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Foreword

QCA attaches great value to the views of NVQ users on how the system is working. These views provide us with an effective way of ensuring that NVQs are serving their intended purpose. 1999 is the second year that we have run forums around the country to talk directly with users. We are delighted with the interest that has been generated by these events.

This year the events provided an opportunity to explore possible ways of making NVQs more flexible and responsive to user needs. The lively debates which were generated will contribute to a wide ranging review, undertaken in parallel with the work of the National Skills Task Force on 'Delivering Skills for All'. The findings of our review will inform advice to the Secretary of State early next year.

Other discussions at the forums made it clear that we still have some way to go in improving consistency in the NVQ system and reducing bureaucracy. We have already reviewed our programme of work for this year and next to ensure that the concerns expressed are fully addressed. In particular, we shall be consulting on a national code of practice for external verifiers which we intend to implement from next summer.

We were particularly pleased with the strong support given to the idea of developing risk management strategies with awarding bodies. The benefits of implementing such strategies are an increase in rigour together with a reduction in unnecessary external intervention. This will be a priority area for QCA in coming months; we shall be consulting awarding bodies on our proposals and expect to announce our recommendations next spring.

Our experience and your responses have confirmed the value of these events, which I intend should be a continuing aspect of our work.

Dr Nicholas Tate
Chief Executive, QCA

Actions already being taken by QCA to help meet users' concerns

ACTION	WORK IN HAND	EXPECTED TIMESCALE FOR COMPLETION
Improving the value of NVQs and other vocational qualifications to meet the needs of users	Views raised at the NVQ User Forums, together with the views of awarding bodies, standards setting bodies and other key partners, will inform QCA's advice to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.	Advice to Secretary of State by Spring 2000
Improving the consistency of external verification practice	Awarding bodies and others will be consulted on a code of practice for external verifiers which will set out priorities for external verification, build on existing guidance and include current best practice.	Code of practice to be published by Summer 2000
Developing risk management strategies with awarding bodies in order to target monitoring activity and support where it is most needed	Awarding bodies will be consulted on suitable models, on common risk criteria that should apply to all awarding bodies, and on other criteria that may be specific to centre or qualification type. Proposals will also be circulated on sanctions and penalties for centres, and the types of transgression that would result in sanctions.	Recommendations on suitable models and risk criteria to be presented to QCA Committees by Spring 2000

Other concerns expressed by users in the forums are also being addressed within QCA's ongoing work programme.

1 Introduction

1999 is the second consecutive year that QCA has held user events to gain feedback about the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system and to report on forthcoming developments. Five forums were held in Belfast, Cardiff, Coventry, London and York in May and June, following the success of seven regional events in February and March 1998.

The main purpose was to seek user views, particularly those of employers, on:

■ improving the value and flexibility of NVQs;

■ consistency in awarding body documentation and procedures;

■ the development of risk management strategies by awarding bodies to aid quality assurance.

Participants were also given an update on recent NVQ developments, including:

■ new criteria for NVQs and national occupational standards;

■ a common code of practice for academic and vocational qualifications;

■ a review of the 'D' units;

■ the joint work of QCA and the Training Standards Council (TSC).

The forums all followed the same format, with participants dividing into groups after an introduction and update on recent developments. The Belfast forum was organised by QCA's Northern Ireland office. The Cardiff forum was arranged jointly with Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm Ac Asesu Cymru (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales: ACCAC) and included references to systems that are different in Wales, such as the role of ESTYN (formerly the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales) in the inspection of work based training funded by the government.

A total of 173 participants attended. Some had taken part in last year's forums; others came for the first time. There was a wide range of employers from major retail, manufacturing and telecommunications companies, the engineering sector and the motor industry. Local authorities, health trusts, the voluntary sector, the army, training providers and government departments were also represented, together with a small number of people from further education.

The main views are summarised in Section 2 and set out in more detail in Section 3. They will be taken into account by QCA in an overall report on improving the value of NVQs and other vocational qualifications, to be presented to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in 2000. The views will also influence continuing discussions with awarding bodies on reducing bureaucracy and developing risk management strategies.

2 Executive summary

User views were sought on three main topics:

- How NVQ structures could be made more flexible, to improve availability and ease of use.

- Practical steps that awarding bodies could take to reduce bureaucracy and develop compatible, consistent documentation and centre approval procedures.

