

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

**General
National
Vocational
Qualifications
in the Further
Education
Sector in
England**

National Survey Report

November 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

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SUMMARY

This report is concerned with programmes leading to **General National Vocational Qualifications** (GNVQs), which are offered by colleges in the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sector in England. In 1994-95 there were almost 163,000 new registrations for GNVQs in schools and colleges and a further 22,100 advanced students entering their second year. Two-thirds of all new registrations were in colleges. As well as inspecting GNVQ provision during their normal inspection work, inspectors made specific visits to 42 colleges to inspect work in 12 vocational areas, in which GNVQ programmes were offered. Over 2,900 teaching and learning sessions were inspected. This report focuses on issues identified as requiring attention in a previous report on GNVQs issued by the FEFC inspectorate in November 1994.

The co-ordination and management of GNVQ programmes have improved since the previous year. Many colleges have appointed co-ordinators and set up steering groups, working parties and policy committees to oversee their GNVQ provision. In those colleges where there are no common procedures this often leads to a duplication of effort or a failure to make best use of the experience gained. Typically, some 12-15 hours each week are set aside for study on GNVQ mandatory and optional units but these weekly hours rise to more than 25 when other curriculum elements are included. Colleges are developing better links with schools, universities and employers, sometimes with assistance from their local training and enterprise council (TEC).

Procedures for **students' recruitment guidance and support** have been strengthened. Many colleges have reviewed their entry requirements and guidance procedures to ensure that students are more likely to remain on their chosen courses until completion. There is, however, a high drop-out rate on some intermediate courses which have recruited students of widely differing levels of ability. Publicity for GNVQs has been improved, as have procedures for interviewing and testing students to assess their need for learning support in the basic skills of numeracy, communication and study skills. Learning support has been strengthened, but it is still the case that some of the students who need support fail to avail themselves of the services provided. In half the colleges visited, arrangements to help students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good.

The quality of **teaching and the promotion of learning** is rising. After one or two years of operating GNVQs, teachers' confidence has grown with their increasing expertise and the majority of teaching is well planned and effective. In 57 per cent of the classes inspected during 1994-95 the strengths were considered to outweigh the weaknesses, an increase of 3 per cent over the previous year; 10 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths, a decrease of 1 per cent. The quality of teaching on advanced GNVQs still compares unfavourably with

that found on General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) work, although at intermediate level the quality of teaching is similar to that on General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) work.

Documentation and record keeping remain major problems. Although there have been improvements, teachers continue to find documentation complex and difficult to interpret. Much of it arrived too late to be used for planning courses in time for the beginning of the academic year. Colleges have been inventive in devising record-keeping systems, many of which are both innovative and effective. Nevertheless, students and teachers still spend an inordinate amount of time in keeping their records up to date. The new unit specifications for use from September 1995, the recently announced simplification of record keeping and the revised arrangements for the assessment of GNVQs are welcomed by colleges.

Work experience for students on employers' premises is included in over 75 per cent of courses at all levels. It is common practice in leisure and tourism, and in hospitality and catering courses to encourage students to obtain part-time employment to gain the necessary vocational experience. In health and social care, some employers are reported to be reluctant to devote time to assessing students. Many course tutors have developed assignments in conjunction with employers, which allow students to produce evidence for subsequent assessments. In some cases, specific units can be achieved by students in the workplace; assessments are conducted by workplace supervisors and subsequently confirmed by teachers. Many colleges would like to see the development of more optional units which students could follow in relevant work experience placements.

The development and assessment of core skills give cause for concern in the majority of colleges inspected. Few colleges have an institution-wide policy to guide developments. Good practice developed in one curriculum area is often not shared. Approaches are changed frequently and some skills are developed in isolation from the vocational area. Inspectors saw some good practice in integrating core skills with vocational work. A number of colleges successfully deliver courses designed to enhance each of the mandatory core skills and careful co-ordination ensures that all aspects are addressed and assessed. In other cases, assessment and recording of achievements in core skills are cursory.

Securing national standards through the **assessment, verification and grading** of students' work in GNVQs is proving to be a major problem for the awarding bodies and teachers. Guidance on the collection of evidence and the recording of achievement has improved, but the whole assessment system remains too unwieldy. Procedures for recording and verifying assessment remain detailed and time consuming. An efficient and objective way of assuring standards within and between colleges has

not yet been achieved. Teachers require training to develop robust internal systems of quality control which incorporate internal verification and colleges need to develop assessment strategies to ensure fairness, consistency and appropriate levels of assessment. Good progress has been made in equipping teachers with assessor and verifier awards and more colleges have found the necessary resources to place teachers for short periods in industry and commerce. The role of the external verifier has been strengthened by the awarding bodies. More needs to be done to ensure greater consistency in their interpretation of GNVQ guidance and in their communication to colleges of the standards expected of students' work. The amount of evidence in students' portfolios varies considerably. Some courses have an overall assessment plan and use assignments which clearly indicate the opportunities for students to achieve the grades of merit or distinction. The layout, consistency and appropriateness of external tests have improved but the quality remains uneven. Success rates in external tests vary considerably from one vocational area to another. In some vocational areas, a number of the questions posed in test papers could only be answered by students with the relevant vocational experience. In other vocational areas, the questions could be answered by those without such experience.

Standards of work for students who are successful on advanced GNVQs are broadly equivalent to those achieved by students on comparable vocational courses, or those achieved by students on GCE A levels studying two subjects. The standards achieved by successful students on intermediate GNVQs are broadly comparable in breadth and depth to the standards achieved by students taking four subjects at GCSE or on the vocational programmes that GNVQs have replaced. At intermediate level, there is considerable variation in the achievements of students and in the standards of work demanded of them at different centres. At foundation level, students are producing work of an appropriate standard and those unlikely to achieve the full awards have the opportunity to achieve success in some units.

Retention and completion rates vary considerably between courses and between colleges. Retention rates as low as 30 per cent are found on a few courses. The DfEE intends to introduce a national GNVQ database in 1996. Meanwhile, there are no reliable national statistics and it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between GNVQs and other programmes of study. GNVQs are based on the completion of units and end points are not clearly defined. Data produced by the awarding bodies show that since beginning their course in 1993, 47 per cent of advanced course students had achieved the full award by October 1995. In 1994-95, 36 per cent of intermediate course students had gained the full award by October 1995 and these figures were expected to increase in subsequent months.

Information on students' **progression** to higher education is encouraging; 89 per cent of the students from advanced courses who

applied for entry in 1995 had received at least one provisional offer, an increase of 5 per cent on the previous year. The majority of students who completed their GNVQ course successfully continued their studies in further or higher education, or gained employment.

Action is required to improve staff development and to simplify documentation. Low completion rates require further investigation and reliable data are needed. All involved in providing GNVQs should work together to make the assessment system more manageable; in particular to improve:

