Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Post-accreditation monitoring report:
British Computer Society (BCS)

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Contents

Introduction

Regulating external qualifications

Responsibility for regulating external qualifications lies jointly with three regulatory authorities:

- the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
- the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS), the body for Wales
- and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the authority for Northern Ireland.

Following the accreditation of a qualification, the regulatory authorities systematically monitor awarding bodies against the requirements set out in the statutory regulations. The aim of this activity is to promote continuing improvement and public confidence in the quality of external qualifications.

Where an awarding body is found not to comply with relevant criteria, the regulatory authorities set conditions of accreditation. Even if an awarding body is compliant, the monitoring team may make observations on ways that the awarding body could change its systems and procedures to improve clarity or reduce bureaucracy.

Accreditation conditions and observations arising from this monitoring activity are specified at the end of each section of this report. Awarding bodies are required to produce an action plan to show how they will deal with accreditation conditions imposed as a result of a monitoring activity. The action plan will be agreed by the regulatory authorities and its implementation monitored.

The regulatory authorities will use the outcomes of monitoring and any subsequent action taken by awarding bodies to inform decisions on the re-accreditation of qualifications, or, if necessary, the withdrawal of accreditation.

About this report

This report is the outcome of monitoring carried out on the British Computer Society (BCS) awarding body by QCA on behalf of the regulatory authorities between May and July 2006. It draws together the regulatory authorities' findings on the resources and expertise available for the delivery of qualifications, BCS's arrangements for quality assurance and control of internal assessment and the quality of customer service.

This is the second post-accreditation monitoring activity of BCS's activities and focuses on the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the user sector. The previous monitoring focused on the systems and procedures in place to support the delivery of its Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs).

Consultants visited four centres in England and interviewed staff, reviewed portfolios, examined records and collected information on customer satisfaction. They gathered information on centres' compliance with the approved centre criteria and on how BCS manages the quality assurance and control of internal assessment. The centres were chosen from different geographic regions to ensure a cross section of external verifiers and centres by size and type. The findings from the visits were collated and identified issues were followed up with the awarding body at the monitoring visit.

About the British Computer Society (BCS)

The BCS Information Technology Qualification (iTQ), which is an NVQ, is aimed at anyone using information technology (IT) at work. It may incorporate parts of recognised IT qualifications such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) as Accredited Prior Achievement. The registration, assessment, verification and certification processes are all electronic. For more information on BCS and the qualifications it offers visit the website at www.bcs.org.

Resources and expertise

This is subject to the *NVQ code of practice* (2001), paragraphs 35, 52(part), 53, 54(part), 55 and 57; and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England in Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 8, 10, 97e and 98.

Findings

1. There are twelve staff working on NVQs (iTQ qualifications) although some of these work on both NVQs and VRQs. BCS has recently deployed dedicated staff at the BCS head office who, with the support of other personnel, are responsible for customer support and e-portfolios. A senior verifier is responsible for quality assurance for all qualifications and an external verifier (HQ) deals with queries from centres and the standardisation of external verification.

2. The candidate administration system (CASy) is a secure section of the BCS website that allows the electronic management of centres and candidates. Centres can use the system to register candidates and candidates can submit e-portfolios containing evidence for verification.

3. Implementing this new system caused some initial problems but effective monitoring and evaluation by BCS identified the difficulties. The monitoring team is confident that the awarding body has sufficient staffing and technical resources to support the delivery of the iTQ.

4. The staff appraisal system includes an annual appraisal and quarterly reviews of organisational and personal objective achievement.

5. The awarding body requires its assessors, internal verifiers and external verifiers to have the knowledge, skills and experience outlined in the current e-skills assessment strategy. This assessment strategy was developed and agreed with four other awarding bodies. BCS checks the occupational expertise of centre staff using the internal verifier/assessor application form. Centre staff sign to confirm that the original certificates for qualified assessors and internal verifiers have been seen. Details of assessors and internal verifiers are entered into CASy and can be tracked.

