

Dreams and Nightmares: The NVQ Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a retrospective on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). It will do so by looking at the ideas that motivated the proponents of NVQs and those which animated their critics, re-examining arguments which were vehemently traded at the time. Though I shall devote a short section to the arguments of the proponents, I shall take more time to examine the criticisms, and particularly to ask whether these criticisms were particular to NVQs, or whether they could be applied to other qualifications. Though this is not intended as a statistical enquiry, I shall look briefly at the current take-up of NVQs before concluding with an evaluation of their current place in the constellation of UK qualifications and what the NVQ experience might say about the prospects for future system-wide reform of qualifications.

Dreams: the case for NVQs

The gestation of NVQs is well set out by Raggatt and Williams (1999) who explain the various roots of the policy in the 1970s and early 1980s, including:

- the prominence given by Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin speech of 1976 to vocational education, links between industry and education more generally, and the express impetus it gave to the idea that politicians and those outside the education system more generally could legitimately have a voice in the content of education;
- a perception that there was an incoherent 'jungle' of vocational qualifications, with offerings by many awarding bodies to no set overall pattern, resulting in overlaps, gaps and confusion about standards. This was a problem identified by the Haslegrave Committee of 1967-9, but only very partially resolved by the resulting formation of the Business Education Council (BEC) and the Technician Education Council (TEC).¹ A unified system, or overall framework, was seen as the key to rationalizing the vocational scene, so increasing its comprehensibility and, in turn, its value and take-up;
- the view amongst policy makers that the prevailing requirements for timeserving for apprentices raised the costs of apprenticeship for industry, and had led to reductions in the numbers of apprenticeships offered by firms. Training to set standards would free-up apprenticeship allowing more rapid completion, permit pay to relate to productivity, and encourage efficiency in training methods;
- a perception in the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) that the existing system of vocational awards was largely dependent on candidates undertaking courses in public sector colleges, which meant that any vocational education and training programmes which offered the prospect of gaining qualifications would need to revolve around these colleges, rather than being able to take place in a range of venues;
- interest by progressive educationalists in experiential and participative modes of learning as a radical alternative to the conventional schooling which served to reproduce social differences. A system under which experience could count and under which the learner could take control of the process of attaining credit would emancipate many.

Raggatt and Williams summarize the prevailing mood:

“The combined effects of these critiques, presenting an image of an under-performing system dominated by producer interest and sustaining privilege and inequality, diminished and displaced the authority of the ‘education establishment’ and its ideas. Not only did this come from the right of the political spectrum, where there was a concern, among other things, to make education more vocationally relevant and suited to the requirements of employers, but it was also a feature of progressive and radical perspectives on educational reform.”

(ibid, p.25)

They go on to describe how the impetus towards what became NVQs was brought to a head in the early 1980s by the need to bring accreditation to the large, politically high-profile, and substantially work-based Youth Training Scheme (YTS).

These discontents with the system of vocational awards that had evolved through the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century led to certain features of NVQs which constituted their claim to be improvements on what went before:

- the NVQ system, as a whole framework covering all occupations at all levels, would constitute a **single system of vocational qualifications** which would supplant other vocational awards, at least below professional level;
- as such, a single system would foster **progression** (as there would be links between levels) and **credibility** (as it would be easier for all parties to understand);
- a common modular structure would engender **flexibility**, allowing individuals to build up credits within a single system and allowing employers and others to specify particular mixes in which they were interested;
- specifying outcomes would be **more effective** than specifying a syllabus as this was the ‘natural language’ of the work place²; it would therefore make learning in the workplace a legitimate way of obtaining qualifications. By the same token it would encourage the involvement of industry in specifying standards – something that was badly needed if vocational qualifications were to be recognized in the ‘real’ world;
- specifying outcomes would also **liberate learners** as “assessment is being brought into the real world and de-mystified ... what is assessed and the standards of performance required are open to both the assessor and the candidate alike.” (Jessup: 1991, p 135);

- the new methodology would similarly **widen the scope of accreditation**. Since assessment would be independent of where and when learning had taken place, the same qualification could be awarded to someone who had studied in college, through open learning materials or in the workplace, and to people who had achieved competence at an earlier point. This would both recognize and encourage a more qualified population.

These were not the only claims about the new system. There were many elaborations, including ambitious targets. The 1991 version of the National Targets for Education and Training set the goal of “50 per cent of the workforce aiming for NVQs or units towards them” (CBI, 1991). And more general and larger claims were made about the virtues of a system of relying on outcomes to delineate and to assess learning programmes well outside the vocational sphere.

We shall return to these claims, and ask not only whether they came about as a result of the NVQ initiative, but whether they were reasonable to have held at all. This is not just an exercise in hindsight: a glance at the list of aims set out above has resonance today, with the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA) attempting to rationalize qualifications in a coherent framework, with Sector Skills Councils being formed in order to strengthen the voice of industry in education and training, and with systems of units and credits being operated by the Open College Network and commended by the government (DfES, 2003, p 84). The ideas of the 1980s still endure today – if they were wrong then, they may also be wrong now.

But before evaluating the original ambitions let us hear the case for the opposition.

Nightmares – the position of the ‘critics’

From the start there were those, of course, who were sceptical about the realism of the claims being made by the proponents of NVQs. This was not surprising given that some elements of the NVQ idea were conceived as a deliberate assault on an ‘establishment’ which was held to have failed the nation. But as the years passed, the voices of criticism increased both in their number and in their stridency.

We may class the criticisms under three broad heads:

- ‘technical’ critiques - these held that the NVQ approach was in some sense ‘fundamentally flawed’; that it could not achieve its own aims because of deficiencies in its methodology

- ‘moral’ critiques - these held that even if NVQs succeeded in their aims, those aims were misjudged
- ‘market’ critiques – these held that whatever the merits of their aims and their technical design, NVQs were not succeeding, and perhaps could not succeed, in altering the patterns of take-up of vocational qualifications.

Let us look at some representative critics in each category³.

The technical criticisms had to do with the unsuitability of the NVQ for its allotted task. Alison Wolf (1995) concentrated on the business of setting standards. Far from the ‘demystification’ which Jessup had offered to the learner, the outcome statements, Wolf considered, were by their nature becoming ever more obscure, even to the trainers and assessors. To be used as the basis for reliable assessment, they needed to be precisely stated. When faced with the fact of less than total reliability, the designers added yet more explanatory or regulatory detail to make the requirement clearer, resulting in “a never ending spiral of specification.” Thus *units of competence* were broken down into *elements of competence*, which were elaborated into *performance criteria*, which in turn were delimited by *range statements* (these latter to indicate the circumstances under which the required performance was to be observed). For Wolf (*ibid*, p.55):

“...this ever-receding goal of total clarity derives not from bad luck or incompetence, but is actually inherent in the methodology adopted.”