- Identifying and developing risk management strategies to aid quality assurance.

A number of common themes arose in discussions throughout the conferences:

- Strong support for the existing NVQ core and options structure. Many believed that it already offered a high degree of flexibility.

- Calls for users to be given more opportunities to influence the development of standards, with the needs of smaller employers taken into account.

- Common agreement that funding of units, as well as whole NVQs, would make the NVQ system more flexible.

- Some support for employer devised units, but also many reservations. It was stressed that any employer devised units should be approved by the standards setting bodies, who should ensure that they do not compromise the national status and integrity of NVQs.

- Resistance to the use of employer logos on certificates, although there was some support for including employer names alongside the logos of QCA and the awarding body.

- Some support for packages of units smaller than full NVQs, as long as they related clearly to relevant NVQs. The structure of any 'hybrid' combination of NVQ units and other vocational units should be defined by standards setting bodies. Such packages should link clearly to national occupational standards and should not damage the NVQ 'gold standard'. Careful attention should be paid to establishing a system for accreditation of hybrid packages, and to their delivery and quality assurance.

- Strong concern about inconsistency in the practices and occupational competence of external verifiers. There were calls to address these through a code of practice for external verifiers and in more consistent guidance by awarding bodies.

- Problems caused by different forms for centre approval, registration, assessment and certification. Awarding bodies were urged to work together to ensure that their centre approval forms, registration forms and other documentation are common, or at least consistent.

- Calls for awarding bodies to recognise employers' existing systems for centre approval and monitoring purposes, together with other information such as Investors in People (IiP) status, ISO9000 and inspection reports.

- The need for awarding body risk management strategies to take account of a range of factors, including pressures caused by output related funding, ratios of internal verifiers and assessors to candidates, occupational competence of assessors, degree of reliance on simulation, clarity and effectiveness of centre procedures, location of candidates and patterns in registration and certification. Responses to risk analysis should be linked to centre action plans for external verifiers.

- The need for awarding bodies to work together to identify centres that have been closed down because of continuing failure to resolve risks, to ensure that these centres are not subsequently approved by other awarding bodies.

- Support for the identification of common key risk factors across all awarding bodies, backed up by other factors that have been defined as specific to centre or qualification type.

3 User views

3.1 Improving the value of NVQs and other vocational qualifications

3.1.1 Background

In the morning workshop, views were sought on how NVQ structures could be made more flexible, to improve availability and ease of use. The aim was to explore a number of areas that had been identified as part of a wide ranging consultation on improving the value of NVQs and other vocational qualifications.

Participants were asked about the importance of the core of an NVQ and whether qualifications covering more than one occupation should be made more widely available. They were also asked if they saw a role for employer specified units within NVQs, and if they wished to see employer logos on certificates. Views were sought on how smaller packages of NVQ units, and combinations of NVQ and other vocational units, could be made available to support the take up of full NVQs.

The briefing for this session, supplied to participants in advance, is reproduced at Appendix A.

3.1.2 Flexibility

Very strong support was shown for the core and options structure. Many participants believed that it already offered a high degree of flexibility; others supported the structure but thought there was scope for improvement. However, it was felt that many employers were still unaware of the potential flexibility of NVQs, and that it was important to raise employer awareness.

There were concerns that if NVQs became too flexible, they would be too difficult to quality assure. Participants did not want to see greater NVQ flexibility at the expense either of the system becoming more confusing, or of NVQs and their underpinning knowledge requirements being devalued.

It was felt that the core of each NVQ, containing units defined as essential to an area of work, helped to strengthen the national status of the qualification. The existence of optional units, allowing candidates to achieve particular specialisms, was welcomed. Some participants also believed that the flexibility of a core and options structure allowed for multi-skilling needs within companies.

Some believed that the core should form at least 50 per cent of the qualification. Others preferred to see a smaller core and a larger range of options, to enable more flexibility.

Any changes to qualification structures must meet the demands of industry and professional bodies. The importance of retaining coherent qualifications that promote progression was stressed.

Some representatives from large employers were satisfied with existing qualification structures and reported that their employees were able to achieve NVQs without too much difficulty. Others, from both large and small companies, felt that it was often difficult to obtain a full qualification. There was widespread support for increasing unit take up, which could improve flexibility and enable more employers to relate the relevant national occupational standards to their own employees' job functions.