6. External verifiers are recruited by recommendation and interviews and potential external verifiers shadow experienced external verifiers on three visits. Two further visits are observed and reported on by the external verifier (HQ) or the senior verifier. On satisfactory completion of these visits external verifiers receive an agreement and an offer of work. This documentation includes general information about roles, responsibilities and conflicts of interest but this information does not meet the regulatory requirements of the *NVQ code of practice*, 2001. There is no external verifier code of practice explaining roles and responsibilities, personal conduct and probity, continuing professional development (CPD) and the appeals process for centres disputing an external verifier's decision.

7. BCS has 15 external verifiers operating in specific geographic regions and they are redeployed every two years. External verifier files include information on their occupational expertise but not confirmation of the achievement of D35 or V2. BCS staff said that five of the 15 external verifiers were qualified but there is no single register for external verifiers to allow BCS to track CPD or the achievement of V2 within the 12-month limit.

8. New external verifiers attend a centre event and an external verifier training day. Existing external verifiers attend two mandatory standardisation days. Attendance is monitored and non-attendance may result in suspension. The agendas seen for a number of NVQ meetings covered topics like the awarding body's systems and the NVQ code of practice. However, the existing written procedures and work instructions for the training of external verifiers are generic. Reference is made to the statutory regulation of external qualifications but not to the *NVQ code of practice*.

9. External verifiers also receive generic email updates and the *BCS Qualifications newsletter*, which contains information on all qualifications. The monitoring team noted that external verifiers do not have an NVQ external verifier handbook to support them in their role but that iTQ-specific external verifier updates were introduced in July 2006.

Accreditation conditions

1. BCS must ensure that all unqualified external verifiers achieve V2 within 12 months of commencing the roles. (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 53, bullet point 1).

2. BCS must maintain a register of external verifiers detailing their compliance with awarding body requirements such as CPD and the achievement of V2. (*The statutory*

regulation of external qualifications, paragraph 98 and *NVQ code of practice,* paragraph 54 (part)).

3. BCS must develop an external verifier code of practice so that the regulatory requirements are met in full. The code should include information about appeals against an external verifier's decisions. External verifiers must confirm in writing that they will comply with the code. (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 55.)

Observations

1. BCS should consider reviewing its work instructions for training contracted staff so that they include specific reference to NVQ external verifiers, NVQs and the *NVQ code of practice*, 2001.

The quality assurance and control of internal assessment

This is subject to the *NVQ code of practice* (2001), paragraphs 22-33, 36-51, 52(part), 54(part), 56, 58(part), 59-65, 66(part), 67-69 and *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 13, 36, 56, 57 and 59-62.

Findings

1. On approval centres are provided with secure access to the CASy system. Centre administrators can use the system to get an overview of iTQ activity at the centre. A link on the iTQ website leads to the test centre forum, which gives information and guidance, including sample forms, for the delivery of BCS qualifications. Most NVQ centres are also test centres for other BCS qualifications such as ECDL. Centres receive the BCS *Operations Manual*, which includes information on NVQ assessments based on the e-skills assessment strategy.

2. All assessors and verifiers have to be registered with BCS. Once approved they are provided with secure access to the CASy system so that assessment and verification activity is tracked and a history is created. Centres can register any number of staff for access to CASy as long as each has an appropriate designation like assessor or internal verifier and an individual email address. Shared email addresses had caused problems at some centres so BCS guidance on this is being strengthened.

3. The *Operations manual* gives criteria for assessors and verifiers. BCS requires centres to have at least one qualified assessor and one qualified internal verifier at all times. Findings from visits to centres confirmed that all centres know about the roles and responsibilities of staff and about the requirements for countersigning of assessment decisions made by unqualified staff.

4. The CASy system requires unqualified assessors and verifiers to nominate a qualified person to countersign their assessment decisions. Certificates cannot be produced without the nominated person's approval. CASy also tracks the progress of unqualified assessors and internal verifiers. If they have not achieved their A1/V1 within 18 months of registering they will be automatically prevented from any further on-line assessment. Additional support can then be provided if necessary. This robust system allows BCS to monitor the movement and development of assessment staff at centres.

5. A new *BCS iTQ operations manual*, providing clearer information and guidance on assessment methods, will be published in September 2006. Centres were unclear on the use of assessment methods such as observation and the criteria for defining realistic working environments. The revised manual addresses these issues.