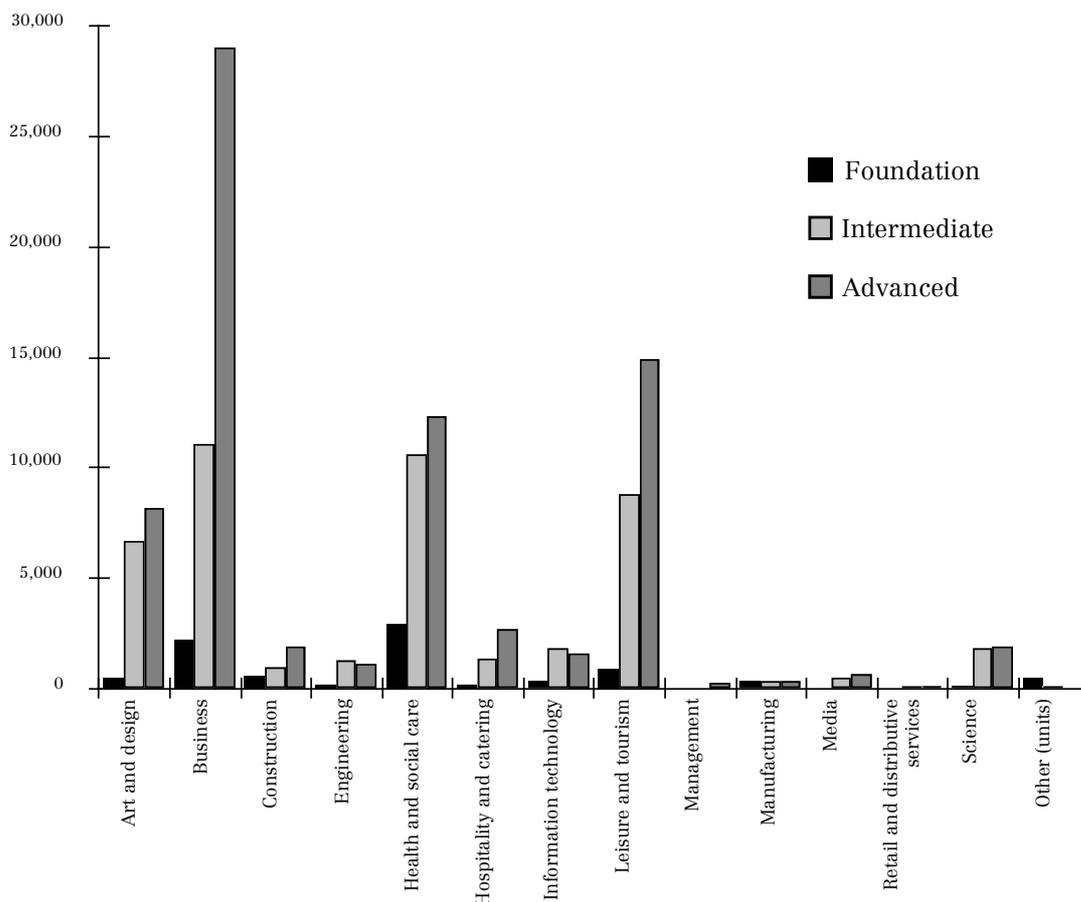
- external testing
- the development and assessment of core skills, and
- internal and external verification.

INTRODUCTION

General National Vocational Qualifications

1 General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) offered under the auspices of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) are proving to be popular with young people in both schools and colleges. The Joint Council of National Vocational Awarding Bodies comprising: the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) and the RSA Examinations Board (RSAEB) reported that there were about 163,000 new registrations for GNVQs in 1994-95 and the numbers of advanced students entering their second year was about 22,100. Most students were between 16 and 19 years old and were studying full time. In 1994-95 two-thirds of all new registrations for GNVQs were in Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sector colleges. Altogether, there were more than 127,000 students studying in sector colleges on over 4,100 GNVQ courses. Over 70 per cent of GNVQ registrations in colleges were with BTEC and 92 per cent of FEFC-sector colleges provided GNVQs. Those that did not were mainly specialist agricultural and horticultural colleges for whom specialist land and environment GNVQs were not yet available. Three sixth form colleges had each made a strategic decision not to offer GNVQs. An analysis of FEFC students undertaking GNVQ programmes by vocational area and level of study is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1
Students enrolled on GNVQ courses in FEFC sector colleges by type of programme and level 1994-95



Subject	Number of colleges running courses			Number of students enrolled at 1 November 1994					Total students
	Founda-tion	Inter-mediate	Advanced	Founda-tion	Inter-mediate	Adv yr 1	Adv yr 2	Adv yrs 1 & 2	
Art and design	61	292	243	435	6,622	6,180	1,975	8,155	15,212
Business	145	370	378	2,194	11,029	19,650	9,344	28,994	42,217
Construction	17	74	73	544	924	1,471	417	1,888	3,356
Engineering	13	56	45	158	1,251	1,071	0	1,071	2,480
Health and social care	195	351	305	2,900	10,567	9,219	3,068	12,287	25,754
Hospitality and catering	15	88	118	96	1,317	2,199	471	2,670	4,083
Information technology	18	70	55	293	1,750	1,520	0	1,520	3,563
Leisure and tourism	83	321	322	866	8,791	11,484	3,395	14,879	24,536
Management	0	0	16	0	0	175	0	175	175
Manufacturing	20	28	21	309	281	201	54	255	845
Media	2	33	31	0	406	594	0	594	1,000
Retail and distributive services	0	2	4	0	55	23	0	23	78
Science	11	137	129	86	1,788	1,616	276	1,892	3,766
Other (units)	16	3	2	453	23	2	0	2	478
Total	596	1,825	1,742	8,334	44,804	55,405	19,000	74,405	127,543

Source: Survey by the FEFC Inspectorate.

3 The GNVQ is a unit-based qualification comprising combinations of mandatory and optional vocational units with mandatory core skills units (table 1). Core skills units cover communication, the application of number and information technology. In addition, all courses are expected to develop a range of personal and study skills. Like NVQs, the GNVQ units are described in terms of outcomes and are assessed according to criteria specified by the NCVQ. Each unit comprises a number of elements which contain descriptions of the performance criteria, the range to be covered, the evidence indicators, amplification of the elements and guidance for teachers. Further details of these terms are given in the glossary. Colleges are expected to design their own courses to meet the requirements of the awarding body with which their students are registered.

Table 1
Structure of General National Vocational Qualifications at
foundation, intermediate and advanced levels

<i>Level</i>	<i>Normal entry requirements</i>	<i>Vocational units</i>	<i>Core skills units</i>	<i>Normal duration</i>	<i>Broad equivalence</i>
Foundation	No entry qualifications	3 mandatory units 3 optional units from different vocational areas	Level 1 in communication application of number, and information technology	1 year	4 GCSEs at grades D to G; 1 NVQ at level 1
Intermediate	1 or 2 GCSEs at grades A to D or a foundation GNVQ	4 mandatory units 2 optional units	Level 2 in communication application of number, and information technology	1 year	4-5 GCSEs at grades A to C; or 1 NVQ at level 2
Advanced	4 or 5 GCSEs at grades A to C or an intermediate GNVQ	8 mandatory units 4 optional units, additional units, if desired	Level 3 in communication, application of number and information technology	2 years	2 GCSE A levels* or 1 NVQ at level 3

**The 12 vocational units of the advanced GNVQ were designed to be equivalent to two GCE A levels. In addition, there is the requirement that core skills be included in the GNVQ curriculum.*

4 Students undertaking GNVQ programmes are assessed internally and externally. They must satisfy the assessment criteria in each unit of the course and be assessed by their teachers in the mandatory core skills. To supplement the internal assessment of each mandatory unit in their programme, there is also the requirement, where appropriate, that students pass externally-set tests to assess their knowledge and understanding of the concepts, principles and relationships which underpin the vocational area. Students must meet the assessment requirements of all the units of their programme in order to gain the full award. However, those who achieve at least one unit are entitled to receive a certificate listing the units achieved. The full GNVQ can be awarded the grade of merit or distinction. A student's work is collected and presented in a portfolio of evidence which is graded against specific criteria. The grading criteria are organised into four 'themes': planning, information seeking and information handling, evaluation, and quality of outcomes. For 1995-96, the four grading themes remain the same but will be presented under two headings; **process**, which comprises the first three of the grading themes; and **quality of outcomes**. To achieve a merit or a distinction, students must show appropriate evidence that they have met the criteria in the four equally weighted themes in at least one-third of their portfolio of evidence.

5 Courses leading to GNVQs differ from GCE A level and NVQ qualifications in a number of important ways. GCE A levels aim to develop knowledge and a range of cognitive skills, generally within a clearly defined academic area. NVQs accredit competencies for particular occupations and professions in a work context, and achievement is based upon mastery of a range of competencies. GNVQs are designed to provide the skills and vocationally-oriented knowledge for progression to NVQs and further learning. They require the development of core skills in communication, application of number and information technology and are designed to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Developments

6 In March 1994, the then parliamentary under-secretary of state for further and higher education, Mr Tim Boswell, set a six-point agenda for action by the NCVQ and the awarding bodies to ensure rigour and quality in GNVQs. He called for measures to:

- improve the quality, reliability and credibility of external assessment, having regard to cost-effectiveness and teacher workload
- clarify the role of external verifiers, so as to give more emphasis to moderation of standards, and to improve the selection and training of verifiers
- improve and simplify the grading criteria, to give more emphasis to the quality of students' completed work and to

secure rigour and consistency of standards; and to develop ideas for using external tests to contribute to grading

- clarify the knowledge requirements within each GNVQ and present GNVQ unit specifications in a way which is jargon free and more readily understandable to teachers and students
- provide better and clearer guidance for teachers on portfolio assessment, grading, course planning and design; and eliminate excessive form filling
- introduce clear and consistent criteria, across all GNVQ awarding bodies, for the accreditation of schools and colleges offering GNVQs and for quality assurance.