3.1.3 Rules for combination

There was general agreement that employers, through National Training Organisations (NTOs) and other standards setting bodies, should specify rules for combining core and optional units and should define the size and content of the core. Otherwise, the system might become too flexible, resulting in confusion and making it difficult to recognise specific areas of work.

While agreeing that standards setting bodies should define the rules, there were requests for those at the 'grass roots' to have more opportunities to influence the development of standards. In particular, it was felt that the needs of smaller employers were often overlooked during the development stage.

Some participants believed that some core units were not specific enough for particular industries. It was recognised by a number of participants that the content of core competences can differ widely between sectors, and that it was reasonable for different sectors to have different requirements. Others wanted to see the core containing common units which could be included within a number of NVQs.

There was support for an increased focus on 'generic' skills within NVQ core units, which could be transferred across a wide range of occupational areas. The key skills units were seen as a good example, and there were suggestions for incorporating key skills into the core unit specifications. There were also some requests to incorporate health and safety units into the core, as they were seen as a valuable way of raising awareness and ensuring compliance with legal requirements.

Some participants suggested that the core should include a number of key skills units in their entirety. Others, who reported difficulties in delivering these units within Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships, felt that key skills were difficult to demonstrate through day-to-day performance and preferred the concept of incorporating relevant aspects into the occupational standards. Others, still, were concerned that any additional requirements to the occupational competence already specified might create unnecessary barriers to achieving the qualification. There were also a few suggestions for a 'pick and mix' of occupationally specific units and expanded key skills units.

An example was given of difficulties caused for candidates when the core and options for a qualification were restructured and an optional unit became part of the core. A participant observed that the degree of choice among optional units was frequently determined by the options offered by training providers rather than by the needs of employers.

The current practice of incorporating units that have already been developed for other NVQs into a new NVQ was welcomed. This could encourage flexibility as well as giving recognition to transferable skills. However, potential problems with assessment were highlighted. Importing units may involve more checks on the occupational competence of assessors when approving assessment arrangements for units from another occupational area.

3.1.4 Levels

Examples were quoted of candidates who currently 'fall between' NVQ levels. Some candidates working towards an NVQ at level 2 may be competent enough to gain a number of units at level 3, but may not have the opportunity to gain the full level 3 qualification. Some participants felt that it should be easier for candidates to take combinations of units from NVQs at different levels. Others believed that a related qualification at level 3, providing progression to the NVQ, would be useful.

3.1.5 Rationalisation and coherence

Some participants felt that simply reducing the number of NVQs would not necessarily lead to a more rational framework. Similarly, increasing the flexibility in the content of NVQs could lead to a loss of coherence. The possible dangers of losing the sector specific approach and of confusing employers must be taken into account.

3.1.6 Employer specified units

The advantages of allowing units to be devised by employers, and the increased flexibility this could bring, were highlighted by a number of participants. Some felt that the specification of certain NVQs did not always reflect job roles, and that many employers were unwilling to spend time making the qualification 'fit' their requirements. Sometimes, employees achieving NVQs needed further training to meet specific employer requirements.

However, there were also many concerns about including employer specified units within an NVQ. Many participants felt that the national status of the NVQ would be lost, together with any notion of transferable skills. Some believed that employer devised units were unlikely to reflect the breadth of an NVQ, while others considered that competing organisations might be reluctant to employ someone with a 'company specific' NVQ. Larger organisations might be able to devise their own units, but smaller employers would be disadvantaged by a lack of resources for development work.

There were calls for employers to become more involved in delivering NVQs and to exploit their potential, instead of devising their own units to fit specific job roles. Employers were also encouraged to consider ways of contextualising national units within their own businesses.

The difficulty of quality assuring employer devised units was raised many times. There was a danger that the quality of assessment for these units would not reflect the standard required for the nationally devised units and would therefore compromise the integrity of the NVQ.

The majority of participants felt that, if employer devised units were to be introduced, they should be mainly based on existing units to ensure they meet the national standard. There should be a mechanism for employers, if they identify a need for their own units, to take their proposals to standards setting bodies for approval. Awarding bodies and their external verifiers would need to ensure that the quality assurance requirements for all employer specified units are as rigorous as those required for the other units within an NVQ.

There was some support for including employer devised units in addition to the core. Others wanted to see them outside the requirements for an NVQ, believing that they could act as a useful introduction for candidates before they undertake a full NVQ.

