990) specify that a person should be "technically competent" to carry out the job and without evidence of such competence they cannot operate. For certification, supervisory and lower level managers are required to have level 3 or 4 which is jointly awarded by WAMITAB and City and Guilds. These are based on workplace assessment and the assessors have to be approved by WAMITAB to assess in more stringent ways than in some other industries. These assessors are also required to have worked in the same areas as those they are assessing. Around 3,000 S/NVQs at these levels have been awarded which has helped to give the industry a more professional image.

There is a second group of NVQ qualifications that are non-statutory at levels 1 and 2 covering health and safety and good operational practice. Although these are voluntary, the Institute is trying to ensure that they are built into contracts so that operators have to obtain them within a certain time limit.

NVQs at Higher Levels

Most professional staff have academic qualifications and degree-level qualifications are mandatory for membership. Like most professional bodies, the Institute of Wastes Management has not gone down the vocational route for professional-level qualifications except for the business aspects of the job. Full professional Members have to have a relevant degree and demonstrate a period of relevant experience and vocational training. They then have to undergo a Professional Review (interview).

Entry to the professional body cannot at present be achieved solely through higher level NVQs although levels 3 and 4 are accepted for non-corporate classes of membership. At the moment there is no relevant level 5 qualification and if this did exist it would only form part of the requirements. The vocational qualification at this level is not sufficiently academic to give the rigour that is required. It would have to be supplemented by academic qualifications.

Costs of NVQs

The time taken and the costs vary considerably. Time can vary from six months to two years and costs from £500 to £6,000 per person. This is largely because of the costs of assessment. Having individual attention for long periods of time can be expensive. There is still a need for a wider range of the voluntary NVQs that could be extended to a range of jobs. However, they are a small industry and in some of the more unusual jobs there are not enough candidates to justify creating a qualification.

Successes and Barriers

The success of NVQs has given the Institute more credibility and more power to negotiate on behalf of the industry. However, higher level NVQs do not give sufficient academic basis for professional-level qualifications.

Part 5 Financial Issues

The context for considering funding comes from progress towards National Learning Targets for 2002 (DfES, 2002). Targets for adults in the economically active workforce are 50% for a level 3 qualification and 28% for a level 4 qualification. The level 4 target looks like being met or exceeded (27.5% achieved in 2000) as does the level 3 target (47.25% achieved in 2000).

Government policies and initiatives for adult education are targeting widening participation such that, by age 30, 50% of young people should have had the opportunity to benefit from higher education. Foundation degrees are set to 'form the bulk of future expansion in HE at sub-degree level'. Foundation degrees are intended to provide opportunities to those who do not hold traditional academic qualifications.

Funding Mechanisms for NVQs

There are four ways of funding NVQs for people aged 18-25.

1. Many occupational sectors are covered by Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMA) which include an NVQ level 2 and Key Skills. Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (AMA) include an NVQ level 3, sometimes level 4, and Key Skills. (Some sectors, eg footwear manufacture, are not covered by Modern Apprenticeships at present.) Apprenticeships are delivered through private training providers who receive a basic national rate per person that depends upon the sector and the level of training. For those aged 16-18, an AMA in construction, for instance, attracts a national rate of £9,110 (36 months) whereas an AMA in business administration attracts £4,040 (24 months). Different rates apply to persons aged 19-24. Training providers may keep all the fee payment or could make a payment to a subcontractor involved in delivery and assessment of the programme. A subcontractor could be an employer of apprentices. The national rate is paid to the training provider; 80% is spread over 12 months (for a 12-month programme) and 20% is paid on completion. Rates are national and are paid by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). For people aged over 25, NVQs are available through Further Education (FE) centres, which negotiate with employers over costs. Costs could be reduced for an employer with assessment facilities, for example.
2. NVQs can be funded directly but the LSC will only do this if there is no overarching modern apprenticeship framework. For people aged 16-18, NVQs are free to employers. For people aged over 18, employers pay 25% of the programme fee set by the FE college.
3. Some NVQs are offered in schools.
4. Employers or individuals can pay privately for an NVQ programme.

In the near future, Advanced Modern Apprenticeships will include a technical certificate that equates to the knowledge and understanding component of an NVQ.