7 In 1993-94, the FEFC's inspectorate surveyed GNVQ provision in 114 colleges. During this period GNVQs were fully operational at intermediate and advanced levels in five vocational areas, art and design, manufacturing, leisure and tourism, business, and health and social care, and were being piloted at foundation level. Three further vocational areas: science, hospitality and catering, and construction and the built environment were being piloted at intermediate and advanced levels. In all, total registrations for GNVQs reached 94,000 of which 53,000 were for students attending further education colleges.

8 The inspectorate's first report, *General National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England*, published in November 1994, echoed the concerns expressed by the minister and identified some further issues to be addressed by colleges and teachers in order to improve the quality and acceptability of the new qualification.

9 In 1994-95, GNVQs were widely available at intermediate and advanced levels in eight vocational areas: business, health and social care, leisure and tourism, art and design, science, hospitality and catering, construction and the built environment, and manufacturing. They were also being piloted at advanced and intermediate levels in four additional areas: engineering, information technology, distribution and media. GNVQ management studies was piloted at advanced level only. Foundation level GNVQs were being piloted in five areas: science, construction and the built environment, information technology, hospitality and catering, and engineering, and were more widely available in five others: health and social care, leisure and tourism, business, art and design and manufacturing. A full list of planned GNVQs and the anticipated timescale for their introduction is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3
The phasing-in of GNVQs

Intermediate and Advanced

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Art and design	pilot	publication		revised pub	
Business	pilot	publication		revised pub	
Health and social care	pilot	publication		revised pub	
Leisure and tourism	pilot	publication		revised pub	
Manufacturing	pilot	publication		revised pub	
Constr. and the built environment		pilot	publication		revised pub
Hospitality and catering		pilot	publication		revised pub
Science		pilot	publication		revised pub
Engineering			pilot	publication	
Information technology			pilot	publication	
Management studies (advanced)			pilot	pilot	publication
Media: comm. and production			pilot	pilot	publication
Retail and distributive services			pilot	pilot	publication
Land and environment					pilot
Perform. arts and entertainment industries					pilot

Foundation

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
Art and design		pilot	publication	revised pub	
Business		pilot	publication	revised pub	
Health and social care		pilot	publication	revised pub	
Leisure and tourism		pilot	publication	revised pub	
Manufacturing		pilot	publication	revised pub	
Constr. and the built environment			pilot		publication
Hospitality and catering			pilot		publication
Science			pilot		publication
Engineering			pilot	publication	
Information technology			pilot	publication	
Media: comm. and production					(pilot)*
Retail and distributive services					(pilot)*
Land and environment					(pilot)*
Perform. arts and entertainment industries					(pilot)*

**Possible introduction*

Source: GNVQ Briefing June 1995 (updated)

Inspection

10 This report, on the inspection of GNVQ provision, carried out by FEFC inspectors in 1994-95, focuses on nine issues identified in the first report as requiring further attention:

- co-ordination and management of GNVQ programmes
- students' recruitment guidance and support
- teaching and the promotion of learning
- documentation and record keeping
- work experience for students
- the development and assessment of core skills
- assessment, verification and grading
- standards of students' work
- retention, completion rates and progression.

11 As well as inspecting GNVQ provision during their normal inspection work, inspectors made specific visits to the 42 colleges shown in table 2 to inspect work in the 12 vocational areas shown in table 3, together with core skills and cross-college aspects of provision. After initial visits carried out at various stages of the year, inspectors returned to colleges to inspect completed portfolios of students' work. They also held discussions with college managers, teachers, support staff, students, and in one instance a major employer. There were meetings with representatives of the three awarding bodies: BTEC, C&G and the RSAEB; officers of NCVQ, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and representatives of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA).

Table 2
The colleges inspected as part of the survey

Eastern Region	Lowestoft College
	Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education
	Colchester Institute
	Hertford Regional College
East Midlands Region	Loughborough College
	North Nottinghamshire College
	Boston College

Greater London Region Barnet College

College of North East London

John Ruskin College

Kingston College

St Charles' Catholic Sixth Form College

Southgate College

Northern Region

Bishop Auckland College

Darlington College of Technology

Newcastle College

Northumberland College of Arts and Technology

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College

North West Region

Accrington and Rossendale College

Bury College

Priestley College

Salford College

Stockport College of Further and Higher Education

Wigan and Leigh College

South West Region

Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education

Bridgwater College

North Devon College

Yeovil College

West Midlands Region Burton upon Trent Technical College

Matthew Boulton College

Mid-Warwickshire College

Newcastle under Lyme College

Yorkshire and

Humberside Region

Beverley College of Further Education

Bradford and Ilkley Community College

Wakefield College

Bishop Burton College

South East Region	Abingdon College
	Alton College
	Esher College
	Godalming College
	Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
	Portsmouth College

Table 3
The vocational areas inspected

Art and design
Business
Construction and the built environment
Engineering
Health and social care
Hospitality and catering
Information technology
Leisure and tourism
Management studies
Manufacturing
Media: communication and production
Science

CO-ORDINATION AND MANAGEMENT OF GNVQ PROGRAMMES

12 The co-ordination and management of GNVQ programmes had improved since the previous year. With the rapid rise in the numbers of students studying for GNVQs many colleges had appointed or designated co-ordinators, usually at a senior level and the role had been reviewed and extended in others. Steering groups, working parties and policy committees had been set up to improve the consistency of procedures in important areas such as internal verification and planning staff development. In most colleges there was a course tutor or course leader for each group of students and in some there was a co-ordinator in each vocational area. In larger colleges there was often a co-ordinator within the faculty or department who liaised with the overall college co-ordinator. Course teams met regularly to monitor the progress of the courses and the students. Such arrangements were beginning to improve the running of programmes.

13 In a few colleges, there was still no one of sufficient status designated to set and implement policy on GNVQ provision and little co-ordination beyond the distribution of documentation. Where there was no joint development work, limited sharing of good practice and no common procedures, there was a duplication of effort or a failure to make best use of the experience gained in the implementation of these new programmes. In some colleges, the strong autonomy of departments or divisions was an obstacle to co-operation and development. In several colleges, the same GNVQ course was offered in two different departments and there were significant differences between the courses. For example, in one college there were different entry criteria for the two intermediate GNVQ leisure and tourism courses and differing arrangements for the diagnosis of students' needs for learning support. GNVQ students could study simultaneously for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects in only one of the two departments. The departments had also developed their own documentation and record-keeping systems for their respective courses. In a few colleges, different levels of the same GNVQ courses were run on different sites and there was little sharing of resources and expertise. In one such college, students on the intermediate level media course had access to good facilities such as a recording studio, photographic equipment, darkrooms and a video editing suite. These facilities were not available to students on the advanced course studying at a different site. Work experience was part of the intermediate course but not the advanced.

14 It was difficult to make accurate comparisons between colleges in respect of the time they allocated to GNVQ programmes because course hours were calculated differently. Nevertheless, there was still considerable variation in the number of hours of study devoted to a GNVQ programme. Some colleges offered a small core of compulsory studies comprising the mandatory and optional GNVQ units. Attendance at additional study sessions, tutorials, core skills workshops and learning support sessions was negotiated between the student and the tutor. In other colleges, students' programmes were more rigidly structured. Typically, some 12-15 hours each week were set aside for study of the GNVQ mandatory and optional units. The timetabled hours in some colleges could total more than 25 each week when tutorial sessions, learning support, core skills, and additional studies were taken into account. A good range of relevant additional studies was available in most colleges, including NVQs, GCSEs and GCE A levels, as well as additional GNVQ units and other vocationally specific qualifications. For example, students on intermediate leisure and tourism programmes most commonly studied for a range of practical sports coaching and first aid awards, and engineering students for NVQ units in a variety of engineering skills. Many students could also obtain awards which recognised their skills in areas such as wordprocessing and information technology. The majority of colleges offered students the opportunity to

improve their existing grades in GCSE mathematics and/or English.

