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A guide for school leaders on  
qualification routes for support staff



*developing people, improving young lives*

## Introduction

Support staff play a key role in making the vision of the 21st century school set out in the Children's Plan (2008) a reality. They are increasingly helping schools to raise standards and enabling them to develop the extra capacity and capability they need. This includes support for developing extended services, improving personalised learning, reaching out more to local communities, and strengthening links with other organisations that support children and young people.

Developing the skills, performance and careers of support staff is therefore becoming more and more important. The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) works with schools to help develop the skills of the whole school workforce.

Many staff development processes are common to all staff in schools. However, there are particular considerations for school leaders regarding support staff.

This booklet outlines five steps that will help you to identify and assess suitable qualification options for support staff development and find sources of further information and guidance. You can use it as a checklist when planning for your school's needs and the individual needs of your support staff.

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## Step 1 – Identify development needs

Having a clear idea of the development needs that training is intended to meet is essential for making an informed choice about the range of qualifications and courses on offer.

Development needs can arise from a range of circumstances, for example:

- where the school improvement plan sets out new areas of responsibility
- where a performance review identifies areas for improvement
- where a member of staff makes you aware of their own interests or career aspirations and you agree that development would be useful
- when a new member of staff is appointed
- when a member of staff takes on a new role or responsibility
- during a performance or appraisal activity, or
- following a school skills audit.



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## Step 2 – Clarify development needs

Arriving at a shared understanding of the exact nature of the development needs is key to identifying appropriate training.

Even when the area for development has been agreed, further discussion is often necessary to be clear on the exact nature of the skills and/or knowledge required. For example, if a member of staff takes on the responsibility of supporting a pupil with a specific learning difficulty, their development needs may relate to the skills required for special educational needs (SEN) support, knowledge of the learning difficulty in particular, or both.

Using national occupational standards (NOS) for specific support staff roles is a good way of identifying particular gaps in skills and knowledge. NOS cover roles such as administration, laboratory technicians, and premises and catering staff.

The standards for staff supporting teaching and learning in schools (NOS STL) cover a broad range of roles and responsibilities undertaken by school support staff including teaching assistants, SEN staff and pastoral support roles.

Training needs analysis (TNA) tools, linked to professional and occupational standards, are widely available and can help you identify specific areas for development.

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### To help clarify development needs, consider:

- whether the needs are related to:
  - a) developing skills or knowledge relating to a current role
  - b) preparing for an enhanced or different role
- if the staff member needs help to brush up on their literacy, language or numeracy skills before undertaking development. A lack of these skills can affect a person's ability to benefit fully from a programme of learning or from being able to fully demonstrate their skills or knowledge. The TDA provides online guidance for school leaders on helping staff to improve their basic skills level
- what impact is completion of training intended to have on work practice and outcomes for children
- how well the development supports future career aspirations.

## Step 3 – Decide what sort of development is needed

There are very good reasons why a qualification may be the best way to meet development needs, for example to support career progression. However, development needs can often be met through a range of internal opportunities or training courses.

### Informal training and development

Training and development needs don't always have to be met through external courses and qualifications. Other forms of development can be very effective and less disruptive to the school and staff. Alternatives to courses include:

- coaching, mentoring or shadowing opportunities where other school staff already have the skills and knowledge required
- asking experienced colleagues to identify resources such as online publications that could fill any knowledge gaps
- joining or initiating local practice networks, making use of any local cluster groups
- participating in an action research project within the school or cluster, or
- arranging a whole school training day to support the development if it is one shared by several staff in the school or cluster.

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### Career Development Framework

The TDA has a unique tool called the career development framework (CDF) to help you, in consultation with your support staff, choose the qualification that most appropriately meets their development needs.

More information on the CDF can be found on p.16.

### External courses and qualifications

**Courses** are run by colleges or other training providers; most local authorities have a list of courses available locally for support staff. They are often tailored to the trainees' needs and last between a couple of hours and several days. Some courses lead to qualifications while others are not accredited.

Achievement of a **qualification** may be particularly appropriate where someone:

- has no qualifications relevant to their role and they, and their employer, would welcome assurance and recognition that they have the skills and knowledge they need to be effective
- is moving into a new role or taking on new responsibilities and needs to quickly acquire new skills and/or knowledge
- needs to develop skills or knowledge in a specialist aspect of a role
- has development needs that cannot easily be addressed through in-house support, such as coaching, mentoring or work shadowing
- aspires to a new or more senior role and a qualification would support this progression
- is required to demonstrate competence in order to meet a statutory requirement. For example, kitchen staff may be required to hold a food hygiene certificate.