The study examined the funding arrangements by the Higher Education Funding Councils and the LSC in respect of NVQs. The HEFCE (England) is prohibited from funding NVQs since they are not included in the courses defined as eligible for funding by the Education Reform Act 1981. HEFCW (Wales) reported that they are reviewing their policy on NVQ funding. The LSC will only provide funding for higher level NVQs through Work Based Learning if the following conditions are met.

- The student is under 25 and does not have a degree.
- The student attends a provider (eg. a college or university) that is an LSC contracted work-based learning provider.
- The student undertakes a 'straight' NVQ, ie, not an NVQ as part of another qualification.
- The NVQ attempted is on the list of NVQs approved in the provider's contract with the LSC.

Outside the Work Based Learning context, the LSC funds students on higher level NVQs in further education colleges. The LSC agrees with each college before the start of each year and gives a funding allocation. Colleges deliver within this allocation and courses delivered may include NVQs.

In sum, colleges and universities that enrol students on 'normal' certificate, diploma and degree courses attract a payment from a funding body on a per capita basis. This even extends to students enrolling on relatively expensive executive MBA programmes. Since the government wants nearly all 16-18 year olds in some form of formal learning, and since the 2002 learning targets for young people will not quite be met (DfES, 2002), funding arrangements appear geared towards achieving these objectives. With the adult learning targets more or less achieved, the only support for people who want to complete higher NVQs is available through further education colleges. Given the government's intention to dismantle the academic-vocational divide, these arrangements appear to be somewhat anomalous.

One way that some universities have found to overcome the funding barrier is to link a high-level NVQ to an academic award, for instance, a postgraduate Certificate in Health Management. Students are then enrolled on the academic award with the university and with an NVQ awarding body. Because enrolments are for fundable HE courses, universities receive a fee payment. Judicious use of assessment strategies allows candidates to complete the requirements of both awards rather than having two separate assessment modes.

Candidates for NVQs require substantial 1:1 support and guidance in order to interpret the standards and evidence in the context of the job. The survey research has found strong support for the view that NVQs are relatively costly, and combined with the lack of support, cost appears to be a substantial barrier where NVQs are not mandatory. High levels of personal support are costly and it is difficult to recover the costs through fees. No hard evidence for the real costs of NVQs compared to other qualifications was found, however.

Part 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions are based upon the literature review and on the survey's findings. Given that NVQs are delivered through a wide range of provider organisations and cover a very wide range of vocations, generalisations from this study need to be taken carefully. Some higher NVQs are popular whereas others attract virtually no interest. Despite success in some areas, the combination of review and survey findings suggests that there are some major flaws in certain aspects of higher level National Vocational Qualifications. A key problem concerns the design and structure of the qualifications. This poses a dilemma since, until higher level NVQs are redesigned and restructured, there is little point in making recommendations for marginal improvement that will continue to be undermined by inherent weaknesses. Removal of these flaws is necessary if owner-managers and managers are to look more favourably on a qualification framework that has relied upon strong public sector employer demand for its survival. It is, of course, true that traditional qualifications, both full-time and part-time, rely on government support in the form of funding council grants. However, other things being equal, fee-paying students and employers appear to favour traditional qualifications to NVQs.

Market Information

One issue concerns the initial premise in this report concerning low take-up. While the universities reported a fall in NVQ activity, the overall level of higher level NVQ take-up is substantial at around 15,000 full certificates a year representing an 18% share of the part-time qualifications market. Buoyant areas include accounting, management-related subjects, care and waste management. Level 5 NVQs seem to be struggling, however.

While the study found some positive aspects to higher level NVQs, it seems clear that the uptake in areas that are well served by alternative qualifications and where an NVQ is not mandatory or part of a qualifying route will remain low. However, growth can be expected in areas that are not well served by traditional qualifications and a clearer picture is needed regarding the provision of higher NVQs.

Recommendation: Analysis of the growth potential in certification, of full NVQs and units, by higher level NVQ titles should be conducted in the context of competing qualifications, qualifying pathways and legislation that makes some NVQs mandatory. The analysis should also explore registrations by centre type (college, university, employer) and would help to clarify where and why growth and decline are occurring.