15 Colleges were developing some effective links with schools, universities and employers. For example, one college in the West Midlands offered advanced GNVQ engineering as part of a modern apprenticeship scheme. The full-time course was jointly planned by the college and a major employer and was run in close co-operation with them. The local university also made a significant contribution to the planning of the course. Over the two years, the trainees spent 10, three-week periods in the company. During this time they were expected to complete 19 work-based assignments assessed by college staff in the workplace. The students also studied for NVQ level 2 units in engineering subjects. The trainees were recruited and selected by the company and the company organised the two-week induction programme, which included an outward bound course. It is intended that the trainees will progress to higher education. The college intended to offer similar courses for other employers. In the eastern region, one college was part of a consortium set up by the local training and enterprise council (TEC) to run modern apprenticeships in manufacturing engineering. In the north, one college had excellent links with local universities, schools and employers through membership of a consortium which aims to offer opportunities and progression in the construction industry. In several colleges, education business partnerships and other projects funded by the local TECs provided useful links with employers and schools.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

16 In most colleges, the entry requirements for the advanced GNVQ were grades A-C in four GCSE subjects, or the equivalent. The entry requirements for the intermediate level varied a great deal: many colleges were prepared to be flexible in their requirements and students at this level generally had a wide range of prior achievements. Some colleges required a minimum of four GCSEs at grades D/E, or the equivalent. Others relied solely on a good report from school, the result of an interview and evidence of an interest in the subject. In one college where these latter criteria had been applied for entry to the intermediate GNVQ in business, students' abilities and achievement levels were not checked early enough and as many as 50 per cent of students left the course early because they could not cope with the work they were expected to undertake. Some colleges required appropriate grades in specific GCSE subjects for entry to certain courses; for example, a grade C or above in science and mathematics for entry to an advanced engineering or science course. Some colleges administered vocationally-specific diagnostic tests for certain programmes. Students wishing to study art and design were usually expected to present a portfolio of their work. Entry to GNVQ foundation courses normally depended on the results of an interview to confirm an applicant's interest and suitability.

17 As part of their publicity, most colleges were producing attractive, informative leaflets about GNVQ programmes. These gave the entry requirements, information about the course of study, the progression routes and the learning support available. A range of effective promotional materials and events was used. For example, there were advertisements in the local press, on radio and television; open days were held, and course leaflets and prospectuses were widely distributed. One college in the Northern Region had arrangements for marketing GNVQs which included publicity in cinemas, on public transport, local radio, television and newspapers. Another college in Yorkshire and Humberside had done much to inform potential students, parents, higher education institutions and employers about GNVQs through a well planned series of meetings and publicity events. About half the colleges in the survey had good links with partner schools. College staff visited the schools on various occasions throughout the year to inform pupils about their choices of further study. In about a third of the colleges in the survey, school pupils were invited to sample the courses on offer in well-arranged taster events. Some colleges were in competition with local schools to recruit students for post-16 courses and this limited the effectiveness of liaison work.

18 Students interviewed by inspectors felt that they had been given sufficient information to make an informed choice about which course of study to follow. Most students were interviewed by college staff before being offered a place and most colleges offered effective induction programmes which also gave students the opportunity to reconsider their choice of course, in consultation with their tutors.

19 In about 70 per cent of the colleges, full-time students completed a test or assignment during enrolment or induction to assess their needs for learning support in the basic skills of numeracy, communications and/or study skills. Learning support usually took the form of students attending workshops and/or additional classes voluntarily. In some colleges, tutors referred students requiring additional support to the learning support services. However, those students who needed help did not always avail themselves of the services provided and students' attendance at workshops and their progress in basic skills were not adequately monitored or reported to their teachers.

20 In about half the colleges visited, inspectors commented favourably on the supportive arrangements which had been made to help students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Examples of assistance provided for students with a disability included: braille and enlarged text in printed materials and on computer monitors for the visually impaired; help with communication for students with a hearing impairment; and support for those with dyslexia. Access to buildings for students with restricted mobility was made possible by ramps and lifts. In some colleges, the support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was centrally co-ordinated. Students' needs were systematically identified and appropriate action taken. In other colleges,

individual tutors referred students for support where they judged this to be necessary. Training events organised by the colleges have helped teachers to develop their skills and confidence in carrying out this task.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

21 Of the 2,900 GNVQ teaching and learning sessions inspected in 1994-95, 57 per cent had strengths which outweighed weaknesses, an increase of 3 per cent compared with the previous year, and 10 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. Fifty-nine per cent of advanced GNVQ sessions had strengths which outweighed the weaknesses and 9 per cent had weaknesses which outweighed the strengths. These figures compared unfavourably with those for GCE A levels where, of the sessions inspected, 68 per cent had more strengths than weaknesses and 5 per cent had more weaknesses than strengths. The difference may reflect the maturity of the GCE A level syllabuses and the confidence displayed by teachers in teaching them. Fifty-five per cent of intermediate GNVQ sessions had more strengths than weaknesses and 11 per cent had more weaknesses than strengths. In comparison, the figures for the GCSE sessions inspected were almost identical at 54 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively.

22 After one or two years of operating GNVQs, teachers had gained experience of planning and delivering courses and their confidence had grown with their increasing expertise. The majority of teaching was well planned and effective. In the best practice, detailed schemes of work had been prepared by course teams. The sequencing of units and topics ensured that the courses progressed logically and that appropriate cross references between units were being made. Students were well informed about their studies and the assessment requirements, and were able to place their learning in an appropriate context. Courses were well structured to allow for some formal input from the teachers, to provide opportunities for students to work independently on their assignments with teachers' support, and to give students time to prepare for tests and tutorials during which their progress was monitored.

23 In the best lessons, there was a good relationship between the teacher and the students. Students were well motivated by varied activities designed to suit the topic and to address their needs. Good use was made of teaching aids, directed questioning and discussion. Students often worked alone or in groups on appropriate tasks, many of which had vocational relevance. In a construction class, students were conducting a feasibility study to develop a former church into a centre for use by those with a disability. Students on a leisure and tourism course were working in groups on an appraisal of the future of the industry and their place in it; they shared their findings and their conclusions with the rest of the class by means of effective presentations which demonstrated that they had acquired appropriate communication skills. Students on an information technology course used a simple computer programme to design an animated slide presentation; it

involved designing the slides and then carrying out appropriate technical activities to create the animated cartoons. In such lessons, students were encouraged to put forward their own ideas and to develop their skills in planning, research, and team work as well as extending their specialist knowledge, understanding and skills.

24 Not all the work which was inspected reached the required standard. Some teachers lacked confidence in their ability to teach on GNVQ courses and were uncertain about how to sequence their work. As a consequence, some courses were poorly planned and students were not clear what was required of them. In some colleges, students spent several sessions, or even a whole day, on similar topics, often with the same teacher. The lack of variety and the slow pace of the work led to students losing interest. Teachers sometimes set inappropriate tasks for students. On other occasions, teachers' overlong expositions, or their ineffective handling of questions and answers with groups of students from very mixed backgrounds, resulted in a failure to check students' understanding of the topic under consideration. A number of lessons provided insufficient challenge for some of the students while others in the same group were bewildered, suggesting that teachers were not sufficiently aware of students' differing levels of ability. In a few classes, the quality of the teaching aids, such as photocopied worksheets, was poor. Sometimes, classrooms were too small for the number of students present and this adversely affected the quality of the work.

DOCUMENTATION AND RECORD KEEPING

25 Although there have been improvements, teachers continued to find much of the documentation from NCVQ and the awarding bodies complex and difficult to interpret. Teachers were becoming more familiar with the terminology, but some reported that unit specifications remained open to different interpretations, some range statements were still unclear and the depth of coverage required was sometimes not easy to infer. Grading criteria were also seen as ambiguous. For example, teachers were not always clear about the distinction between the planning for 'a series of discrete tasks' required to gain a merit and the planning for 'complex activities' required for a distinction. What was to be counted as one third of the evidence necessary to grade students' work as worthy of a merit or distinction was the subject of much debate. Teachers had spent a great deal of time rewriting documents so that colleagues and students could understand them more easily.

26 Once again this year, much of the information from the awarding bodies and NCVQ arrived too late to be used in planning of courses in time for the beginning of the academic year. In some cases, mandatory unit specifications were not received until October or November, and additional unit specifications arrived after Christmas, a considerable time after the courses had started. The revised grading criteria were

published at the beginning of the autumn term when courses were already under way. These late changes led to a considerable amount of extra work for teachers in rewriting the course documentation and revising courses which had already begun.