The learning involved in gaining a qualification often brings additional benefits to the learner and their school by increasing their confidence, creativity and self-awareness. Understanding the different types of qualification available will help employers and staff to make an informed choice of qualification.

An explanation of qualification types can be found on p.12.

## Step 4 – Consider the practicalities

Once the choice of development has been made, it is important that both the school and the staff member understand and agree what practical and financial support will be provided and what will happen once the training is completed.

To help the school and candidate have a positive experience, it is important to ensure that:

- the candidate meets any entry requirements for the qualification, such as literacy and numeracy skills
- the level of the qualification is appropriate to the candidate's skills level and the demands of the role they have or aspire to
- the progression routes from the intended qualification are clear and matched to aspirations
- the candidate and school are aware of the nature of the qualification and how it will be delivered and assessed
- the candidate will have the opportunities to demonstrate the required competencies if the qualification or status is based on standards
- a training mentor is identified to support the candidate and that the mentor is aware of their responsibilities
- there is agreement between the candidate and the school about release time
- any costs, including hidden ones such as the costs of books or travel, have been identified and that the candidate and school are clear about who is responsible for meeting these
- the school and candidate are agreed on the outcomes of the development, including any changes to role, responsibilities or grading
- the school and candidate are clear about the desired impact of the training and development and how success will be measured.

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## Step 5 – Evaluate the development and ensure changes are embedded in practice

Reviewing the intended aims of training is helpful in evaluating the impact of professional development.

It is important to review any development activity to ensure that it has met the needs and intended outcomes identified in steps 1 and 2.

Impact should be considered in its widest sense – in terms of the needs of the school, the children and young people, and the individual's professional development.

The evidence base for impact evaluation needs to be broad. For instance, it could include children's emotional or physical well-being, more efficient administrative systems, as well as improved attainment.

Staff should also be encouraged to share their new skills and knowledge with colleagues to inform practice across the school. This will also contribute to their own development and professional recognition.

A tool has been developed by the TDA to help you evaluate the impact of CPD activities.

## Qualification types and levels

### Occupational qualifications

These qualifications are predominantly delivered and assessed in the workplace. Examples include support work in schools (SWiS) qualifications and national vocational qualifications (NVQs). They contain core and optional units and are based on standards. They use an assess-train-assess model to check a candidate's progress.

#### Occupational qualifications are suitable for those who:

- are already in the role covered by the qualification
- seek confirmation that they are working to nationally agreed standards, and
- have a school willing to provide a training mentor and development opportunities, and support the assessment process.

Assessment is usually through observing the candidate at work; a portfolio of evidence generated through the candidate's day-to-day work; and through drawing on the testimony of those who have worked with the candidate (expert witnesses). The school will need to provide a training mentor to help the candidate identify suitable evidence and development opportunities.

### Vocationally related qualifications

These qualifications usually involve a taught programme designed to increase a candidate's knowledge and understanding, for example the level 2 certificate in business administration. They are related to standards; assessment may include case studies, extended writing or tests.

#### Vocationally related qualifications are suitable for those who:

- are fairly new to a role and want to develop knowledge and understanding
- are already occupationally competent but want to deepen knowledge in a specialist area
- are not yet working in the role to which they aspire, but would like to demonstrate that they have the capability and knowledge to progress, and
- have sufficient literacy and/or numerical skills to cope with the assessment.

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### Higher education (HE) qualifications

These qualifications are usually delivered by a university or, partially, through distance learning. They often relate to professional standards, where they exist, and may link to professional status. One example is the foundation degree in learning support. HE qualifications often carry transferable credit (CAT points) so that a candidate can build up a qualification at their own speed and with a choice of options. It is worth checking the nature, level and credit value of any university award to establish what progression opportunities, including those in other institutions, it may offer the candidate.

#### HE qualifications are suitable for those who:

- have developed sufficient higher level skills to cope with the demands of assessment
- are working, or aspire to work, at a senior level, and
- are able to commit considerable time to study.

### Accreditation

Many qualifications are nationally accredited: those offered by awarding bodies can be accredited by Ofqual (formerly QCA), and those awarded by universities operating within the quality assurance framework of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Accreditation offers reassurance about the quality of the qualification and the organisation running it. The assessment will be robust and the course should consider the needs of employers. Some qualifications may not be accredited through either the Ofqual or QAA systems. Such qualifications may be very useful, but candidates need to think about their own circumstances when choosing, and consider how well they will support their transferability and progression.