3.1.7 Employer logos

Many participants felt that a business logo would detract from the value of the NVQ and would put undue emphasis on where the award had been achieved. On the one hand, a certificate from a 'respected' employer could be valued more highly, while on the other hand, it could hinder future employment opportunities if a company lost its credibility in the marketplace. However, there was some support for employer names appearing on NVQ certificates beside the logos of QCA and the awarding body.

There was support for allowing the company name to be mentioned in the text of the certificate. It was noted that some awarding bodies currently working with large employers do this already, and that it should be possible to mention training providers instead of employers, if appropriate. There were also suggestions for producing two certificates – one with the company name and one with the logos of QCA and the awarding body.

3.1.8 Packages of units

Smaller packages of NVQ units

Most participants were in favour of introducing smaller packages of units to support the take up of full NVQs. It was recognised that smaller packages could lead to greater flexibility and meet the needs of a wider range of employers than at present. They could also aid progression to higher level NVQs and help build up credits within a national framework. However, participants felt that care would be needed to ensure that smaller packages relate clearly to the relevant NVQ and that the national status and transferability of the full NVQ were not undermined.

It was noted that some NVQ units are already presented as packages – for example, the current practice of awarding bodies of grouping the 'D' units into awards for assessors, internal verifiers, external verifiers and accreditation of prior learning advisers. There was also a suggestion for an interim qualification – half an NVQ – which could be certificated.

It was felt that smaller packages could benefit certain people who already have experience in the world of work and who want to develop their skills further in discrete areas. Such packages were not, however, seen as suitable for young people starting a training programme or a first job, who needed to work towards demonstrating the full range of competence specified within an NVQ.

Some believed that individual units should be promoted to candidates and that naming packages could confuse their relationship with NVQs. Others felt that the name would need to show a relationship with specific industries.

Some participants wanted the freedom to 'pick and mix' from units across NVQs, to accommodate job roles which do not fit into neatly defined occupations, or which cover more than one specialism. The difficulty of naming such packages, if they do not relate overall to a main occupational area, was recognised.

There were some requests for standards setting bodies to offer packages of units from which companies could pick their own combinations. It was felt this would be particularly useful for smaller employers, who could first become involved by delivering a few units, and build up to full NVQs as their business expanded.

Concerns were raised about the possibility of smaller packages devaluing or diluting the full NVQ. Some participants felt that unit certification, already available within the NVQ system, already served the need for 'mini' awards.

Smaller packages could be suitable for areas that were easily defined, such as the assessor and verifier awards, but not where demonstration of competence depended on a carefully specified combination of core and optional units. There was concern that smaller packages would encourage a unit by unit approach to assessment rather than looking at the NVQ holistically.

It was felt by many that the potential for mixing and matching units could lead to confusion, with increased bureaucracy and a proliferation in combinations of existing qualifications. The possibility of undermining the transferability of existing NVQs was raised again. It was suggested that a greater range of optional units within an NVQ, with the core focusing on key skills and other generic areas, would be more suitable.

It was stressed that employers need to be clear about what a candidate can do. A number of participants preferred a full qualification covering the range of competence required to an undefined package. They saw a whole qualification as enhancing job prospects, while a combination of units that fits an employee's current job may not help progression or transferable skills.

Effective marketing would be needed to convince both employers and candidates of the purpose and value of these smaller packages. There were requests to take into account government targets for achievement of qualifications. The sense of achievement that many candidates feel when gaining a nationally recognised NVQ should not be overlooked.

'Hybrid' packages of NVQ units and other vocational units

The proposals to combine NVQ units with units from other vocational qualifications received cautious support from most participants. However, they wanted to see certain conditions fulfilled when specifying these packages.

There were calls for standards setting bodies to determine the rules for combination. Working with awarding bodies, and overseen by QCA, they must ensure that any units imported from other vocational qualifications relate clearly to national occupational standards, and that the NVQ 'gold standard' is not damaged. The needs of both large and small employers should be taken into consideration.

A number of participants felt that units from other qualifications could help to cover some of the underpinning knowledge requirements for NVQs. This would be a more realistic approach for those colleges and training providers who were often unable to provide acceptable opportunities for candidates to achieve performance evidence in the workplace. By introducing other vocational units as additional, to complement a full NVQ, company training programmes could be enhanced. The opportunities to strengthen links between NVQs and other vocational qualifications, thereby aiding credit accumulation and transfer, were welcomed.