27 The new unit specifications produced for use from September 1995 contain better guidance for teachers and students and the revised arrangements for the assessment of GNVQs are more clearly described in recently-published documents. Publications which have been particularly helpful to teachers include, BTEC's *Getting GNVQs Right*, the RSAEB's cumulative assessment record and the C&G's log book.

28 Colleges had been inventive in devising their own tracking and record-keeping systems based on guidelines issued by the awarding bodies. Many were innovative and effective. For example, a college in the south east had developed an A3 size card which indicated the knowledge required for each element. Business students were able to use these as a guide to keep track of their progress when they were working on their assignments. A college in the north west had developed a tracking system which included a wall display giving details of the timetable, the assignments to be completed and the performance criteria addressed by the assignments. The new networking systems that are being developed to aid GNVQ teachers in their job should be used to encourage such good practice to be shared more widely. Students and teachers were still spending an inordinate amount of time in keeping their records up to date. The recently announced simplification of record keeping is welcomed by the colleges as a way of releasing students from this onerous task and allowing them to spend more time on their studies.

WORK EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS

29 Few colleges had an institution-wide policy on the inclusion of work experience in courses. In some areas of the country, competition from schools and private training providers made it difficult for colleges to find sufficient placements. Although work experience is not mandatory, nearly all colleges and course co-ordinators recognised the value of including planned work experience in GNVQ courses and over 75 per cent of courses at all levels included some period of work experience on employers' premises. Almost all business GNVQs included relevant work experience which reflects a tradition inherited from previous vocational courses in the subject and the widespread availability of potential placements. Other vocational areas such as science and information technology often did not include such opportunities, either for lack of suitable placements, or because the perception of the course leader was that the demands of the course did not permit sufficient time for this activity. It was common for courses in leisure and tourism and in hospitality and catering to encourage students to obtain part-time employment to gain the necessary experience. Suitable placements for

art and design students were often difficult to arrange; where students were placed successfully it was often because college staff had worked closely with the careers service. A number of employers in health and social care were reported to be reluctant to offer placements because they thought their role in assessing students would demand an excessive amount of time.

30 No single pattern of work experience emerged from the survey. The value to students was related less to the amount of time spent at the placement and more to the care exercised in preparing and organising explicit links to vocational units in the course, and the extent to which such work contributed to students' assessment. The valuable contribution that work experience could make to students' learning was not always maximised because of the pressures of assessment, both at the work place and in the college. A number of colleges were either reducing the assessment burden on employers by not assessing work experience, or had taken it out of the curriculum entirely. Many teachers had developed assignments in conjunction with employers which allowed students to produce evidence for the development of a range of core skills and/or experience relevant to vocational units. However, opportunities for involving employers more closely in designing and assessing work experience for GNVQs remained relatively unexploited.

31 Over 60 per cent of advanced and intermediate level GNVQs included at least 15 days work experience. Some courses included over 30 days each year, and students sponsored by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) on construction and the built environment courses had up to as many as 12 weeks each year. A minority of courses included only one week over two years and two colleges relied on site visits to provide a vocational context. One college in the Midlands, offering a BTEC national diploma course in science, had arranged a nine-week placement for the students with a pharmaceutical company in Germany. It intended to continue this practice for students in their second year of the advanced GNVQ in science. In the same college, the GNVQ engineering course was closely associated with a large motor vehicle manufacturer who provided extensive work placements for students. Staff from the college worked with staff from the company to design appropriate assignments which contributed to students' assessment. At another college, students taking intermediate and advanced health and social care GNVQs were to undertake work experience in an orphanage in Romania.

32 Teachers on a number of GNVQ courses in business, health and social care, science, and leisure and tourism had identified specific units that could be achieved by students in the workplace. Regular visits from teachers were used to confirm assessments made by workplace supervisors and the whole experience was an integral part of the students' course. The students on these courses were frequently

enthusiastic about their placements and were often able to relate their experience to the content of their courses. Many colleges would like to see the development of more optional units which students could follow in relevant work experience placements.

33 At the other extreme, an intermediate course in business, required students to arrange their own placement from a list prepared by the teacher. No supporting documentation was available for students or supervisors in the workplace and students were not visited by college staff. The experience was not well managed and did not contribute to students' assessments. Students were only expected to obtain a signature from the employer to confirm attendance. The value of such placements to students and employers was questionable.

DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF CORE SKILLS

34 Several approaches were used in delivering mandatory core skills. Their development and assessment were sometimes built into vocational assignments so that students had to apply the relevant skills in order to complete the work; they were sometimes taught and assessed in separately timetabled sessions; or students could attend open workshops to practise and develop their core skills. Some combination of all three approaches was commonly used. Over 80 per cent of courses provided opportunities to develop some of the mandatory core skills in separately timetabled slots. In the majority of colleges inspected, the development and assessment of core skills in GNVQ courses gave cause for concern. Few colleges had an institution-wide policy to guide development, assessment and accreditation of such skills. Good practice developed in one curriculum area was often not shared with others. Many course teams had developed their own approach and this frequently changed from year to year. Sometimes the skills of information technology were developed separately from, and with no relation to, the vocational area. Less than 10 per cent of courses were systematically delivering tuition in, and assessing, the additional core skills of working with others, and improving the students' own learning and performance. Nevertheless, students were clearly developing these skills in the work associated with their assignments.

35 Many of the difficulties facing teachers and students in developing and assessing core skills arose from the language used to describe the criteria, the variety of levels available, the problems associated with making core skills an integral part of assignments and the burden of recording achievement. Many of the elements and performance criteria were expressed in similar language at different levels. This made it difficult for teachers to identify the standards students were expected to achieve. The specifications for core skills have been revised for courses starting in 1995 and now include clearer indicators of the evidence required and amplification of criteria to assist teachers to identify appropriate standards at each level.

36 The additional advice and guidance recently provided by the awarding bodies and NCVQ, such as the NCVQ's *Core Skills for Students*, have been well received by teachers and students. The series of publications dealing with assessment of students' work was seen as less useful in showing teachers how to incorporate some of the core skills into vocational units. On business courses and art and design courses, teachers often found the application of number the most difficult of the core skills to integrate with other aspects of assignments. In the colleges inspected, course leaders in a variety of vocational areas identified specific core skills which they felt to be either inappropriate to the course of study, or difficult to integrate with other aspects of the work. Teachers of these courses often expressed the view that there should be a smaller number of core skills which should apply to all GNVQs and, in addition, each vocational area should identify specific skills appropriate to that area.

37 Inspectors saw some good practice in making core skills an integral part of vocational work. Where teachers responsible for core skills were active members of course teams they had worked at developing vocationally-relevant assignments that required the students to demonstrate effective use of one or more core skills. A number of colleges successfully delivered 10-week courses designed to enhance each of the mandatory core skills. Careful co-ordination and record keeping ensured that all aspects of each core skill were addressed and assessed. A college in the northern region had a clear core skills policy for all GNVQ courses and although it allowed each team to decide the best way to deliver and assess core skills, a named co-ordinator had responsibility for ensuring that practices matched the policy. The co-ordinator met regularly with course teams and course leaders to determine common approaches and to share good practice. A successful feature was the support provided for staff who were not experienced in integrating core skills with other aspects of work in their subject area. In many other colleges, opportunities to develop core skills were identified and planned together with other aspects of the vocational units at the start of the year. Staff monitored progress at regular course team meetings and addressed difficulties as they arose. On a leisure and tourism course in one Yorkshire college, the core skills of communication and working with others were successfully used as a focus for the work experience placements undertaken by students. Another northern college is working with the local TEC to look at the assessment of core skills in the workplace. College staff were disappointed that only two employers attended an introductory meeting on the subject. As colleges became increasingly familiar with GNVQ core skills, more were exploring ways of extending the core skills framework to include other students on GCSE and GCE A level courses.

38 Generally, the assessment of core skills was seen by teachers as difficult and often artificial. In some cases assessment and recording of achievements in core skills was cursory. Some course teams did not

record students' achievements in core skills systematically and were unable to demonstrate that they had been covered adequately during the course. In many courses, special assignments had been developed and were completed at the end of a course to pick up those skills which had not been covered in the assignments associated with the vocational units. These special assignments were often contrived and the extent to which core skills were being achieved was questionable.