## Status

Higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) status and qualified teacher status (QTS) are not qualifications. Both are assessed through the demonstration of the professional standards that underpin the award of status. The professional standards for each apply to the full range of specialisms and contexts in which people may be working. A national approach and monitoring programme ensures that assessment is fair and consistent.

HLTA achievement is a status rather than a qualification because a qualification is required to have defined learning outcomes. As HLTAs operate in a variety of contexts, age phases and subject areas, it would not be possible for a single qualification to reflect this wide range. However, attainment of a qualification or qualifications may help an individual achieve the underpinning knowledge necessary to successfully demonstrate the standards.

## Qualification levels

Qualifications are accredited to the national qualifications framework (NQF) at one of eight levels (see table). It is important to note that qualifications at the same level can vary considerably in size and content. What determines level is the complexity of the skills or knowledge required for successful achievement. Some qualifications may require staff to demonstrate a broad range of knowledge and skills related to the needs of an occupational role (eg, an NVQ) and it may take some time to develop the necessary skills and knowledge; others may be developed to equip candidates with a particular skill or specialist knowledge and may take only a short time to complete.

## Qualification levels in England

| Level       | National qualifications framework (NQF)                       | Framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) |
|-------------|---|--|
| Level 8     | Specialist award  | Doctorate  |
| Level 7     | Diploma in translation  | Masters degree                                       |
| Level 6     | Diploma in management   | Honours degree                                       |
| Level 5     | Advanced diploma in administrative management                 | Intermediate – foundation degree, diploma of HE      |
| Level 4     | Certificate in early years                                    | Certificate of HE                                    |
| Level 3     | A-level<br>NVQ in supporting teaching and learning in schools |  |
| Level 2     | GCSE grade A*–C<br>SWiS certificate                           |  |
| Entry level | Certificate in adult literacy                                 |  |

For occupational qualifications, it is important that support staff are able to demonstrate the performance criteria through their day-to-day work; in order to be successful they will need to be working at, or close to, the level of the qualification. The online guidance to the NOS STL includes a unit selection tool which helps determine the appropriate level for those considering an NVQ.

For NVQs in other occupational roles, looking at the standards that underpin them, together with discussions with a training provider, will help you decide on the appropriate level. The SWiS qualifications are available at levels 2 and 3 and the guidance will help in making decisions on level.

Not all learners will progress up through levels in a linear way; for qualifications designed to develop knowledge and understanding, it is important to consider the match between the content and the identified development need of the candidate, together with their ability to meet the assessment requirements (for example, essay writing skills).

It may well be appropriate for someone to take a qualification at a level equivalent to, or even lower than, an existing qualification that they hold; for example, a history graduate wanting to learn about using spreadsheets would not need a PhD on the subject – what matters is that the content matches their needs.

## Qualification changes

By the end of 2010, all Ofqual-accredited qualifications will need to have moved from the current NQF to the new qualifications and credit framework (QCF). The main changes are that all qualifications will be made up of units which may feature in more than one qualification, and each unit will have a credit value attached which represents the typical amount of learning required to meet its learning outcomes. For users, this opens up the possibility of transferring credit between qualifications and for having a clearer understanding of the relative size of different qualifications. The qualification levels 1–8 will remain.

The TDA has developed a qualification strategy in consultation with schools and other stakeholders that sets out the range of qualifications expected to be included on the new framework for the school workforce.

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## Sources of additional information

### CPD zone

The TDA has developed an online zone to help school leaders deliver effective CPD that addresses the personal needs of all staff, linked to the school's improvement planning framework. The CPD zone also contains a new database of CPD provision. To access all these CPD resources, visit: [www.tda.gov.uk/cpd](http://www.tda.gov.uk/cpd)

### Unlock the potential of your support staff

The TDA has developed a booklet and web hub to maximise the training and development opportunities for support staff. The guide 'Unlock the potential of your support staff' outlines the benefits of well-deployed support staff and explains the range of TDA training tools and resources available. You can find all of these resources and the guidebook on the web hub: [www.tda.gov.uk/developsupport](http://www.tda.gov.uk/developsupport)

The tools and resources listed below can also be accessed through this web address.