There were concerns that the specification of some vocational qualifications varied widely from college to college, and that as little as five per cent of their content was relevant to the workplace. Those employers who are still unconvinced by NVQs might find the qualifications system even more confusing if they were confronted with a mixture of NVQ and other vocational units.

Potential challenges to quality assurance were highlighted. Awarding bodies and NVQ centres would need to ensure that assessors are occupationally competent in all the components of hybrid packages. All units should be written in a similar format to aid consistency and coherence. There were concerns that there may be increasing, unrealistic pressure on assessors to become 'multi competent'.

To avoid the possibility of devaluing NVQs and creating confusion, and to limit the growth of too many options, there were calls for the standards setting bodies to specify rules of combination, both for smaller packages of NVQ units and for hybrid packages that include other vocational units. Packages must be coherent and based on national occupational standards, showing clear links to the relevant NVQs. The focus should be on the quality of a package rather than on its size, as different sectors may require different sizes. It was felt that the regulatory authorities should oversee the overall development of such packages, to ensure consistency across the framework.

The need to pilot such packages was stressed, as was the need for regular monitoring by the awarding bodies and for those involved in delivery to be given the opportunity to provide feedback on their effectiveness.

3.1.9 Unit funding

There was common agreement that flexibility was hindered by the current funding system. Some employers who do not rely on government funding already select units from NVQs to underpin their training programmes and to develop their staff in other ways. This option is not available to training providers and others who depend on public funding. If units or combinations of units, as well as whole NVQs, could be funded, it would go a long way towards increasing the flexibility of the NVQ system.

The importance of encouraging a unit based approach to encourage multi-skilling was also stressed. There were requests for awarding bodies to do more to encourage multi-skilling – by improving their administration documentation and by reducing the registration fee for candidates taking units from more than one NVQ, for example.

3.2 Consistency in awarding body documentation and procedures

3.2.1 Background

In the first part of the afternoon workshop, participants were asked about the most significant problems caused by the differing demands of awarding bodies. They were also asked for their views on the practical steps needed to reduce bureaucracy and to ensure compatible, consistent documentation across awarding bodies.

The briefing for this topic, supplied to participants in advance, is reproduced in the first part of Appendix B.

3.2.2 External verifier practices

The great majority of participants saw inconsistency in external verifier practices as the most serious problem. Not only did the demands of external verifiers differ from one awarding body to another, but examples were given of different demands for the same NVQ from verifiers employed by the same awarding body. There was a feeling that some external verifiers were reluctant to deal with contentious issues.

There were reports of external verifiers leaving and being replaced by new ones who forced new systems and paperwork on centres. Examples were also quoted of widely varying interpretations of the amount and sufficiency of evidence needed. Some participants highlighted difficulties when external verifiers based in colleges came to verify within companies.

Others reported that some external verifiers were unwilling to check the centre's own documentation and systems, wanting all information duplicated onto the awarding body's own forms.

It was felt that consistency in procedures and documentation went hand in hand with consistency in external verifier practices. To ensure this, guidance issued by awarding bodies for external verifiers should be standardised by sector and across sectors, with input from QCA and the standards setting bodies. It was also suggested that a set of criteria could be developed to enable centres to design documentation of their own which would meet the awarding body requirements. This would help consistency and negate the need for multiple sets of systems.

There was a request for more consistent presentation of action plans and their target dates. Furthermore, it was felt that there should be regular procedures for outgoing external verifiers to induct new ones, to aid consistency and to reduce the burden on the centre.

There were many calls for awarding bodies to work together to provide external verifiers with thorough, regular training. Awarding bodies must ensure that all external verifiers interpret the occupational standards and *The Awarding Bodies' Common Accord* in the same way. It was noted that the emerging professional body for external verifiers might help to increase effective networking, although there were concerns that many people would be deterred by the registration fee.

Participants welcomed the establishment of awarding body registers of external verifiers. There were requests for awarding bodies to incorporate centre feedback on external verifiers' reports as part of the monitoring process, and to provide sufficient information to centres about how to appeal against external verifier decisions.

3.2.3 Occupational competence of external verifiers

Concerns about the occupational competence of external verifiers were raised a number of times. Some participants felt that the requirements for external verifiers should cover aspects such as 'hands-on' work experience in the occupation, current or recent experience and continuing professional development.