The NVQ was showing the futility of attempting to influence behaviour in the real world through written texts. The bind was that large quantities of written guidance was needed to achieve reliable assessments, but that the very many assessors, who were workplace supervisors with many other important things to do, just would not read – let alone understand – the necessarily voluminous assessment requirements. The only solution might be to assess relatively narrow and readily described aspects but in this way “the minutiae pile up and the domain shrinks”, rendering unfeasible one of the points of the NVQ approach which was to widen the scope of accreditation to apply to more ‘real world’ practical activity.

For Alan Smithers (1993) it was the lack of a syllabus which made NVQs both curious and ineffectual, as a result of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)⁴ setting its face against such old-fashioned devices:

“Teachers preparing students for NVQ and GNVQ qualifications have been given little or no guidance as to what it is they should actually teach.”

(*ibid*, p 9)

In contrast to Continental countries, where syllabuses existed, there was a weak infrastructure in Britain, with few textbooks and other learning materials. Smithers also contested one of the main claims of the new ‘outcomes-based’ system: that assessment would be better. Far from introducing flexibility:

“...a new bureaucracy has been created consisting of, among others, “national chief verifiers”, “principal verifiers”, “external verifiers”, “internal verifiers” and “assessors”. A great deal of time is being spent filling in forms and ticking boxes.”

(ibid, p 10)

and despite these paraphernalia:

“The one award can ... mean very different things according to who has taken it, where it has been taken, what evidence has been brought forward, and who has assessed it. Rigour has seemingly been sacrificed to flexibility.”

(ibid, p 40)

Other commentators, however, were not so much concerned that NVQs would fail in their objectives as worried that they might succeed. For they felt that the project as whole was wrong-headed. We might put Terry Hyland into this category. For Hyland (1994, p.13):

“The ‘autonomous learner’ along with notions of open access, the accreditation of prior learning, individualised learning contracts, action plans, records of achievement and student-centredness, has been appropriated by the industrial-training lobby from progressive and experiential traditions.”

As well as sacrificing progressive ideals to the needs of the captains of industry, NVQs – by fragmenting desired learning into assessable chunks – were prone to miss very important outcomes for students, a failure to see the wood for the trees:

“The segmented and compartmentalized assessment framework of NVQs seems to be inimical to growth, development and progression in learning.”

(ibid, p 62)

It was not just fragmentation which impoverished what might otherwise be valuable learning, but also the “behaviourist” lack of emphasis on knowledge and understanding, and any attempt to link this with the aspirations of learners. While this might conceivably be an adequate approach for “lower level tasks and skills” (ibid), the roots of the NVQ idea were inimical to constructive approaches to learning:

“Having such a remote connection with learning, there has been no incentive for [competence-based education and training] to develop a systematic and coherent VET framework in which the questions about knowledge, skills, theory and practice are connected with the activities of learners.”

(ibid, p 74)

This meant that they could have little value for the education of young people, nor – since the occupational standards on which NVQs were based were drawn from current practice – could they be the basis for continued professional development, which looks to move from the present to the future through critical reflection.

The final strand of criticism is concerned not with the alleged technical faults in NVQs, nor on whether they are educationally valuable, but rather challenges the wisdom of the enterprise of rationalizing the vocational qualifications system at all. In 1996, Peter Robinson reviewed the numerical progress made by NVQs (and GNVQs) in constituting the new comprehensive framework of vocational qualifications. He concluded that overall:

“...the net quantitative impact of these new qualifications on the access of adults and young people to education, training and certification has been negligible at best.”

(Robinson, 1996, p 35)

and that:

“The NCVO framework has clearly not rationalised the overall structure of qualifications. Awards of traditional vocational qualifications in 1994-5 were still significantly higher than awards of NVQs (and GNVQs) by a wide margin. Individuals and employers now face a wider array of qualifications than was the case before the introduction of NVQs.”

(ibid, p 36)

Commentators such as Robinson believed that the project to ‘nationalize’ vocational qualifications had not succeeded in the face of employers and individuals who either wanted something different, or perhaps nothing at all. Why not just let the market take its course? And why spend considerable amounts of money – £109m according to Robinson – in developing a new system when many players were evidently happy with the old one?

The light of day? – an evaluation of the arguments

Technical Defects

With the benefit of hindsight, what can we say about the merits of these various stances? First let us take the allegations of fundamental flaws at the technical level offered by Wolf and Smithers. The allegation here was profound – that the very basis of the NVQ methodology was unsound, and that therefore the venture was doomed from the start.

Wolf's (1995) line of attack is correct at the most fundamental level. It is impossible to define in conclusive terms what a 'standard' is. This is ultimately because standards concern *performance*. Words are different from actions; they can *describe* actions, and they can do so more or less accurately, but however precisely defined or extensively elaborated a linguistic expression is a more or less useful 'picture' of the action, actions, or set of behaviours that it intends to denote. The success of written or oral⁵, 'standards' to denote the performance that they intend to denote depends not only on the skill of the authors of those standards, but also on the understanding of those who read or hear them.⁶ Wolf appreciates this issue; she stresses that the language of standards effectively relies upon a "pre-existing consensus and understanding on the part of the assessors." (ibid, p 64), and offers, though not perhaps with great conviction, a path of greater personal interaction between the standards setters and assessors, and between assessors themselves, as a way of at least ameliorating the problem of what is *actually meant* by the written standards.

If we accept this fundamental ontological issue at the root of the NVQ idea, we can accept that the project of describing standards, through ever further elaboration and ever more sophisticated conventions of how standards were to be written, would always fall short of expressing just what was required in terms of 'competent' performance. But is this a 'fundamental flaw' invalidating the whole NVQ idea? Well, if NVQs go by the board, so, arguably, does a lot else. All forms of qualification express standards, and they do so through the written word; in the forms of syllabuses for teachers, guidance for the setters of examinations, and instructions for the many who mark them. These can no more aspire perfectly to describe the level of performance required than can NVQs.

Two strategies can be employed to minimize the annoying effects of the limitations of language to inhibit the accuracy with which assessments can be made. Both of these are alluded to by Wolf, and both are observable in the operation of qualifications including, but by no means confined to, NVQs:

- The first is to rely on features other than language to transmit what is meant by standards – thus one can use assessors who ‘know’ the standards from their own practice (for example experienced workers or teachers), one can train them and give them the chance to compare their own standards with those of others. One can also offer them ‘exemplification’ of work which meets, or fails to meet, standards. It might be a fair, though not a fundamental, criticism of the early days of NVQs that too much faith was put in the written word alone, and too little in alternative methods to achieve some commonality of standards. But there is a cost to these alternative strategies, and not only the obvious ones of hiring expertise and training assessors. For such strategies are more effective when the pool of assessors is restricted. And one way of operating assessments with a limited pool of assessors is to have the evidence of performance that they are judging brought to them rather than to have them go to where the evidence ‘naturally occurs’. Thus it is easier to have ‘transportable’ evidence, such as written scripts, as the object of assessment, as compared with more awkward items such as evidence of service of customers.⁷ In this way there can be a trade-off between offering *reliable* assessments (consistent judgements by different assessors) and having assessments which take account of a wide range of ‘real life’ evidence, and which therefore have a high degree of *validity*;
- The second strategy is to restrict the scope of what is being assessed; for it is easier satisfactorily to describe the adequate conduct of a discrete task, than to characterize acceptable performance in a wide range of contexts. This is what Wolf means when she talks (ibid, p 66) of the ‘domain’ shrinking as the object of assessment is ever more precisely described. But this phenomenon is by no means confined to NVQs or outcome-based qualifications. Surveying the issues in conventional assessments for the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, Wood (1991, p.23) pointed out that:

“...the typical examination answer...tends to be marked more for accuracy and number of facts than for organisation, originality and so on, not least because this tends to produce acceptable levels of reliability” (p 23)

and, ten years ago, Duncan Graham, first chairman of the National Curriculum Council, predicted with considerable accuracy that the tendency would be:

“...to go for simple controllable tests, formally administered and comfortingly familiar. These will tend to produce a system which measures institutions rather than pupils, measures tangibles rather than skills and concepts...”