ASSESSMENT, VERIFICATION AND GRADING

Assessment

39 Assessment of GNVQs is based upon units so that each unit can be separately awarded. Assessment combines a set of very different and complex types of assessment: formative assessment; criterion-based assessment; grading and external tests. Creating and implementing a system that is simple, easy to understand and operate, and which meets the needs of students, teachers, employers, higher education and parents is not easy. Since the introduction of GNVQs, issues of assessment and grading have been the subject of much debate within colleges and have proved to be a major problem for the awarding bodies and teachers in securing national standards. During the last two years, there have been improvements to the external tests and guidance on the collection of evidence, the role of the external verifier and the recording of students' achievement. Alternative forms of external testing have been piloted on art and design courses. However, many of the changes to assessment and grading practices in GNVQs that have occurred so far have resulted in only piecemeal improvements. The system remains too unwieldy to be either efficient or effective and further work is required.

40 Recording and verifying assessment remained detailed, time consuming and cumbersome. Colleges were still recording students' achievements for each performance criterion. Teachers in one college identified that students were spending more than 10 hours a week recording their achievement and ordering their evidence in files, while they themselves were spending up to seven times longer assessing and recording the achievements of GNVQ students than GCE A level students. In response to criticism expressed by colleges, NCVQ has produced further guidance for courses starting in September 1995, to reduce the amount of paperwork required to support assessment decisions. Evidence indicators in the specifications now set out what aspects of the range should be assessed in the portfolio. Students do not need to provide any other evidence. The main focus for recording achievement is at the level of the element. It is no longer a requirement to record or track coverage of every item of range in students' work.

41 There remains a need to find an efficient and objective way to assure standards within and between colleges. Teachers require training to develop robust internal systems of quality control. In some colleges, the time needed to complete assessment encouraged teachers to

design assignments which they could assess on the basis of paper-based evidence alone. Because of the time constraints, teachers were reluctant to allow students to present evidence of their achievements in alternative forms. Colleges need to develop assessment strategies to ensure that assessment practices are fair, and consistent and that students are not over or under assessed. The present emphasis on recording achievement has reduced the formative role that assessment plays in students' learning. A strategy is needed to support teachers in balancing the formative, diagnostic role of assessment with its summative function of accumulating evidence and certificating achievement. Currently, the summative processes are taking precedence.

42 As a result of the general concerns that surround this topic the NCVQ set up a task group under the chairmanship of Dr John Capey to look at the assessment regime for GNVQs. The group invited all GNVQ centres and others with an interest in GNVQ assessment to submit evidence. It plans to report in November 1995.

Verification

Internal verification

43 Internal assessments carried out by teachers are checked by internal verifiers to ensure that appropriate standards are being applied. During the introductory stages of GNVQ, internal verification was often carried out by course co-ordinators as part of their role. The rapid increase in the numbers of courses and students had increased the demands on colleges. The systems and practices that had been developed were not robust enough to assure the quality of courses. Where course teams remained small, internal verification procedures were often carried out effectively by the course team and the GNVQ co-ordinator. As course teams have become larger, more elaborate systems have had to be introduced. A college in the South Eastern Region had an effective approach to verification and assessment for courses in business, health and social care, and leisure and tourism. Each GNVQ was verified by a teacher who held the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) internal verifier qualification and who was not a teacher on the course. The system was managed by a centre co-ordinator who held regular meetings of internal verifiers to moderate assessment practices and develop common approaches to portfolio building and assessment. In a number of colleges, teachers were meeting together regularly to moderate each others' assessments and this has proved beneficial to teachers new to GNVQ. Ten per cent of the colleges carried out their own grading standards exercise at the end of the year. A college in the south west had a college committee to guide the development of GNVQs and NVQs and to establish good practice for all courses in key areas such as core skills and internal verification.

44 The *GNVQ Quality Framework*, published by the Joint Council of National Vocational Awarding Bodies in March 1995, clearly restated the

importance of internal verification for the assurance of high quality courses. Although the full effects of action arising from this statement, have yet to be seen in colleges, an increasing number were putting into place formal internal verification systems to cover all GNVQ courses.

External verification

45 External verifiers generally visited colleges two or three times a year to sample assessment practices, to provide advice and guidance on how to improve quality assurance, and to review the standards achieved by students. There were wide variations in the standards accepted by external verifiers in such key areas as: internal verification, preparation of portfolios, grading, core skills, the importance of range and the standards to be achieved. Many colleges had established good working relationships with their external verifiers who had sometimes worked in their own time to provide particular advice or support to courses. One verifier was seen to rescue a course from total collapse by visiting and supporting the teachers. Some external verifiers used their professional knowledge to help teachers interpret standards and to suggest appropriate resources. Others had taken part in internal verification events in order to comment on their effectiveness and the appropriateness of the standards achieved by students. Not all external verifiers had experience of teaching GNVQs, or experience in the particular vocational area in which they would be expected to make judgements about the quality of students' work. In some of the smaller colleges, one external verifier was responsible for verifying all GNVQ courses. Although this might have made for more consistent guidance, it often did little to assist teachers in different vocational areas to identify appropriate standards. Inspectors found that on a management course in one college, the external verifier had failed to note that the course did not have any system for internal verification and another had missed significant weaknesses in the preparation of art and design portfolios.

46 The role of the external verifiers is being strengthened by the awarding bodies. More emphasis is being given to their having experience in the vocational area of the award in order to form sound judgements on the standard of students' work. A college may have up to 10 different GNVQs, or be associated with more than one awarding body. Visits from several different external verifiers increase the possibility of colleges receiving mixed messages. It is therefore essential that external verifiers be given careful training to ensure that they are consistent in their interpretation of GNVQ guidance and in communicating to colleges the standards expected of students' work.

Grading

47 Merit and distinction grades are awarded to students who demonstrate a level of performance above the basic GNVQ requirements. As in the previous year, teachers were not always aware that assessment

and grading were separate and distinct activities. In too many assignments, teachers had not applied the grading criteria correctly. Few colleges based the overall grade awarded on a review of the student's portfolio after all the units and external tests had been completed. In about 70 per cent of colleges, assignments were given indicative grades which were reviewed at the end of the course when the overall grade was awarded. In 30 per cent of courses this review was undertaken by the whole course team who used the opportunity to moderate the portfolios of evidence. More often, grades were proposed by the course co-ordinator and agreed by other teachers. Some courses had an overall assessment plan and used assignments which clearly indicated the opportunities for students to achieve the grades of merit or distinction. This helped ensure that the final grade more accurately reflected application of the grading criteria.

48 The amount of evidence in students' portfolios varied considerably from course to course and from college to college. Some portfolios comprised only those assignments which were part of an agreed assessment plan whilst other portfolios contained all the work a student had completed over the course, together with supplementary evidence collected from outside the course. In the latter case, the link between the final grade awarded and the grading criteria was less clear. Given the wide variations in assembling portfolios, it was not surprising to find a lot of variation in the way colleges selected the evidence for grading. NCVQ have now provided teachers with clearer guidance on the accumulation of evidence for inclusion in the portfolio and the processes of awarding interim and overall grades.

External Tests

49 The mandatory vocational units are each subject to an externally set and marked test, normally of 25 to 40 questions and lasting one hour. The pass mark is set at 70 per cent, and students must show that they have mastered the knowledge, understanding and principles underpinning each unit.

50 In 1994-95, the external tests generally caused colleges and students less anxiety and fewer problems. Teachers were more familiar with the types of questions to be expected, and were spending less time preparing students for tests. However, the awarding bodies, NCVQ and colleges are acutely aware of the difficulties of this form of assessment. Awarding bodies have improved the layout of the tests and made great efforts to ensure that the tests are set at an appropriate level but the speed with which they have been introduced has prevented wide scale pre-testing of questions and quality remained uneven.

51 External tests are conducted three times a year in a winter, spring and summer series and there are informal opportunities in the autumn to enable students to complete their course. The awarding bodies scrutinise completed test papers and remove responses to invalid

questions from the results. Following each series, comments from centres on specific questions and test papers are taken into account by the awarding bodies. Seminars had been arranged in different parts of the country to give representatives from centres the opportunity to give their views on how well the external testing regime was working. One awarding body had circulated both the national results and commentaries from chief examiners immediately after each series of tests. This had proved useful and had given colleges greater confidence in the tests.