There were calls for external verifiers to demonstrate competence in assessment as well as in specific occupations. A number of participants wanted to see units D32 (*Assess candidate performance*) and *D33 (Assess candidate using differing sources of evidence*) as minimum requirements for external verifiers, as well as units D34 (*Internally verify the assessment process*) and D35 (*Externally verify the assessment process*).

Participants discussed the problems caused by high turnover of external verifiers. There was a suggestion that there should be fewer external verifiers, each working for a greater proportion of time, instead of the large number currently working for a limited number of days per year. The possibility of increasing the number of full time 'professional' external verifiers was raised, although it was acknowledged that continuing professional development would be needed to keep occupational competence up to date.

3.2.4 Code of practice for external verifiers

There was very strong support for a code of practice for external verifiers, to provide a basis on which to resolve the current problems. Participants felt that a code must build on existing guidance, include current good practice and be applicable across all awarding bodies to ensure consistency. It should also deal with the possible conflict of roles – for example, between verification and advice/support.

There were requests for a code to build on unit D35, setting out clearly what is required of external verifiers and the limits of their responsibilities: possibly in the form of a common job description. An outline of what centres should expect from external verifiers was also requested. A code should require a commitment to continuing professional development and attendance at training and 'standardisation' events. There was also a suggestion that external verifiers should declare any vested interests – for example, work they may be doing with different awarding bodies.

3.2.5 Different documentation

There were some participants working with more than one awarding body who were satisfied with existing arrangements, and who had no problems with the different documentation required. Others believed that centre approval procedures across awarding bodies were now fairly similar, and that these improvements were largely due to the Common Accord.

However, there were also many reports of difficulties caused by the wide variety of forms for registration, assessment and certification. This often led to confusion and duplication of work. Some participants described how awarding bodies interpreted evidence requirements in different ways, causing inconsistencies in assessment and verification. It appeared that some awarding bodies required 'mountains' of documentation, while others asked for far less. There was an example of an awarding body changing its assessment documentation for existing NVQs halfway through the accreditation period, which caused confusion.

Many participants wanted to see common forms for candidate registration and centre approval being used by all awarding bodies. There was even a request for a single awarding body for all NVQs. There were suggestions for candidates to be given a registration number for life, to be used across all NVQs and other qualifications, provided data protection issues could be resolved.

The wide variation in fees across awarding bodies was seen as a potential barrier to assessment. While it was recognised that awarding bodies operate in the marketplace, and that centres are offered competitive charges by different awarding bodies depending on their needs, it was felt that there should be set limits to their fees. Furthermore, standardisation of procedures across awarding bodies should not lead to a lower standard of customer service, which is a key factor for centres when selecting awarding bodies.

3.2.6 Transferable centre approval

There were numerous demands for awarding bodies to work together to design documentation that is common, or at least consistent. They were urged to use the same form to cover common centre approval procedures, in line with the approved centre criteria within the Common Accord. The form could have sections for further information required, which may be specific to the type of NVQ to be delivered, or which may be needed to fill gaps in existing evidence.

A number of participants said they would be happy to supply additional information when applying to another awarding body for centre approval, if it was needed to cover gaps that had already been identified. They did not see why they should supply evidence that had already been accepted by another awarding body, or information that was unnecessary for the purposes of centre approval.

3.2.7 Approved centre criteria

Participants were asked which aspects of the Common Accord approved centre criteria, and possible sources of supporting evidence, were most appropriate for recognition by all awarding bodies. They were also asked to identify the aspects that were likely to require different sources of evidence, depending on the type of NVQ.

It was suggested that evidence relating to management systems should be recognised by all awarding bodies. Evidence for resources would probably differ, depending on the type of NVQ and the occupational expertise required of assessors and internal verifiers.

Participants also suggested that most of the criteria relating to candidate support should be common, with the exception of the requirement to provide information, advice and guidance about qualification procedures and practices. The latter was likely to be specific to the type of qualification. Evidence needed to demonstrate the occupational competence of assessors and the expertise of internal verifiers was also likely to be specific.

It was felt that the following evidence, required to meet other criteria for assessment and internal verification, should also be accepted by all awarding bodies:

- access to assessment;
- resolution and recording of queries;
- sampling of assessment decisions and practices;
- making unit certification available to candidates;
- information on the continuing process of maintaining records;
- carrying out reviews of centre performance.