(Graham & Tytler, 1993, p 127)

Indeed we are much concerned these days with ‘teaching to the test’. This might not matter if the tests were *valid* (ie. measured all the things that we wanted students to learn), but if the need for reliability results in tests which only measure a portion of what should be learned, then teachers and students may restrict their efforts to these items.⁸

It would seem therefore, that the basic technical flaw identified by Wolf is ‘basic’ only in the sense that *any* written syllabus or schedule of assessment is incapable of expressing with total accuracy that which it tries to denote. While there may be a basis for alleging that those developing NVQs put rather more effort into the instrument of the written word, and rather too little into other tools for securing consistent assessment, there was nothing unique in the NVQ’s limitations. In fact the employers who actually see the results of the assessments of NVQs seem relatively content with them: survey data show that 74% of employers using NVQs consider their assessments to be reasonable, with only 3% expressing dissatisfaction (IFF: 2002, p 96). So it seems that the inevitable weaknesses in transmitting standards have not resulted in fatal damage in terms of credibility or overload of written instructions, though plainly problems in these areas exist. And it is far from obvious that NVQs suffer any worse than other qualifications in the restriction of domain that the search for reliable assessments brings. At the same time, though, the original claim for emancipating learners by de-mystifying qualifications must be taken with a distinct pinch of salt, and the ambition to widen the scope of accreditation through a new methodology has not extended much beyond the inclusion of fairly discrete activities encountered at work – which is not to say that this alone is not a significant gain.

Let us now turn to the point that we have ascribed to Alan Smithers, that the NVQ’s lack of syllabus renders it ineffective and unreliable. The claim that effective study towards qualification must, in some form, involve a schedule of instruction seems unanswerable. While it is possible that individuals will simply ‘absorb’ the necessary learning from the situation they are in without any purposeful instruction or coaching, few would claim that this is an especially effective strategy, still less that it should be the preferred method for a whole class of qualifications.

But this, surely, was not what NVQs were claiming. Rather they were asserting that the question of the construction of a syllabus should be divorced from that of constructing the desired outcomes of a qualification. And they were doing this for a reason, namely that in workplace learning students find themselves in myriad different environments, with different levels of equipment and different sequencing of experience (eg. someone starting in farming in the autumn might encounter the harvest

before ploughing). The fact that the NVQs themselves did not contain a syllabus or guide to instruction did not mean that such instruments were unnecessary, but rather that it made no sense to specify them *at the national level*. If a particular schedule of instruction had formed part of the requirement for offering an NVQ it is hard to see how workplaces could have participated in the programme at all.

It may, though, be fair to say that the absence of a national syllabus has not always led to the construction of 'local' syllabuses, that some of these have been sub-optimal, and that a national syllabus would have facilitated the development of workbooks etc which would have aided instruction and learning. These are reasonable points, though seem rather less than fundamental problems with the NVQ approach. Some awarding bodies have indeed developed teaching guides and workbooks as means of helping students attain NVQ standards. With hindsight the NVQ development might have been easier if the NCVQ had insisted that awarding bodies seeking accreditation had offered supporting materials of this nature – and this might too have reduced the numbers of awards offered through numerous competing awarding bodies.

If this is the point of Smithers' attack then one might readily accept it. If however he is arguing that there should be syllabuses which are not only *available* to support the attainment of NVQs, but that it should be *mandatory* for all instruction towards an NVQ to follow a given syllabus, then the effect would be to make NVQs undeliverable in most workplaces, which – as we have seen – cannot realistically all follow the same schedule of instruction. This would be a very high price to pay as it would in practice confine the attainment of vocational qualifications to the college and the dedicated training school, where 'properly' sequenced schedules of instruction could be followed, using standard equipment, ingredients, and so on.

If one thought that this was the right path, the consequences might either to make the workplace a 'qualifications-free' area, or to have different forms of qualification; workplaces might have something on the lines of the current NVQ, and colleges might teach syllabus-based qualifications. In fact there has for some time been scepticism about the appropriateness of NVQs being undertaken in colleges; in his review of NVQs in 1996, Gordon Beaumont alluded to worries that NVQs delivered in colleges were not able to replicate the real conditions of employment, though he fell short of recommending that 'simulation' should be banned. And some separation of college-based qualifications and work-based NVQs has occurred, both in practice (NVQs account for only 12% of substantial vocational qualifications in colleges. See LSC: 2003, Table 2a), and in deliberate policy; the technical certificate, a 'taught' qualification, has been added to the requirements of modern apprenticeships to join the need for an NVQ and key skills.

Smithers, therefore, could be arguing for one of three rather different things:

- that NVQs should have been rather better supported in terms of guidance for teachers and course materials;
- that better quality would arise in colleges and other formal training venues if a syllabus-based qualification were used;
- that the ambition of offering formal qualifications which could be attained in the workplace was doomed to failure, and should never have been undertaken.

The first is uncontentious, but does not argue for any very radical reformulation of NVQ precepts. The second, as we have seen, has to a large extent come about, even though there is little factual evidence that NVQs are unsuited to a formal college setting⁹. But the last seems both extreme and unjustified by reference to any evident dissatisfaction by employers on the grounds of the quality of the award.

Moral defects

We now turn to the criticism, as represented here by Hyland, that NVQs are inimical to education. There is a strand in his attack which inclines to the view that *any* qualification concerned solely with vocational matters is corrupt from the educational point of view. A discussion of this viewpoint would take us beyond the bounds of this paper, so let us merely note that in most advanced industrial countries vocational topics *have* been seen as a legitimate means of achieving educational goals. The question is in what form they should be presented and delivered in order to extract valuable learning.

But before going into this, it should be noted that the arguments for NVQs, in contrast to other forms of competence and outcome-based learning, were seldom couched in terms of educational benefits. The NVQ idea was always pretty occupationally specific, intending explicitly to train to the standards current in industry, no less and no more. Though governments of the late 1980s and early 1990s used NVQs as the basis of programmes for work-based training for young people, they generally recognized that the NVQ alone would not suffice. So there were commended 'add-ons', for example enterprise education, core skills and so on. Some of these additional elements were poorly conceived, or poorly executed, but the point here is that there was recognition from the start that NVQs alone would not constitute a wholly adequate education. They were supposed to inculcate occupational competence, rather than to form the basis of an entire educational programme.