### Finding the right qualification

The TDA has created the career development framework for school support staff to help you, and your support staff, identify relevant qualifications. Some local authorities have used this to develop frameworks for their own areas. The career development framework shows currently available qualifications for the range of support staff roles, together with sources of further information, and can be found at: [www.tda.gov.uk/careersupport](http://www.tda.gov.uk/careersupport)

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## National occupational standards

The TDA has worked with school leaders, support staff and local authorities to develop new NOS for supporting teaching and learning. The standards support the effectiveness of staff through describing the skills and knowledge required for the range of activities carried out by support staff at two levels of practice. They align with national expectations and qualifications.

The TDA has also developed online guidance to the NOS STL to help, for example, with skills reviews, preparing job descriptions, creating effective performance review processes for support staff, and matching the right training and development to the needs of the individual and the school.

The online guidance also contains a unit selection tool which helps you to select NOS units to match a particular job role.

A booklet and a pull-out wall chart have also been developed to complement the online guidance.

For more information on the NOS STL and guidance, or to order or download the booklet and wall chart go to: [www.tda.gov.uk/nos](http://www.tda.gov.uk/nos)

Higher level teaching assistant standards and related information can be found at: [www.tda.gov.uk/leaders/supportstaff/hlta](http://www.tda.gov.uk/leaders/supportstaff/hlta)

You can find more details on other support staff-related standards at: [www.tda.gov.uk/leaders/supportstaff/nos](http://www.tda.gov.uk/leaders/supportstaff/nos) and [www.ukstandards.org](http://www.ukstandards.org)

## Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship programmes are available for a number of school support staff, including those in catering, administration and supporting teaching and learning roles. Apprentices will be supported by a provider to achieve an NVQ, a vocational qualification, and literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

Funding is available for apprenticeship training; employers are expected to pay their apprentices a training wage and support them by allowing time off to attend training and opportunities for on-the-job development. Apprentices can be new recruits or drawn from existing staff. There are no upper age restrictions for doing an apprenticeship. For more information go to: [www.apprenticeships.org.uk](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk)

## Skills for life planner

The TDA has developed a planner to help you identify and address any literacy and numeracy gaps among your support staff. The easy-to-use planner includes resources such as checklists, case studies and links to useful organisations. Access the skills for life planner at:

[www.tda.gov.uk/sflplanner](http://www.tda.gov.uk/sflplanner)

## Resources for support staff

The TDA has a range of online resources for support staff, including information on job roles, induction, identifying career opportunities, standards, training and qualifications. For more information visit:

[www.tda.gov.uk/support](http://www.tda.gov.uk/support)

The Teacher Training Resource Bank (TTRB) includes resources suitable for support staff. For more information visit: [www.ttrb.ac.uk](http://www.ttrb.ac.uk)

The Skills4schools website provides online guidance and resources to help school support staff access learning opportunities at work. Visit: [www.skills4schools.org.uk](http://www.skills4schools.org.uk)

## School improvement planning framework

The TDA's school improvement planning framework is a suite of useful tools to help schools take a fresh look at their priorities by putting the needs of children and young people at the heart of the planning process. For more information go to: [www.tda.gov.uk/schoolimprovement](http://www.tda.gov.uk/schoolimprovement)

## Information on expert witnesses and training mentors

Candidates taking occupational qualifications such as the SWiS and NVQs benefit from the support of a training mentor who can help them identify assessment opportunities. Expert witnesses may also be used to testify to the quality of the candidate's work. Information on these roles can be found at:

[www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/n/nos\\_guidance\\_expert\\_witness.pdf](http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/n/nos_guidance_expert_witness.pdf)  
[www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/n/nos\\_guidance\\_training\\_mentors.pdf](http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/n/nos_guidance_training_mentors.pdf)

This information can also be found within the NOS STL online guidance.

## Choosing a provider

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has developed a list of questions to ask a training provider to ensure that the employer's and learner's needs are met. These can be accessed at: [www.lsc.gov.uk/regions/EastMidlands/egtp/questions-provider](http://www.lsc.gov.uk/regions/EastMidlands/egtp/questions-provider)

The TDA has a provider question checklist relating to the SWiS qualifications. To view this visit: [www.tda.gov.uk/swisguidance](http://www.tda.gov.uk/swisguidance)

## Evaluating CPD guidance

The TDA has developed a tool to help evaluate the impact of CPD activities. Although the tool was developed primarily for teachers, it is relevant to CPD for all school staff. For more information visit:

[www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/i/impact\\_evaluation.pdf](http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/i/impact_evaluation.pdf)

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