52 The success rates of students entering the tests varied considerably from one vocational area to another. In a number of cases, tests were passed by students before they had received much teaching on the topic, whilst other students who had completed their studies took three or four attempts at a test before they were successful. Awarding bodies must ensure that there is a clear relationship between the units, test specifications and test questions for GNVQs in construction and the built environment, science and engineering. In one advanced construction and the built environment course a majority of full-time students took seven attempts to pass one test. This had a significant impact on the sequencing of other topics in their course. The results which students achieved in this test were at variance with the internal course assessment of their understanding of the range statements.

53 BTEC's reports on the test results for 1994-95 confirm that the pass rates vary a great deal between each test series, vocational areas and units. In 1994-95 the overall pass rates as a percentage of entries were:

	January	April	June
Foundation	77	78	67
Intermediate	74	81	61
Advanced	66	64	63

In 1994-95, 227,224 students sat the tests in January, 201,505 in April and 120,761 in June. Tests involving mathematical calculations or the application of formulae generally had low pass rates, as did those examining conceptual, abstract or specific knowledge which might not have been met in previous studies. For example, in each of the three series of tests the pass rates for the two advanced level units, 'mathematics for engineering' and 'science for engineering' were below 10 per cent. Other advanced level units where the pass rates have been low are 'surveying processes' in construction and the built environment, and 'purchasing, costing and finance' in hospitality and catering.

54 At advanced and intermediate levels the first five vocational areas were being offered for a second time and the test papers were generally

of a more consistent standard than those used to test areas being piloted in 1994-95. The major problems associated with the newly introduced vocational areas involved differences in the degree of difficulty between the test papers from the different awarding bodies, particularly in mathematics papers for engineering. On some test papers, questions in construction and the built environment could only be answered by students who had vocational experience, while some questions in business, and leisure and tourism were so general that they could be answered by students with little vocational knowledge. A minority of questions at all levels did not relate to the range statements and others contained possible answers which did not appear in the range. Papers from all boards contained too many typographical errors and papers in art and design suffered from poor monochrome reproduction.

55 At foundation level, some of the questions were far too difficult for students. For example, an engineering question required students to make calculations which were far too complicated. In art and design, the language used and the content were sometimes too difficult. Some questions in leisure and tourism papers, where students were required to select the right answer, listed answers which were so obviously implausible that students were led to the correct answer by default.

56 Alternatives to the external tests that presently involve machine-marked, multiple-choice questions were piloted in the advanced GNVQ in art and design in 1994-95. The results indicated that a short answer examination, involving a student's response to a set design brief, which was internally marked and externally re-marked, was worthy of further study. Further work is continuing.

Assessor Awards and Staff Development

57 Colleges have made good progress in equipping teachers with the TDLB assessor and verifier awards, originally intended for those working on NVQs. Work to achieve the awards has encouraged teachers to realise that they can accept a wider variety of forms of evidence of achievement from their students than they had previously thought possible. Some teachers reported that work they had undertaken to achieve the awards had enabled them to understand better how prior learning could be assessed and how portfolios could be prepared. However, the extent to which these awards increased the competence of teachers in assessing work which contributes to GNVQs was not always clear. NCVQ has recently developed two new units on planning and assessment specifically for teachers of GNVQs. These awards will be accredited by the three GNVQ awarding bodies.

58 During the year, more colleges found the necessary resources to place teachers for short periods in industry and commerce. The benefits that accrued included more relevant assignments, updated commercial practices and improved relationships with local employers. Generally, such updating schemes were most effective when supported by the local

TEC but a number of colleges used links with employers established through advisory groups or the college corporate board.

59 The DfEE is making £29 million available over a period of three years to develop and improve GNVQs. The main focus is to be on making GNVQs rigorous and manageable, securing standards and improving staff development and curriculum support materials. In 1995-96, £1.5 million will go to FEDA to support delivery in colleges and schools, and £5.7 million to NCVQ to secure the rigour, quality and credibility of GNVQs. This should help ensure that there are sufficient resources to address the deficiencies which have been identified.

STANDARDS OF STUDENTS' WORK

60 Given the newness of GNVQs, a consistent understanding of the standards required was not yet firmly established in the minds of teachers and verifiers. As with all new awards, it will take some time for all concerned to come to a common understanding of what is needed to establish national standards.

61 The standards achieved by successful students on advanced GNVQ programmes continued to be broadly equivalent to those achieved by students on comparable vocational courses or those studying for two GCE A level subjects. In construction and the built environment, and engineering, many teachers considered that the advanced GNVQs were more demanding than the courses they had replaced. Some of the work produced was of a higher standard than that produced by students on other comparable vocational courses. The standards of students' work in leisure and tourism, health and social care varied, with the best being comparable with, or better than, that produced by students on GCE A level. In health and social care, the best assignments showed evidence of original research involving complex analytical work. In leisure and tourism, the work related well to the industry. In science, students generally completed individual projects well but in some cases their work demonstrated that their scientific knowledge was limited and their understanding had not been developed sufficiently. In art and design and in business studies, much of the work was of a high standard. Realistic business assignments allowed students to demonstrate an appropriate depth and breadth of subject knowledge. For example, in one college a finance assignment had first been agreed with a professional member of the course advisory group. Students had to collect information from interviews with accountants, analyse company reports and prepare a presentation to a group of peers and professionals. The assignment allowed for differentiation of outcomes and the best students reached the equivalent of a grade A or B at GCE A level. In work which did not reach this standard, students often failed to make relevant connections, evaluate evidence, or draw conclusions.

62 The standards achieved by students who were successful on intermediate GNVQ courses were broadly comparable in breadth and

depth to the standards achieved by students taking four GCSEs and the vocational programmes they had replaced, but there was considerable variation in the achievements of the students. In science, many students had developed good practical expertise. They were well informed about the practical applications of science and about health and safety matters. In business, there were wide differences between the standards achieved by students who obtained the award and those achieving a merit or distinction. In health and social care, the work was consistently of a good standard. It was more variable in leisure and tourism where there was a considerable difference between centres in the standards of work demanded of students. In a sixth form college in London, the students achieved a high standard of work in all units of their intermediate GNVQ in leisure and tourism and a majority of them were expected to progress to the advanced course. The assignments clearly identified opportunities for grading, and there was a strong emphasis on students planning their own work. On courses in other colleges the assignments were sometimes simplistic; although they required students to collect and present information, they did not require them to use the material to solve problems.

RETENTION, COMPLETION RATES AND PROGRESSION

Retention and Completion

63 Figures compiled by the Joint Council of National Vocational Awarding Bodies show that, since the inception of GNVQs in 1992 until August 1995, a total of 261,956 students have registered for GNVQs. Of these, 74,386 have gained the full award and 49,837 have gained units which will count towards the full award. Of the students registering for an advanced course in September 1993, 47 per cent had achieved the full award by October 1995. Of those registering for an intermediate course in September 1994, 36 per cent had achieved the full award by October 1995; for foundation students the figure was 21 per cent over the same period. These disappointing figures should be treated with some caution. Substantial numbers of students had gained units towards the awards and were expected to complete their studies during the following academic year. A significant number of students transferred to other courses, including other GNVQs. The total number of students registered for GNVQs includes those on advanced level courses who have as yet completed only one year of their course, those who will take more than the usual one or two years to complete their studies, as well as those who have left their course early. Colleges have often designed foundation courses specifically for those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those for whom English is not their first language. Many of these students can be expected to obtain some units rather than the full award or to take longer than one year to complete the programme.

64 Retention rates varied a great deal between courses and between

colleges. Rates were as low as 30 per cent on a few courses. Figures available from a small sample of courses indicated that some 20 per cent or more of students left their courses before they had completed them, or had transferred to other courses. The information on early leavers available from colleges indicated that students may leave one course to transfer to another, enter employment, gain a place on a training scheme or leave for financial or other personal reasons. For example: of 14 students recruited to an advanced GNVQ course in science two transferred to other courses and one left to gain employment; of the 15 out of 51 students who left an intermediate GNVQ in engineering before completion, six obtained employment, four transferred to other courses and five left the course for other reasons; eight of the 37 students enrolled on an intermediate leisure and tourism course left early in the course, one found employment, two left because of illness, three transferred to other courses and two left for other reasons. Nearly two-thirds of students leaving an intermediate GNVQ course from a sixth form college in the West Midlands did so to take up employment. In a seaside town in the eastern region, students on an intermediate leisure and tourism course at a college left to take up seasonal employment.