Still, the points made by Hyland need to be addressed. They may be formulated thus:

- is there something in the very construct of NVQs which is inimical to ‘deeper’ learning?
- do NVQs adequately deal with necessary knowledge and understanding?
- is the NVQ approach only suitable for lower-level occupations?

Hyland points particularly to the ‘fragmented’ nature of NVQs in support of the first point. The NVQ’s unit structure, and ‘item by item’ form of assessment gives them their particularly anti-educational characteristics. It is of course true that NVQs are constructed in this manner, but it is not clear what is desired instead. And it is far from clear whether any other mainstream educational qualifications actually deliver the “accreditation of prior learning, individualised learning contracts, action plans, records of achievement and student-centredness” which Hyland favours. Indeed we have seen the unitization of academic qualifications (and it is worth noting that modular A levels have tended to be favoured in progressive educational circles and opposed by proponents of rigour and tradition). At the most mundane level, one thing needs to be taught at a time, and assessments – to achieve any chance of either reliability or validity – must operate in a defined domain of just what needs to be assessed. To call for qualifications which attest to ‘holistic’ qualities is to invite awards which, at best, are vacuous and, at worst, involve subjective judgments about personality traits rather than concrete attainment.

Indeed all robust qualifications involving summative assessments and claiming objective certification are best based on the particular rather than the general. Moreover those particular elements are happiest when founded within an established occupational or academic discipline. From the point of view of progressive education, the reasonable conclusion should surely be not that this means all qualifications are inimical to ‘proper’ education, but rather that learning which is not directed solely towards qualifications should be included in overall programmes. It is true that Jessup and other proponents of the ‘outcomes’ approach considered that it could be applied to much wider educational aims¹⁰, but that is different from claiming that NVQs, concentrating as they did on specific occupational matters, had educational pretensions.

It would seem therefore that study towards NVQs *can* involve ‘deeper’ learning, but the extent to which they do will depend on matters other than their design – matters such as the circumstances under which they are studied and the pedagogic skills of teachers and instructors.¹¹ In this, surely, they are not very different from any other type of qualification.

On the same topic of fragmentation, we must also acknowledge that the original ambition of flexibility, which was used to justify the unit structure of NVQs, has appeared to be used in a limited fashion. In Autumn 2001 the Labour Force Survey showed that 1,059,000 people had NVQ units and 910,000 were at that time studying for an NVQ. If only a third of the latter (300,000) had got to the stage of achieving a unit that would imply that some 750,000 people had units having finished their studies towards an NVQ. With over 3,500,000 people possessing full awards, it would seem that no more than around 20% of NVQ takers are content to settle for units – and probably considerably fewer given that many who did not gain a full award are likely to have cut short their studies for involuntary reasons such as sickness, pressure of work, redundancy or family factors. In short it does not seem that there is considerable demand for partial, as opposed to full, awards. At the same time employers not offering NVQs frequently cite a poor match between the qualification and the requirements of their jobs (IFF, 2003, p 96). It would appear therefore that either the flexibility inherent in the NVQ's unit structure has not been exploited, or that it is not of sufficiently fine granulation.

The charge that NVQs do not adequately address knowledge and understanding has now been accepted in official circles. A much trumpeted revision to NCVQ's *Criteria and Guidance* for NVQs in 1995 added a requirement for specifications of knowledge and understanding, though it is not clear that these specifications added very much to increasing the knowledge and understanding actually developed. And the government's Skills Task Force (2000, p 38) argued for "the separate assessment of underpinning knowledge and understanding through related vocational qualifications ... within publicly funded apprenticeships", a recommendation which was given effect through the development of 'technical certificates'.

However, despite the general acceptance that the development, and assessment, of 'knowledge and understanding' requires a different approach from that embodied in NVQs, doubts must arise as to exactly what is meant by these terms. For example, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein considered that knowledge was not a very different from competence:

"The grammar of the word "knows" is evidently closely related to that of "can", "is able to". But also closely related to that of "understands". ('Mastery' of a technique)" (1958, p 59)

and did not believe that understanding was an cognitive activity at all:

“Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all ...
understanding is not a mental process”

(ibid, p 61)

And, from a very different standpoint proponents of the idea of ‘tacit’ knowledge would question the ability of formal syllabus-based qualifications to transmit important aspects of knowledge:

“While explicit knowledge is easily codified and conveyed to others, tacit knowledge is experiential, subjective and personal, and substantially more difficult to convey.”

(Evans, 2002, p 80)

Moreover, as a somewhat curious footnote, we can remark that from the point of view of employers offering them, the most frequently cited reason for *satisfaction* with NVQs over the past four years has been that they “Improve the knowledge of employees.” (IFF, 2002, p 95)

There are plainly deep, and largely unexplored, waters here. It would be prudent not to leap to the conclusion that certain types of qualification can, and others cannot, ‘deliver’ knowledge and understanding, whatever the popular consensus of the moment might be.

It would, however, be reasonable to claim that the NVQ format does not readily lend itself to transmission, or anything more than the most indirect assessment, of *theory*. The reason for this is that theory tends to be abstracted from performance¹², though the one may inform the other. Theory thus occupies a rather different plane from that of performance, manifesting itself in performance at different points. It may make little sense to learn ‘bits’ of theory at the point where it is relevant to practice, for this would interrupt any cohesion that the theory in question possesses. And it would be a laborious, hit or miss business to use assessments of performance to gauge whether theory had been appreciated. This, no doubt, is why training for many of the professions involves separate assessments of theory on the one hand and proficiency on the other.

The allegation that NVQs are not suitable for higher status occupations and professions would at first sight be borne out by the data. In 2000/1 NVQ awards at Level 2 (skilled operative) amounted to 60% of all awards, with those at Level 3 (craft or supervisory) approaching 30%. Those at Level 4 and above (technician, professional or managerial)

amounted to only 4% (DfES: 2003, p 19). However, we must remember that NVQs were actively promoted within government training programmes for young people and for the unemployed, of whom few were training for professional occupations, and that many of the higher level occupations and professions already had established qualification pathways well before the NVQ initiative. Although the official rhetoric was that such qualifications should reform themselves to come into the NVQ tent it would have been curious if the professions and universities concerned had seen any particular merit in subjecting themselves to accreditation by the NCVQ, or anyone else for that matter – a position eventually acknowledged by the government in 1996 when it declared that existing professional awards performed “much the same function” as NVQs and that “there would be little point in attempting to supplant” them (Raggatt & Williams: p 154).