Recommendation: Further research is needed to better understand the already sizeable market for higher NVQs. That is, the demographic, personal and job-related characteristics of higher NVQ candidates, the sectors and the types of employers that support them.

Recommendation: Further research is needed to clarify the ways in which NVQ provision is organised in higher education providers.

Image and Promotion

There is a sizeable body of support for NVQs from stakeholders who feel that the qualifications are valuable. Overall, however, the NVQ scene can be described as patchy. Where NVQs are mandatory, no obstacles to their take-up were noted although this does not mean that the image and delivery of NVQs are satisfactory. NVQs have had a 'bad press' and some of the damage has been long lasting. Renewed initiatives to attract interest from employers and candidates need to target a more positive image with new messages. Further use of old messages about real world competence and employer-led initiatives will not be heard. It is worth

noting that the living and working context has changed considerably in the time since NVQs were first introduced. The climate now is for high quality qualifications and lifelong learning. Higher NVQs have a role to play so long as branding and design issues are resolved.

One important perception to target concerns the equivalence of NVQs and other qualifications. The framework embraces levels of qualifications, for example, level 4 meaning a degree or higher education diploma and level 5 meaning a postgraduate degree or diploma. The survey found a general perception that an NVQ5, for instance, is claimed to be equivalent to a Master's degree and yet there was little belief that this is a realistic or meaningful comparison. While there is a banding of level 5 awards, this does not mean that all awards in the band are directly comparable with each other. A doctorate is not the same as a Master's, even though they fall into the same band. Marketing communications need to clarify that higher level NVQs fall into the same bands as other qualifications, but that this does not make them substitutes for one another.

Communications strategies need to clarify the relationship between vocational and academic qualifications if NVQs are to be better understood. People have a relatively clear idea of what it means to have a diploma or degree in a subject but there is less clarity about what it means to have an NVQ. This is partly brought about by the diverse approaches to NVQ delivery that exist and which range from being accrediting to developmental. Both modes are allowed by standards and, in another sense, this is a 'course versus assessment' choice that NVQ providers have. Colleges and universities tend towards wanting courses that fit into academic years whereas other providers tend towards more assessment-driven and open-ended approaches. NVQs are of course concerned with accrediting knowledge and competence and the standards are silent about the methods by which they are reached. This apparent advantage appears to be creating confusion about 'what NVQs are'.

Finally, the marketing, as opposed to marketing communications, of higher NVQs is relatively weak. Higher NVQs are not 'owned' and promoted in the same ways as other qualifications. They are not quite the orphans of the qualification world and the main parental role lies with awarding bodies. However, neither awarding bodies nor the university sector are promoting NVQs as much as comparable qualifications and this contributes to depressed take-up. Higher NVQ success stories are found where ownership comes through professional bodies who are promoting them well.

Recommendation: The NVQ framework should be reassessed in terms of marketing communications. Separate identities for high-level NVQs that reinforce parity with academic qualifications need to be considered along with radically new delivery mechanisms for achieving high-level NVQs.

Recommendation: Awarding bodies should do more to promote NVQs, for example, by working with education providers and 'bundling' NVQs with other qualifications in areas not well-served by traditional qualifications and where growth is apparent.

Design of Standards

The role of national occupational standards in helping to create qualifications and improve the skills base of the UK workforce is widely accepted. The government remains committed to the idea of standards but it is pertinent to ask questions about the present and future design of standards. There are many instances where the standards are seen as too generic such that they have an insufficient correlation with job content. Furthermore, the design of the standards in terms of performance criteria and evidence (range) requirements present major obstacles to a rewarding learning experience when they are embodied in qualifications. It is disappointing that revised standards have offered little if any discernible improvements over their predecessors in this regard (Grugulis, 1998). Constructive criticism of NVQs has not just come from academics. The CBI (1989) showed concern for the narrowness of occupational standards and recommended a more holistic approach. Beaumont's (1996) review pointed to several major problems. It is hard to find any convincing evidence that significant changes have occurred following these suggestions.