65 The NCVQ carried out a survey of students who commenced their GNVQ studies on pilot courses in 1992. Its unpublished data show that retention, at 79 per cent, was better for the one-year intermediate than for the two-year advanced courses on which retention was 62 per cent. Of those still registered on the course they had begun in 1992, 46 per cent of intermediate and 49 per cent of advanced students achieved the full award within one and two academic years, respectively. Five months later the figure for successful achievement of the advanced award had risen to 75 per cent of those still registered, which indicates an overall success rate, from initial registration to completion, of 47 per cent.

66 Research recently published by one of the awarding bodies found that overall, of those who had enrolled, 48 per cent of intermediate students and 55 per cent of advanced students had completed their GNVQs by the end of the normal programme duration. Analysis of the reasons given for non-completion indicated that a significant number of students who appeared to be non-completers intended to resit external tests and/or complete their portfolios of evidence. Inspectors found that up to 20 per cent of students coming to the end of their courses in 1994-95 still had some work to do to complete their portfolios or had not yet passed one or more of the external tests. Many of these students finished their work during the summer months and most of them were expected to achieve the full award before the end of the autumn term.

67 Nationally, there is a need for better statistical evidence on retention and completion. In this connection, the individual student record that is now being put into place should yield some valuable insights on those students taking GNVQs in colleges funded by the FEFC.

The DfEE is developing a national GNVQ database for the recording of data on GNVQ achievements and the characteristics of GNVQ students. This database is expected to become fully operational in 1996.

Progression

68 In 1995, 9,555 GNVQ students applied for a course in higher education and of these 89 per cent received at least one provisional offer. This was an increase from 84 per cent in 1994 when 55 per cent eventually took up a place in higher education. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) are currently producing figures on the numbers actually taking up offers this year. They are also looking at the progress made by GNVQ students who joined higher education courses in 1994.

69 In 1995, the majority of students applied for courses closely related to their GNVQ course and all had taken some form of additional studies, usually GNVQ additional units. In all, 20 per cent of applicants had combined their GNVQ with one or more GCE A level. UCAS found that the type of additional studies taken by students made little difference to the number of offers made. A number of colleges are using their close links with particular universities to agree a suitable range of additional studies for students intending to apply for specific courses.

70 In colleges visited during the inspection, the majority of students who successfully completed their courses at intermediate and advanced level continued their studies in further or higher education, or gained employment. For example, of 14 students achieving an intermediate GNVQ in business at a college in Yorkshire and Humberside, 12 continued their studies in further education and two entered employment. Of the 49 students who began an advanced business course at a college in London, 44 gained the full award, of whom 38 gained a place in higher education. Five of the remaining students gained employment, one continued in further education and the destinations of five are unknown. Eight of the nine students in the second year of an advanced science course at a college in the north west had been offered at least one provisional place in higher education at the time of the inspection.

71 A recent survey carried out by one of the awarding bodies showed that of those students successfully completing their intermediate GNVQ courses, 81 per cent continued in full-time education, 14 per cent went into employment and 5 per cent were unemployed. Of those students completing their advanced GNVQ in 1994, 70 per cent continued in full-time higher education, 25 per cent gained employment and 5 per cent were unemployed. Of those who continued in full-time higher education, 52 per cent entered degree courses, 44 per cent BTEC higher national diplomas, 2 per cent teacher qualification courses and 2 per cent other professional courses.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

72 The range of GNVQ courses has broadened and the numbers of students have increased over the last year. The achievement of many of the foundation and lifetime national targets for education and training will increasingly be dependent on the quality of the vocational pathways available for young people. Teachers, colleges, awarding bodies and NCVQ are under increasing pressure to get the GNVQ qualifications right and they are working together closely to improve the courses. NCVQ and the awarding bodies are continuing to make strenuous efforts to address the minister's six point plan. These efforts must continue if the qualifications are to develop into mature and equally valued alternatives alongside GCSE, GCE A levels and existing vocational awards.

73 Many positive findings emerged from the survey. They include:

- a widespread commitment from teachers, colleges, awarding bodies and NCVQ to work together to improve GNVQs
- improved teaching as teachers become more familiar with the new courses
- more effective involvement of higher education institutions and employers in the planning of GNVQ courses
- standards achieved by successful students on GNVQ courses which compare well with those of students on comparable GCE A level, GCSE and vocational programme
- GNVQ students' success in receiving offers from higher education courses of their choice.

74 However, a number of serious problems remain and the following action is required:

- better staff-development activities should be provided to enable teachers to come to grips with the problems inherent in offering these new qualifications
- NCVQ and the awarding bodies should continue their efforts to simplify documentation and to offer clear and unambiguous guidance to teachers and students on curricula and assessment
- NCVQ and the awarding bodies should refine the present assessment system that is too unwieldy to be either efficient or effective
- the appropriateness and clarity of external test questions should be improved
- the development and assessment of core skills in a vocational context require further improvement
- colleges must strengthen their systems for internal verification

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- the awarding bodies should ensure greater consistency in external verification by enhancing the role of the external verifier
 - the reasons for the low completion rates on some courses need further investigation and action taken to improve them
 - there is a need for the collection and publication of reliable data on retention, completion rates and progression.

GLOSSARY

TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE GNVQ COURSES

Mandatory units

These cover the fundamental skills, knowledge and understanding of the vocational area covered by the GNVQ. These units must be taken by each candidate.

Optional units

These complement the mandatory units and extend the range of a students' achievement.

Additional units

These give students opportunities for further specialisation within the vocational area or to broaden their studies.

Core skills units

All GNVQs require students to provide evidence of achievement at an appropriate level in three core skills units:

- communication
- application of number
- information technology.

The development and assessment of core skills should be integrated within the vocational activities which students carry out.

Elements

A vocational unit normally consists of two to five elements which set out in detail the outcomes which must be demonstrated by the candidate.

Performance criteria

Each element has a number of performance criteria. These criteria clarify the activity described by the element and set the standard of performance that must be met.

Range

Each element has a statement of range which gives the main aspects which must be covered by each student.

Evidence indicators

The evidence indicators indicate the minimum evidence a student needs to present in terms of type of evidence and sufficiency.

Amplification

Amplification clarifies key terms used in the element, sometimes with examples to help interpret and illustrate the key terms and provides detail on depth and scope.

Guidance

Guidance provides advice for teachers on delivery and indicates links between elements.

Portfolio of evidence

All candidates have to gather their assessment evidence for the GNVQ into a portfolio of evidence, which will be unique to each candidate. To meet the requirements of internal assessment the student's portfolio of evidence must show that he or she has met all the performance criteria and understands all the range dimensions as they relate to the appropriate performance criteria.

Internal assessment

The main evidence for assessment comes from projects and assignments carried out by students and assessed by their teachers. This work is kept in the portfolio of evidence. This portfolio allows both internal verifiers to examine the quality of students' work and to monitor the standards being set and achieved.

Externally set tests

Internal assessments are complemented by externally set written tests for each mandatory unit (with the exception of certain units for which an external test is inappropriate). Students need to achieve 70 per cent in each test to achieve a pass.

Verification

This is the process of monitoring assessment. It involves two parts:

Internal verification is the responsibility of the centre. Internal assessment records are checked by internal verifiers, who oversee assessment within centres.

External verification is carried out by external verifiers, acting on behalf of each awarding body. They visit centres to look at a sample of assessments in the portfolios of evidence and check the quality and standards of students' work and that suitable processes and procedures are in place.

Grading

Awards are graded pass, merit or distinction according to criteria set by the NCVQ and applicable to the awards of all three awarding bodies. Merit and distinction grades are awarded to students who demonstrate a level of performance above the basic GNVQ requirement based on an

assessment of the quality of the overall body of work presented in their portfolios of evidence.

Centre approval

Approval to offer GNVQs given to the college by an awarding body.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

The use of abbreviations and acronyms in this report has been kept to a minimum. Because of their familiarity and frequency of use, the following have been used:

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
C&G	City and Guilds of London Institute
CITB	Construction Industry Training Board
DfEE	The Department for Education and Employment
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency
GCE A level	General Certificate of Education advanced level
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
RSAEB	RSA Examinations Board
TDLB	Training and Development Lead Body
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service