Nevertheless there are examples of professional groups adopting NVQs. The Association of Accounting Technicians offers the most popular award at NVQ Level 4, with around 4,000 candidates a year, and the Probation Service has built an NVQ into their professional training scheme. NVQs have been incorporated in the training, whether initial or in-service, of a number of health professions. Much more significantly, though, the basic tenets of the NVQ, a requirement for structured practical experience to certain standards, features in many professional accreditation schemes. The Law Society requires trainee practice in a range of ‘seats’ in a recognized firm and medicine, accountancy and teaching have requirements for supervised practice in addition to formal courses. It would, of course, be wrong to argue that NVQs have influenced such professional practice – in most cases such professional pathways pre-dated NVQs by many decades, and may well have informed the NVQ idea. Moreover the forms of assessment of the practical elements are not as involved (some might say, as ‘bureaucratic’ – or as ‘rigorous’) as NVQ assessment. But this is not the question; if one asks whether the NVQ approach of requiring performance to practical workplace standards is inimical to professional development, one must answer that it is not – indeed this kind of approach is common in the professional arena, though it is generally accompanied by theory and knowledge being directly taught, and separately assessed.

In summary, we might conclude that NVQs are not an especially educational vehicle; but this was never the main focus of their claim, despite the hopes of some progressive educationalists at the time of their inception. On the other hand, many of the features of NVQs (focussing on specifics, rather than breadth; assessments which ‘miss’ considerable elements of important personal development) are also shared by other English systems of certification. It can be said, though, that the ambitions of NVQs

to reflect and encourage 'flexibility' through their unit structure has had only a limited effect; whether this is because they do not allow sufficient flexibility for the employer and trainee markets, or whether conversely there is not much real demand in these markets for 'flexible' qualifications, is not clear. The issue of whether NVQs adequately foster knowledge and understanding begs very considerable questions about what these concepts actually encompass, though it may be true to say that the NVQ structure does not lend itself to the teaching or assessment of theory – a rather more limited proposition. As for their alleged unsuitability for higher level occupations, it may be true to say that theory plays a larger part in such occupations, and that a 'dual' structure of theory and practice requirements is a more natural configuration than a qualification based on practice alone, but the fact that expressions of practical requirements were already a feature of many professions before the advent of NVQs, and that the professions concerned had little reason to adapt to the NVQ format, may be the main reasons why the NVQ did not penetrate this particular market.

Market issues

NVQs did not result, as intended, in single system supplanting other vocational awards. Even at the formal level of official policy the decision in 1991 to introduce GNVQs for young people who "want to study for vocational qualifications which prepare them for a range of related occupations but do not limit their choices too early" (DES: 1991, p 18), marked a recognition that the pure NVQ model would not suit all circumstances. Since then governments have recognized less broad vocational qualifications, which lie outside the NVQ system, and indeed encouraged their development in the form of technical certificates to play a part in modern apprenticeships. In September 2003 the DfES's 'Section 97' website¹³ listed 2,452 officially recognized vocational qualifications. Of these only around half were NVQs; also recognized were 41 Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education, 29 GCSEs in vocational subjects, 77 GNVQs and nearly 900 'vocationally related' qualifications.

But if we look beyond official recognition, to the awards actually being taken, we see a yet more diverse picture. We only have partial views of the total picture, on the one hand from those awarding bodies which make returns to the NISVQ¹⁴, and on the other from the awards offered by publicly funded colleges and work-based trainers. Neither source is comprehensive, and they will particularly under-report any vocational awards which are taken without support from the public education system.

From the NISVQ we can compare the volumes of the different types of award:

Table One: Awards of vocational qualifications – 2001/2

| '000s | L1 | L2 | L3 | L4+5 | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|
| Other vocational qualifications | 244.8 | 119.5 | 86.3 | 48.5 | 499.1 |
| GNVQs/AVCE | 16.7 | 72.0 | 39.5 | - | 128.2 |
| NVQs | 47.0 | 231.4 | 113.5 | 16.6 | 408.4 |

(DfES: 2003a, Tables 17,24,27 & 32). GNVQs and AVCEs do not offer awards above Level 3. Some 'other vocational qualifications' are now recognized by the QCA as 'vocationally related qualifications'.

We can also look at the situation in the English further education sector funded by the Learning & Skills Council¹⁵:

Table Two: Numbers in LSC-funded provision – late 2002

| '000s | L1 | L2 | L3 | L4+5 | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|
| Other vocational qualifications | 551.2 | 338.9 | 311.0 | 29.2 | 1,230.3 |
| GNVQs/AVCEs | 10.7 | 35.8 | 75.2 | 0 | 121.7 |
| NVQs | 48.0 | 250.0 | 189.8 | 22.2 | 510.1 |

(LSC: 2003, Tables 1 and 7). Numbers studying for GCSEs, A levels, Access to Higher Education courses, and courses with no specified level (112,000) have been excluded. Some classified as 'other vocational' may not be strictly vocational. NVQ figures include those on work-based courses.

Taking the two tables together some rough conclusions can be drawn:

- NVQs clearly account for a minority of all vocational qualifications taken in the country, and of those which are publicly funded;
- However much of this difference is accounted for by the predominance of other vocational qualifications at the lowest level (nearly half of other vocational qualifications are at Level 1 according to both measures, compared with about 10% of NVQs);

- Levels 2 and 3 are the ‘heartland’ for NVQs . Here they exceed the numbers of other awards made by the major awarding bodies, and account for a fair proportion of all qualifications at this level which are publicly funded through the LSC;
- At all levels NVQs account for a much bigger market than the GNVQs, which are largely confined to 16-19 year olds.

It is often claimed that NVQs are particularly subsidized by the public purse and therefore have an unfair advantage over other qualifications. It is true that government support for those undertaking modern apprenticeships is dependent on their following an approved framework, which in turn must involve an NVQ. But as can be seen from Table Two, a very large number of other vocational qualifications are also subsidized through colleges, as indeed are higher vocational awards in universities.

The following table shows the age and status of NVQ takers:

Table Three: Numbers studying for NVQs – Autumn 2001 (‘000s)

| Age | Employed | Unemployed, Gov’t programme or inactive | Total |
|-------|----------|---|-------|
| 16-19 | 157 | 124 | 281 |
| 20-24 | 116 | 25 | 141 |
| 25+ | 421 | 68 | 489 |
| Total | 694 | 217 | 910 |

Source: Labour Force Survey

It is plain from this that the image of NVQs being taken by young unemployed people on government ‘schemes’ is a considerable way off the mark. Indeed the largest single group, amounting to nearly half of all NVQ-takers, are those who are over 25 and in work. These are unlikely to attract public subsidies unless they go to colleges to take their courses, which fewer than a third do. There is, in short, no evidence that the delivery of NVQs is more dependent on public funds than are other vocational qualifications, two thirds of which are awarded through schools or FE colleges (DfES: 2003, Table 27).

The truth is that *all* vocational qualifications are likely to require considerable public support, unless they are required for regulatory purposes (which is in fact another form of public intervention). Though the numbers of NVQs awarded each year has increased by 50% since Robinson reported, there can be no doubt that the central vision of a framework of market- friendly vocational qualifications eagerly taken by existing employers and workers, has not come about. In the final section we turn to the question of why this is so.