Some instances were found where developmental approaches to portfolio building were encouraged (eg. the Institute of Management), but there is nothing in the regulations governing assessment that discourages an historical, paper-trail approach should candidates wish to use it. Even though this cannot be enforced, awarding bodies, through their external verifiers, should develop clear visions for the type of portfolios that they wish to encourage.

National occupational standards exist for reasons beyond the creation of qualifications alone. Greater distinction between standards as development frameworks and their use as qualifications is needed. This research suggests that the reductionist content of occupational standards is not compatible with the requirements of high-level qualifications because of the influence on the learning experience. While there are rigorous procedures that govern the development of standards, new guidelines for standards-setting bodies should be issued. A stronger sense of involvement in NVQs from the university sector should come if universities are more closely involved in the development of standards and related assessment methods. The literature review alluded to the methodological problems of interpreting competence and the difference between threshold and best practice competence. The methodology behind existing standards, functional analysis, should be questioned in light of the reductionist outcomes that it produces. Alternative methodologies need evaluating that, for higher levels, generate qualifications that are based on briefer and more holistic descriptions of work. Standards redesigned along these lines would allow stronger correlation with a wide range of jobs, be challenging and more enjoyable to evidence and bring about lasting impressions of personal development.

Higher level qualifications need a fundamentally different approach to assessment than lower level qualifications to reflect different sets of expectations from candidates and to provide a different learning experience. There is evidence that providers and assessors are making pragmatic interpretations of standards in order to construct a realistic learning experience (Eraut, Steadman and James, 2001). As such, the design and content of standards should catch-up with practice.

Further research is necessary to unravel what new approaches to assessment could look like. Some suggestions include less emphasis on the use of 'standing' documentation to show coverage of reductionist competence. This change would be offset by more emphasis on validated accounts of previous work activities, demonstration of 'best' practice, reflection on activities showing how and where learning occurred, the limitations of past experiences in light of a standard's requirements and thoughts about how the learning can be applied in the future. The knowledge and personal competence statements were not identified as being contentious, unlike the occupational competence statements. The implications from this study are that they could remain largely in the same format.

Recommendation: Methodologies for assessing and describing higher level competence should be revisited with a view to identifying a way of producing more 'user-friendly' standards than currently exist.

Recommendation: In the short term, awarding bodies in partnership with HE should rethink the NVQ process such that, without compromising quality, it is simplified and enhanced from the candidates' viewpoint. This has implications for documentation given to candidates and the training of advisers and assessors.

Recommendation: Awarding bodies, co-ordinated by UVAC representing HE, should collaborate to create a database of higher level NVQ assessors in order to facilitate NVQ take-up.

Disseminating Good Practice

NVQs have a distinctive vocabulary and the processes leading to accreditation (portfolio building) are not well-understood by most candidates unlike the processes on 'traditional' qualification programmes, for example, essay and report writing and examinations. The vocabulary and the processes take time to understand and harm can be done to candidates and to the reputation of NVQs by inexperienced advisers and assessors in centres without a clear vision of NVQ processes. It was inevitable that a large number of providers would enter the market when NVQs were introduced and the actions of some of these have tarnished the movement. While awarding bodies have always used tight criteria for centre approval and re-approval, these criteria have largely emphasised assessment processes and resources rather than the reality of the learning experience. Approval decisions should strengthen their emphasis on the value-adding experience that candidates will receive.

In many small to medium sized organisations, the number of high-level NVQ candidates each year is small and does not justify the bureaucracy that accompanies them. Ways need to be found for organisations to reliably access high-level NVQs while guaranteeing satisfactory delivery standards. Drawing on the cumulative experience of NVQ delivery, thought should be given to ways of smoothing-out wide variations in NVQ practices and disseminating good practice.

Recommendation: Examples of good practice in NVQ assessment that facilitates personal development, an enjoyable learning experience and competitive completion times should be identified and disseminated. Awarding bodies should consider identifying regional 'flagship' centres to attract high-level NVQ candidates from small and medium sized enterprises in particular.

Accreditation of Knowledge and Understanding

Further and higher education sectors are well placed to contribute to high-level vocational education. One opportunity arises from the accreditation of knowledge (Randall, 1995, p.12) such as that gained from traditional certificate, degree and diploma courses. There is no compulsion to assess competence and knowledge simultaneously at high levels and it should be relatively straightforward to benchmark the content of traditional courses with the knowledge statements in existing standards and create some form of accreditation scheme. The uptake of NVQs should be catalysed if people entering the workforce already have a substantial part of an NVQ accredited.