6. Candidates must submit an evidence record sheet and confirm its authenticity. When an approved expert witness is used the expert can confirm the authenticity of evidence. When there is not an expert witness candidates can provide a testimony to state that evidence is authentic and they can reference the evidence to the task or unit. This must be signed and scanned so that it can be added to the e-portfolio.

7. Much of the existing centre documentation and records existed before CASy was introduced and centres continue to keep the majority of records on paper. All centres are clear about what records to keep and how long to keep them.

8. Internal verification procedures in centres comply with BCS guidance and with the *NVQ Code of Practice* (2001). Centres had appropriate internal verification sampling systems. Evidence was seen of completed sampling pro formas across units, candidates and assessors. There was also evidence of increased sampling where necessary, for example, on the appointment of a new assessor. Records of standardisation meetings were also seen.

9. While completed assessments are submitted, assessed and verified electronically external verifiers sample incomplete portfolios on visits to centres. They provide feedback to internal verifiers to support candidates not ready to submit.

10. Centres already approved to deliver VRQs may not receive a separate approval visit for the delivery of NVQs. BCS is satisfied that as their criteria to be a VRQ centre is based on the NVQ approved centre criteria, an additional approval visit is not necessary.

11. Centres have the same external verifier for the VRQ and the NVQ. Centre visits are allocated to external verifiers six weeks in advance and external verifiers contact the centres to make arrangements. They can use CASy to view information on topics like candidate tracking, assessor and internal verifier activity and the most recent visit report. Centres also complete a pre-visit form.

12. BCS currently visits centres once a year but this may be increased to provide extra support in using CASy.

13. Visit reports are currently completed by hand and a copy is left with the centre on the day of the visit. Centres are graded following external verifier visits in line with the tariff of sanctions. Grading and sanctions are recommended by the external verifier in the report left on the day and everyone involved is aware that these recommendations need to be authorised by BCS and may change. The rigour within the CASy system is effective in assisting BCS to monitor centre activity and performance.

14. As evidence is submitted electronically external verification can take place at any time. CASy issues certificates on a fortnightly cycle so external verifiers have two weeks to review evidence.

15. As the system is new BCS requires external verifiers to sample all evidence submitted. Once BCS is satisfied that the electronic system is working correctly and that verifiers are confident in verifying e-portfolios, the ratio of sampling will be tailored to individual centre performance. Some centres were unhappy about the 100 per cent sampling seeing it as re-assessing.

16. Findings from centres also showed that CASy has resulted in an over reliance on external verifiers for authorising evidence. This was at the expense of checking the quality assurance of the system by the sampling of assessment decisions. This was not helped by an initial problem in the CASy system that sent external verifier deferrals and comments directly back to candidates. BCS

monitoring and evaluation processes identified this as both a security and a quality assurance issue and have now solved the problem.

17. External verifier performance is monitored through their centre visit reports and accompanied visits. Priority for accompanied visits is given to less experienced external verifiers and to those who have had a particular issue identified.

Accreditation conditions

There are no accreditation conditions for this section.

Observations

2. BCS should consider reviewing its criteria for the number of external verifier visits to NVQ centres so that adequate support and guidance is provided.
3. BCS may need to consider explaining more fully the reasons for 100 per cent external verification.

Customer service

This is subject to *The statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (2004), paragraphs 32 and 33b.

Findings

1. BCS embarked on a customer service survey in May 2006 focusing on the iTQ qualifications. While the response rate was low the results show that centres are satisfied with the level of service provided by external verifiers and the customer support team. However, there were problems with CASy and delays in issuing certificates.

2. This supports the findings from centre visits, which highlighted late receipt of certificates and problems with CASy such as feedback on e-portfolios. Centres also commented that they would like further guidance on the iTQ delivery and more clarity about their responsibilities. As already stated BCS has identified many of these issues through its customer service survey and other monitoring and evaluation processes. In response to this BCS has made amendments to the CASy system and is revising its guidance documents, including the operations manual, which is to be re-issued in September 2006.

3. All centres knew about the customer service statement but there was some confusion about the appeals and complaints procedures. The monitoring team noted that the draft *BCS iTQ operations manual* does not include any information about complaints.

Accreditation conditions

4. BCS must publish information on its complaints procedure. (*NVQ code of practice*, paragraph 80 part).

Observations

There are no observations for this section.