Lessons for the future

First, though we need to locate the place that NVQs do occupy. Though this is a considerably less exalted place than their architects originally envisaged, they seem to have settled into a pattern of usage, and are not – as their critics might have had us believe – beset by appalling difficulties which are only mitigated by massive government subsidies. That place can be fairly precisely located. It is at Levels 2 and 3 (intermediate skills), for people at work whether apprentices or older workers. NVQs may well be the only kind of public qualification, which can realistically be used for certifying on-the-job experience and instruction.

If this is accepted, the question is whether it is actually worth having a qualification which occupies this role? After all many other countries do not, either not bothering to accredit experience at all, insisting on simulation in colleges and training centres, or requiring only a certain length of experience of work – an equivalent of ‘flying hours’ needed for a pilot’s licence – to stand as a proxy for competence. I would argue that it is worthwhile; it does not actually cost much in terms of on-going updating to maintain the system.¹⁶ In a number of sectors – engineering, electro-technical, construction, social care for example – the NVQ has become important in the entry to, and regulation of, occupations. Moreover there has been a widespread movement in industry over the past 20 years to emphasize the importance of structured experience at work, and of being able to articulate this formally. Many application forms ask candidates to instance examples of their competencies in work or social settings; promotion often depends on exemplifications of competence attested by line managers. Formalized use of competencies, does not seem out of keeping with the times. Reversion to ‘time-serving’ or simulated exercises (always particularly artificial in the sizeable service sectors) would seem a backward step.

There has also been considerable interest in the 'competence-based' approach overseas. On occasion this has involved the actual 'export' of NVQs to other countries, for example in the Persian Gulf. More often it has involved the replication of the general approach of determining occupational standards and using these, fairly directly, to determine assessments which can include judgements of on-the-job performance, and, like NVQs in the UK, elaborating this technical approach to the design of individual qualifications into a more general and 'rational' system for a whole vocational qualifications framework, or important parts of it. Examples have included the development of a national qualifications framework in New Zealand, the generation of 'training packages' in Australia, and the establishment of vocational qualifications for work-based learning in Finland. These developments have often been accompanied by visits to the UK by delegations by the countries concerned, and sometimes too by direct consultancy from this country. Interestingly, similar strands of debate have surrounded such competence-based initiatives, with proponents pointing to the advantages of having a coherent system and the emancipation of trainees from previous systems which restricted access to recognition of their skills (an important dimension, for example, in South Africa), and opponents concerned about the practicality of maintaining reliable standards, and the rejection of institution-based learning, with allegations that this involves the jettisoning of educational content.¹⁷

As we have seen, NVQs have deficiencies. Their reliance on written standards can lead either to problems of unreliability or of narrowing the field in which reliable assessments can be given. They do not, therefore, lend themselves to 'holistic' assessments of large and important areas of personal achievement. But the same charges can be – and often are – levelled against other qualifications, whether vocational or academic; the right path may well be to rely less on an array of qualifications, still less a single qualification, to form the basis of education and training.¹⁸ Neither are NVQs a suitable vehicle for teaching or assessing theory – though taught qualifications which do this are likely to have parallel deficiencies in their ability to assess practical performance. The answer here would seem to be to have a 'dual' structure of awards.

We might therefore conceive that NVQs occupy a legitimate, and arguably rather important, niche in the constellation of vocational awards. But this is a far cry from the original project, to develop a single coherent framework of valid vocational qualifications, which would cover all requirements and prove popular to firms and employees alike. What can we say about this?

The wholesale reformation of vocational qualifications, which was inherent in the NVQ idea, was launched, at best, at half cock; there was never a tremendous appetite in the market outside publicly funded provision for the new-style qualifications, and even within the publicly controlled sector NVQs were far from the only show in town. Nevertheless the vision of a comprehensive and coherent qualifications system remains very much alive, as does the belief that it would be attractive to individuals and employers if as much learning as possible was certified. Furthermore there is considerable belief that the key to the latter lies in the former – if vocational qualifications were less confusing and better designed many more people would be attracted to them.¹⁹

So it is important for the future that we determine whether it was particular shortcomings in the concept of NVQs themselves which prevented this wholesale reform, in which case we might hope that a better design might bring success; or whether, conversely, the very enterprise itself is ill-conceived, in which case no design, however perfect, will achieve the desired outcome.

The answer to this question, I believe, is rather different in the case of qualifications for young people as opposed to those for adults. For young people qualifications gained at the last stages of education or in the first years at work are undoubtedly tremendously important for future life chances. Many studies (eg. McIntosh: 2002) have shown that future earnings, future occupational status and indeed the propensity to undertake further education and training, are all significantly correlated to the attainment of initial qualifications. Though vocational qualifications gained at this stage may not carry the same returns as academic ones (Robinson, 1997),²⁰ they do nevertheless attract considerable rewards. The high stakes evidently involved in initial vocational qualifications make it important that these are right, not just for the immediate requirements of the labour market, but also for longer-term careers and capabilities, and indeed that they reflect the cultural imperatives that society demands for the education of its citizens. This implies that initial qualifications, or programmes that encompass a variety of qualifications, should both be carefully balanced and fairly directive; an entirely elective system is likely to mean that some young people – and probably the most vulnerable – will make poor choices involving substantial damage to their future life chances.

So it probably does make sense to have some kind of system with common design principles in the case of young people. NVQs would be a strange choice as the principal basis for such a system. As we have seen, they made few educational claims, even in their early days, and they are weak vehicles for the teaching and assessment of theory.

Under the Youth Training Scheme it was acknowledged that other inputs beyond occupational NVQs should be included, and though NVQs feature significantly in modern apprenticeships, they form only part of the total package. In short, for young people and NVQ-style approach may be useful in certifying practical work, and as a balance to a constant diet of theory and associated tests of retention and understanding, but they do not seem to lend themselves as a basis of certifying all – or even the majority – of valuable attainments that young people should aim for.

For adults, however, the picture is different. In great contrast to initial qualifications, those gained later in life seem to offer very little by way of wage premiums, whether they are academic or vocational, at a low or high level (Jenkins et al: 2002).²¹ Perhaps because of this, adults seem to place relatively little stress on gaining a qualification as part of a course; the Learning & Skills Council's learner satisfaction survey (LSC: 2002) reported that only a quarter of adults cited qualifications as a reason for choosing their course of study in further education. It seems likely that qualifications will be taken by adults, only if they are required for regulatory purposes (eg. health and safety, independent financial advice etc) or if they are mandated as part of the course that they take – which of course they are in most publicly funded offerings.