Recommendation: Awarding Bodies and education providers should seek ways of calibrating skills and underpinning knowledge and understanding obtained through non-NVQ programmes and accrediting them so that they map onto NVQs.

A problem with this recommendation, however, is that there is no direct incentive for education providers to do this.

Costs and Value

While the survey found no firm evidence concerning the costs of higher NVQs compared to other forms of training and development, there are clear perceptions that NVQs are relatively costly in terms of personal time and expenditure. The key issue here is not absolute costs, since there are many examples of high cost development to be found, rather it is cost-benefit considerations. In a free market, the added value deriving from possession of high-level NVQs generally does not warrant the inputs required to achieve it. Added value in this context embraces considerations such as personal development, public recognition of the award, and the learning experience.

Recommendation: A study should be commissioned to identify the comparative costs of higher level NVQs. The study should cover the costs of developing new qualifications as well as the costs of delivery and quality assurance.

Recommendation: Delivery methods, assessment methods and quality assurance mechanisms for high-level NVQs should be reconsidered with a view to reducing costs.

A recurring cost driver in NVQs has been the high proportion of 1:1 time involved between candidates and advisers and the need for separate assessors. The external verifier role is basically the same as that of an external examiner and internal verification is basically the same as internal moderation. So long as these roles are carried out by people used to learning and teaching at high levels then they should not be as costly. There seems merit in NVQs moving towards the quality assurance systems that are used in higher education such as moderation, external examining, and examination boards. The greatest potential for saving lies with delivery and assessment methods but the potential is heavily influenced by the learning outcomes and evidence requirements set-down by standards.

Whereas many candidates elect for a safe but bureaucratic paper portfolio approach, so-called 'paperless' portfolios are used. The downside of these is that they can amount to no more than observation by an assessor of documents *in situ* and of candidates going about their normal work activities. While meeting the requirements of standards for evidence, they are firmly at the 'rubber stamping' end of the accrediting-developing continuum and this approach to assessment causes concerns about the credibility of the exercise.

Funding Arrangements

The study found support for the notion that the academic-vocational divide is accentuated by funding mechanisms. This area is highly politically-charged and there are no easy solutions. The most popular higher level NVQs to-date cover both accounting and management and benefit from being linked to further qualifications and the membership routes of professional bodies. Neither area appears to have been adversely affected by education funding mechanisms. Little, if any, evidence was found of demand for 'straight' higher NVQs and a lack of funding for them is arguably not a barrier. Furthermore, funding mechanisms can be utilised by linking an NVQ to a fundable qualification and this could help to overcome any negative images of NVQs that students may have.

Recommendation: NVQ awarding bodies, UVAC and universities should evaluate how courses eligible for HE funding can be linked to higher NVQs and use common assessment strategies (that is, two qualifications in one).

Recommendation: All higher NVQ titles should be mapped onto the qualifying routes for professional bodies and statutory requirements to help determine where additional fundable qualifications can be linked to NVQs.

Appendix 1

Take-up of Leading NVQs by Title

NVQ Title	Level	2001 (Jan-Sept)	2000	1999	1998
Accounting	4	5,382	5,744	6,177	4,148
Management	4	2,534	3,282	3,133	3,356
Training & Development (Lng Dev)	4	553	760	794	972
Operational Management	5	531	624	370	106
Administration	4	346	510	486	452
Care	4	392	366	178	81
Managing Transfer Ops - CSW	4	154	331	379	91
Training & Development (HRD)	4	190	281	228	317
Guidance	4	315	240	146	135
Occupational H&S Practice	4	231	236	149	81
Managing Transfer Ops - BW	4	94	172	168	38
Engineering Manufacture	4	119	166	234	107
Building Site Manufacture	4	156	160	37	20
Procurement	4	145	152	106	30
Managing Landfill Ops - SW	4	72	152	37	62
Management (Superseded)	5	9	146	381	895
Strategic Management	5	56	144	52	20
Community Justice - WOB	4	166	136	0	0
Newspaper Journalism (writing)	4	84	116	146	109
Managing Treatment Ops - CSW	4	52	107	123	37
Pensions Administration	4	35	100	61	29
Business Counselling	4	88	71	63	94
Quality Management	4	41	65	23	6
School Administration	4	30	58	46	24

The criterion for inclusion is the award of 50 or more certificates in 2000. Source: QCA

Appendix 2

Participating Organisations

The names of small and medium sized private organisations are omitted to protect the names of individuals contacted.