3.2.8 Making the most of existing systems

There was strong support for allowing an organisation to use its own systems, where appropriate. Examples were given of some large companies who were able to negotiate use of their own in-house documentation, while smaller centres were required to operate several different systems. One participant described how tracking documentation for assessment and internal verification had been developed in the centre, and how all the awarding bodies who worked with the centre had been persuaded to accept it. Awarding bodies were urged to be more flexible and to recognise that many employers have well established IT-based systems that could reduce the paperwork currently required.

As well as recognising an organisation's existing systems for centre approval purposes, awarding bodies were also asked to consider other information, such as IiP status and ISO9000. Evidence and reports arising from other sources, such as inspection visits, should also be taken into account.

3.3 Identifying risk

3.3.1 Background

In the second part of the afternoon session, participants were asked for their views on the factors that should be taken into account when establishing levels of risk.

They were given an update on QCA's current work with awarding bodies on the development of strategies for risk management. The aim is to target resources more effectively at centres whose practices give rise to concern. It should result in fewer demands on those centres who are deemed as low risk, providing there are no significant changes within the centre itself.

The briefing for this topic, supplied to participants in advance, is reproduced in the second part of Appendix B.

3.3.2 Common risk factors

A number of common themes emerged relating to risk factors:

- funding;
- ratio of assessors to candidates;
- occupational competence of assessors;
- number of internal verifiers;
- centre systems;
- use of simulation;
- staff turnover;
- registration and certification;
- numbers of candidates leaving without achieving an NVQ;
- number of assessment sites;
- 'age' of the centre;
- failure to implement external verifier centre action plans.

The topic raised most frequently was the risks that can arise due to the pressures of output related funding. It was reported that some training providers were putting candidates through higher level qualifications mainly because of the funding attached. Other participants believed that colleges, as providers, sometimes asked companies to compromise their own standards so that candidates could achieve NVQs. Some felt that training providers took short cuts to get candidates through their NVQs, often within too short a period.

Another frequently quoted factor was the ratio of assessors to candidates. It was acknowledged that acceptable ratios can vary, depending upon the sector and the level, and that different qualifications have different requirements.

The importance of qualified and occupationally competent assessors was stressed a number of times. It was felt that frequency of assessment was an important factor; if assessors do not assess regularly, both their occupational and assessor competence can diminish.

The role of internal verifiers, and their ratio to assessors and candidates, were seen as important factors in determining risk. Good, effective internal verifier systems that are actually used should lead to fewer risks.

The need for consistency in centre documentation was also raised: if internal verifiers and assessors use different methods and forms, the potential for risk increases.

Heavy reliance on simulation was highlighted as a key risk factor. The use of simulation must be realistic and in accordance with standards setting body guidelines.

Staff turnover within centres, management changes and a high turnover of candidates were seen as likely indicators of risk. Other factors that should be taken into account were the type of centre and the location of candidates. Awarding bodies could find it difficult to keep track of large numbers of subsidiary sites, and there may be problems in maintaining the consistency of assessment. Where a number of 'client organisations' are attached to an approved centre, the resources needed by the centre to offer support and guidance should be scrutinised.

Further factors that could be used when determining risk included candidate retention and completion levels, speed of assessment and certification, the percentage of candidates who are successful at the first attempt, and the percentage of certification claims rejected by the external verifier.

The speed at which new centres are established and built up, the implementation of new awards, mass registrations, financial viability and changes to a centre's personnel and internal structure were all seen as having the potential to increase risk.

The track record of a centre and how it responds to external verifier action plans should be taken into account. If action points are not implemented in the agreed timescales, the external verifier should be alerted to possible risks and take remedial action. The external verifier should have experience of the occupational areas in which the centre is assessing in order to identify risk correctly.

Reports arising from visits by other agencies – for example, TSC or the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) – could also help in alerting awarding bodies to poor practice. QCA was urged to work with the inspection bodies to share findings of visits. It was suggested that feedback from customers, evidence from self monitoring and assessment and personal development plans for centre staff should be taken into account.

3.3.3 Centre information

Participants were asked about the information they would expect to supply to awarding bodies to help assess risk.