It may well be that NVQs have higher penetration of unfunded adult training compared to other vocational qualifications. But while individual NVQs may have utility in particular sectors and firms, it is in this area, I would argue, that there is least need for an overall framework of coherent qualifications. As we have seen, this is 'low stakes' territory with only limited demand for qualifications of any kind, and few benefits in terms of life chances to be gained by obtaining one. Vocational qualifications for existing workers will make sense for particular firms which wish to benchmark their in-house training, which need to comply with particular regulatory requirements, and for firms which see attractions in a qualification as a non-wage benefit. From the point of view of individuals, qualifications are currently a necessary, and probably unobjectionable, part of the package of education or training in public institutions; they may help at the margins if one is out of work or has absolutely no previous qualifications at all; and they can be important pre-requisites for some very particular occupations or areas of work.

But all these are particular needs, some of which are currently being satisfied by NVQs, while others are satisfied by other types of vocational qualification. At the *system* level there seems to be no significant demand for all adult learning to be accredited, nor any evidence that introducing comprehensive accreditation would act as a significant

incentive for adults to enter learning. It seems likely that adults, and firms, will seek accreditation where it makes sense to them, and are more likely to be concerned that particular qualifications will ‘deliver the goods’ in the context of industry practices or regulatory requirements, than to be worried whether they are part of an overall framework. Indeed if the erection of a ‘coherent’ framework had the effect of altering the qualifications that currently serve the various purposes sought by adults, then one might well see either an overall decline in usage, or the continuation of the current qualifications outside any ‘new’ framework – a pattern which has been repeated before.²²

The existence of an overall framework does, though, have some attractions to policy makers and those responsible for funding public education and training. A comprehensive framework is comprehensible to those who have to understand the *whole* system and explain it to others – as opposed to those who only need to understand the particular bits that they use. More specifically a system of equivalencies between qualifications, with consistent measures of difficulty and volume, constitutes a convenient currency for accounting for teaching and learning that takes place across the system, enabling the setting of national targets,²³ and forming the basis for comparisons between providers. However this functionality of a comprehensive system of qualifications would seem an odd justification for bringing one into being, with all the costs and drawbacks of doing so. The same end of accountability can surely be achieved through statistical conventions of how to ‘count’ the various existing qualifications, without any particular need to change the nature of the qualifications themselves.

If these arguments are accepted, one is led to the conclusion that, in the case of young people, an overall and reasonably homogenous system of qualifications is needed, but that the particular form of NVQs was not a suitable vehicle for this task. In the adult sphere perhaps the converse is the case. NVQs do have a fairly important part to play, and do satisfy some particular and important needs, but the case for an overall unified system of *any description* is relatively weak, and we can expect reforms – such as those undertaken in the case of NVQs – to encounter an uncertain and patchy response.

Why the fuss?

This paper has dealt, I hope in a dispassionate way, with both the claims and the critiques of those who thought and wrote during the development and roll-out of NVQs. We have concluded, with the very considerable benefit of hindsight, that many of the claims were plainly over-ambitious, and many of the criticisms curiously

overplayed, as they could have been applied to many forms of qualification other than NVQs. But our consideration of the arguments has not done justice to the *passions* of each side, for there is no doubt that those who were associated with the development considered that they were reforming an elitist, ineffective and self-serving system, while the ‘critics’ evidently considered that NVQs represented a veritable onslaught against tried, trusted and educationally meaningful forms of vocational education and training.

In fact neither was actually the case; NVQs did not radically reform the system, and not only did their failure to do so demonstrate that the feared ‘attack’ did not materialize, but also it is hard to see in just what respects they could have posed a greater threat than any other form of qualification reform. But all the while that the debates about NVQs were raging, other contentious reforms in the field of vocational education and training were taking place; for example, the rise and sudden abolition of the tri-partite Manpower Services Commission, the abolition of statutory Industry Training Boards, the increasingly prescriptive insertion of non-waged ‘trainees’ to undertake work in private enterprises and the establishment of employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils to direct government programmes at the local level. But these seemed to generate less heat than the apparently rather arcane matter of the design of competence-based qualifications. It was as if the NVQ reform *stood for* a constellation of values which lay near the heart of a deep political, moral and indeed philosophical schism. Let us allow ourselves a degree of indulgence to allow that this was the case, and to speculate about the nature of that schism.

The schism was multi-dimensional, though somehow the various dimensions made a coherent, if mutually repellent package. The various constituents of the ‘cocktail’ might be enumerated as:

- vocationalism as opposed to ‘liberal’ or ‘academic’ education. This fault line, though undeniably present, was not wholly clear-cut. As we have seen, particularly in the early days, some of those who would have firmly seen themselves as liberal educators, wary of ‘vocational instrumentalism’ had high hopes of the NVQ development as an emancipatory mechanism for fostering, and giving credit for, learner-centred techniques. By the same token some from the educational right, who would normally support a firmer vocational pathway for those not academically gifted, found themselves in deep opposition to the NVQ idea.

- centralism versus devolution. The NVQ was a ‘centralizing’ mechanism. It could thus be attractive at national governmental level (as a lever for reform, or control), and likewise constitute a threat to employers and institutions who valued their own autonomy. But again the political dividing lines were not clear. While giving proper ‘national’ recognition to vocational achievement was held by some on the right to be a way of improving the skills base and productivity of UK plc, others interested in progressive educational reform saw it also as a means for conferring recognition for achievements which did not count in the established educational value-system. Conversely opponents of centralism included not only liberal educators wary of the State’s moves to interest itself in the content of education since Prime Minister Callaghan’s Ruskin speech of 1976, but also right-wingers attracted by a laissez-faire rather than a managed approach to qualifications.²⁴
- linked to the centralizing tendency of a ‘rational’ system of vocational qualifications, was the use to which NVQs could be – and to a considerable degree were – put as a means of measurement and control of the previously idiosyncratic world of vocational education and training. If these qualifications were a fair and accurate representation of what was needed as the output of the system, what more natural role for them than to be used as the defining measure of what was and what was not adequate vocational education and training, and indeed to determine funding. NVQs were quickly therefore used as the required goal of government training schemes; and trainers who achieved good results in terms of NVQs got additional funds as a reward. This managerial use accorded well with contemporary notions of ‘modernizing’ or ‘re-inventing’ government, part of whose creed was that the focus should be on outcomes of the system, not on its inputs.²⁵ However the emancipation of the consumer and freeing up of the policy-maker promised by this type of reform movement – much influenced by public-choice theory – was of course at the expense of others:

“This move ... to the sovereignty of consumers and control by decision-makers may be read as subjecting bureaucrats and professionals, long held to be different from workers and managers in the private sector, to forms of control which have been familiar in the profit sector. Thus the flipside of consumerism is the ‘proletarianization’, deskilling and ‘de-professionalization’ of bureaucrats and professionals”

(Parsons: 1995, p 479)

The NVQ development therefore was not just a matter of having better vocational qualifications; it was also seen as, and reacted to, as part of a more general power play between managerial bureaucrats and beleaguered professionals – or between champions of the citizen and apologists for the *ancien regime*!