Learning and Skills Councils

Birmingham and Solihull
 Cumbria
 Devon and Cornwall
 Greater Manchester
 London
 North Yorkshire
 Suffolk
 Tyne and Wear
 Northern Ireland: OCR, LCCI and Edexcel

Small Business Services

Birmingham and Solihull
 Devon and Cornwall
 Essex
 Humber
 North Yorkshire
 Somerset
 Tyne and Wear
 Wiltshire
 Wales: Business Connect
 Northern Ireland: Company Development Programme (DTI)

Awarding Bodies and NTOs

Accountancy NTO
 Chartered Institute of Building
 Council for Administration NTO
 Engineering Construction Industry Training Board
 Hospitality Awarding Body
 Institute of Personnel and Development
 LCCI
 Local Government NTO
 Oxford and Cambridge Examining Board
 Social Services NTO (England)
 Social Services NTO (Wales)

Private Sector Employers

Balfour Beatty
 British Telecom
 Clarks Shoes (manufacturing and retail)
 Ford
 Powergen
 Scania Trucks
 Weetabix Ltd

Plus a small to medium sized food manufacture, a small motor engineering company, a small light engineering company.

Public Sector Employers

Addenbrookes Hospital
 Barnsley Borough Council
 Cambridgeshire Constabulary
 Cheshire County Council
 HM Treasury
 LIAG
 Norfolk County Council
 Northamptonshire County Council
 Oxford Learning Disability Trust
 West Sussex County Council

Universities

<i>Pre-1992</i>	<i>Post-1992</i>
Bangor	Brighton
Lancaster	De Montfort
Plymouth	Greenwich
Durham	Liverpool John Moores
Bristol	Oxford Brookes
Queens, Belfast	Nottingham Trent
Loughborough	Sunderland
Open University	West of England
	Teesside
	Bolton College of HE

Appendix 3

An Introduction to the University Vocational Awards Council

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) was established in 1999 to enable universities to influence the development of higher-level vocational education and training. The Council acts as a forum to promote a coherent voice to represent the interests of higher education institutions as the qualifications framework emerges in the wake of recent reports.

The continued expansion of Council membership, incorporating major further education institutions, clearly signals that universities and colleges are taking the government agenda of key skills, graduate employability, work-based learning and professional employment experience seriously.

UVAC members, acting as a consortium, have accumulated expertise in the delivery of both general and specific vocational programmes and are well placed to disseminate good practice across the whole of the higher education system.

Since 1999, UVAC has

- published research reports and articles
- organised seminars, workshops and national conferences
- established a Graduate Apprenticeship (GA) National Network and organised network meetings
- published a GA Framework Directory on the UVAC website
- developed accreditation processes for Foundation Degrees and Graduate Apprenticeships

Full membership is open to all universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and to higher education institutions with degree awarding powers. Two other categories of membership have been introduced: associate membership for higher education colleges with over 40% of higher education provision; and corporate membership for relevant local, regional and national organisations and agencies.

For further information about UVAC, please visit our website (www.uvac.ac.uk) or contact:

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Chief Operating Officer
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Bolton Institute of Higher Education
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Email: sroodhouse@uvac.ac.uk

You can join UVAC by emailing the membership form to us (available from the website).

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- [1] "Recognised courses of HE are those defined in paragraph 1 of Schedule 6 of the Education Reform Act 1988. This includes any postgraduate or undergraduate degree accredited HE diploma or certificate. Other professional or vocational qualifications may be included if they are generally recognised as HE qualifications; this does not include NVQs." (Source: Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey 2001-02, p.15. HEFCE 01/52.)



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