These undercurrents, related but not coherent either in terms of conventional politics or of educational philosophy, undoubtedly had the effect of raising the temperature in the interchanges about NVQs. And there may even have been a deeper divide. NVQs were symbols of the modern, the scientific, and the empirical. They were – and are – concerned with the bits that make up the whole rather than the whole itself. Language and the importance of its precise use, as we have seen, were central to their approach. They place a premium on action and utility rather than on understanding and appreciation. But it is these very qualities which incited their opponents for whom a fragmented, behaviourist and context-free approach was a veritable denial of any prospect of achieving wisdom and identity through ‘deep’ vocational knowledge. There is something here of the debates in early 20th Century America between John Dewey and ‘social efficiency’ proponents of vocational education, with the latter favouring short practical courses focussed always on ‘relevance’, whereas Dewey stressed the development of an all-round “industrial intelligence ... so that the individual may be able to make his own choices and his own adjustments, and be master, so far as in him lies, of his own economic fate” (Wirth: 1991, p 64). But there is also something of the long-lasting division between ‘analytic’ and ‘Continental’ philosophical traditions. Simon Critchley (2001, p 45) characterizes the former as concerned with truth, by nature ‘critically destructive’, associated with social change, reform and progress. The ‘Continental’ tradition, by contrast is concerned with meaning, ‘hermeneutically reconstructive’ in style and associated with social conservatism and tradition. These terms have a certain resonance with the debates over NVQs; is it going too far to suggest that the passion of the parties concerned may have been a reflection of this age-old, and perpetually bitter, philosophical division?

Notes

- 1 According to Raggatt & Williams (1999, p.10) the TEC developed its own new model of vocational award resting on validation of college courses, as opposed to brigading existing qualifications under a common framework as had been the original intention – a pattern repeated by the NCVQ fifteen years later.
- 2 cf. “For those with no previous experience of assessment and examining [the NVQ assessment process] will probably seem quite straightforward.” (Jessup: 1991, p100)
- 3 This is not to imply that each critic only had one criticism. Most had several lines of attack, and many put glosses on the points made by others. But here, for convenience, we assign a particular criticism to only one critic, as an articulate advocate, if not always the originator of the line in question.
- 4 The NCVQ, the body established by government to introduce a new qualifications framework in the vocational field, was subsumed into the QCA in 1997.

- 5 Or, for that matter, other expression of standards. Consider the cases of musical or choreographic notation. We would readily acknowledge that any performance based on them is likely to be *different* from that the author intended; whether better or worse is a matter of aesthetic taste, but ultimately unknowable since just what the author intended cannot be comprehensively described in words, whether the author's or anyone else's.
- 6 "the *meaning* of a word is its *use* in the language." (Wittgenstein, 1958, p 20, my italics)
- 7 Though many consider that new technology might narrow the scope of assessment – by proliferating machine-markable multiple choice tests – others think that it may widen assessment domains, by making new categories of item transportable to assessors. For Gilbert Jessup (1999, p.19) the capability of the internet to transport video and audio evidence promises to "greatly reduce the burdens placed upon supervisors and provide the external and independent assessment that is demanded for quality assurance."
- 8 As an example, consider the likely effects on teaching of new tests in basic skills which cover reading, and, slightly, writing, but do not assess speaking or listening at all.
- 9 If anything the reverse is true. The FEFC Chief Inspector reported that NVQ lessons inspected in 1998-9 were, on average, slightly better than those for other types of qualification. Good or outstanding grades were awarded for 69% of NVQ Level 3 lessons, 65% of NVQ Level 2 lessons, and 68% of Level 1 lessons, compared with 65% for all qualification types. (FEFC, 1999, p 49)
- 10 "The premise put forward here is that all formal learning ... and much informal learning would be more effective if targeted on specified outcomes" (Jessup, 1991, p 131)
- 11 Cf. Tolley *et al*, 2003, p 8. "Authentic tasks undertaken in the workplace generate opportunities to develop procedural knowledge and the understanding of deeper principles [but] many learning opportunities which arise through work are neither recognised nor exploited."
- 12 And indeed may have nothing to do with successful performance. Consider the medieval doctors who frequently managed to effect a cure, despite rather than because of their theories of the 'humours'.
- 13 A valuable resource, to be found at www.dfes.gov.uk/section97
- 14 The National Information System for Vocational Qualifications collects non-NVQ information from City & Guilds, OCR (RSA), London Qualifications Ltd (Edexcel and BTEC), the Construction Industry Training Board, the Institute for the Motor Industry, and the former London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. There are 200 other vocational awarding bodies, though these probably account for the majority of full awards. Open College Network units lie outside NISVQ, as do Scottish National Certificate modules.
- 15 These two tables are not compatible with one another. There are many differences including: a wider geographical base for NISVQ (GB, as opposed to England in Table Two), many more awarding bodies are included in the second table than the first, Table Two shows those studying towards a qualification (many of whom may not attain it) whereas Table One counts only awards made etc.
- 16 The principal cost is around £4m pa, the product of £10 'tax' on awarding bodies for each NVQ awarded, which goes towards the updating of the occupational standards which underlie NVQs, and which now also act as a reference point for other vocational qualifications accredited by the QCA.
- 17 For a critical review of international developments see the collection in the *Journal of Education & Work*, 2003, Vol 16,3. For an account of NVQ-style qualifications in Finland see Haltia: 1999
- 18 Or perhaps to erect a single, multi-faceted qualification requiring attainment in different fields and subject to a variety of assessment methods. (Tomlinson, 2003, p 25). But there are problems in having such a broad award, which, most would agree, is not a realistic proposal for adults in any event.

- 19 Cf. Ken Boston, Chief Executive of the QCA: "When we are successful [in developing a national qualifications framework], there will be a profound cultural change: the ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skill, formally recognised as accredited qualifications, will be a routine and expected activity for the great majority of people" (Boston: 2003)
- 20 Though this is contested by Dearden et al (2000), who point out that the shorter duration of vocational qualifications leads to lower income sacrifice while taking them, and hence to higher rates of return.
- 21 The few significant positive returns were in the case of women in their thirties gaining higher level qualifications and for those with no earlier qualifications whatsoever. For both these groups the qualifications gained later in life may perform rather similar functions to initial qualifications.
- 22 For example the use of City and Guilds awards as full-time courses alongside BTECs in the 1970s, the parallel running of GNVQs and BTEC Nationals in the 1990s, as well as the multiple offerings competing with NVQs for adult training in colleges.
- 23 For example DfES: 2003, p 61. "The target is [for]...1 million adults in the workforce to achieve a level 2 qualification between 2003 and 2006." Without some method of counting the qualifications which class as level 2 such targets would not be possible to set in a meaningful fashion.
- 24 For example the 'Hillgate' Group: "[It] seems to us to be advisable ... to encourage the privatisation of examinations, with employers, universities and other interested bodies, getting together to set the examinations that they would wish students to pass, rather than those which have been devised by people detached from the worlds of scholarship, employment and industry." (Cox et al: 1987, p20)
- 25 "Public entrepreneurs know that when institutions are funded according to inputs, they have little reason to strive for better performance. But when they are funded according to outcomes, they become obsessive about performance" (Osborne & Gaebler: 1993, p139)

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