It was generally agreed that any information supplied should be based on risk indicators previously established by the awarding bodies, and that it should be collected in the context of action plans arising from external verifier visits. These action plans should also be the basis for a flow of information up to the awarding body and down through internal verifiers to the assessors and candidates. Centres should supply awarding bodies with examples of good practice.

The importance of external verifier action plans, how the centre responds to them, and the monitoring of outstanding action points were stressed. Some participants described plans that were badly written or inaccurate. Others reported instances where actions were not followed up at subsequent external verifier visits. Awarding bodies were urged to monitor the quality of external verifier action plans for accuracy and consistency.

Awarding bodies were asked, when establishing risk assessment systems, to train their external verifiers to give guidance to centres. It was suggested that a risk assessment form or checklist would help centres and external verifiers to collect the appropriate data.

The need for more detailed monitoring of new centres, to minimise the possibility of poor practice from the start, was raised.

Effective systems and clearly documented procedures were seen as important factors in reducing a centre's risk banding. It was believed that those continuing to meet all the approved centre criteria within the Common Accord should be considered as low risk, but that external verifiers must continue to monitor the centres to ensure compliance.

3.3.4 Centre and awarding body action

When asked how centres and awarding bodies should act in response to results of risk analysis, participants felt that there should be a reward for good practice, with low risk centres receiving far fewer visits. There was some evidence of awarding bodies already operating this policy.

Centres at risk could be helped by increased training of internal and external verifiers and by improved networking of assessors and verifiers across centres and awarding bodies.

It was agreed by many that responses to risk analysis should be linked to external verifier action plans. Action points relating to areas that have been identified as risky should be marked clearly, to enable centres to prioritise remedial actions. There were some calls for sanctions to be imposed where these risk items were not satisfactorily resolved, such as removal of direct claim status or temporary suspension of certification. Centres that continue to fail to undertake remedial actions should have approval withdrawn. Awarding bodies were urged to work to ensure that such centres are not approved by another awarding body.

3.3.5 Consistency

Strong support was shown for making key risk factors consistent across all awarding bodies. Participants recognised that some factors may need to vary depending on the type of centre (for example, employers, training providers or colleges) and the type of qualification. It was therefore suggested that a number of common risk criteria should be introduced, backed up by other criteria specific to centre or qualification type.

4 Evaluation of the user forums: participants' views

Each participant received a short evaluation form about the organisation of the forums. Four questions covered use of the briefing materials sent out before the forums, how well the forum aims were met, and satisfaction with the group sessions and the venues. A total of 67 forms were completed and returned to QCA, representing 39 per cent of the total number of forms circulated.

Over 95 per cent of responses were positive. It was particularly encouraging to see that 78 per cent of participants were very satisfied with the opportunities to give their views in the group sessions, and that 61 per cent found the advance briefing materials very useful.

The results are summarised in the table overleaf.

Participants were also invited to provide further comments on the evaluation form. Some very useful feedback was received. A selection of these comments is reproduced below.

I felt as though the mix of delegates in my working group enabled a considered and informed debate and the facilitators managed well the issues which were to be covered.

Very useful, leading on from the forum I attended in Bristol last year.

I found the whole day very useful. The exchange of views was valuable and I would like to be involved in future activities.

It will be interesting to see how quickly changes suggested are implemented.

Future forums should include representatives of NVQ candidates and a larger cross section of NVQ using companies, especially smaller employers.

I found the whole day to be informative and enjoyable. Most importantly, I felt the group's feedback was listened to and taken on board. Thank you.

Very interesting and useful opportunity to share and listen to the wide range of experiences of the delegates.

Well presented and plenty of useful ideas.

It is good to see the progress made from last year.

Excellent forum for open discussion on the NVQ process. Very helpful getting views from all industrial sectors.

Excellent. The opportunity to both give and receive views in the workshop was invaluable.

I feel that this was one of the more positive forums I have attended for some time.

The afternoon session highlighted bureaucracy and inconsistency and concern regarding the relationship between awarding bodies in the main, TEC/Providers, etc. Useful, but worrying from the customer view point in terms of professionalism and quality/speed of service offered to employers. Given that the CBI are encouraging ongoing uptake and acceleration of NVQs, the relationship within the supporting infrastructure really does now need to be addressed.

Excellent opportunity to register our views directly with QCA.

Summary of responses
(based on the 67 conference evaluation forms returned to QCA)

QUESTION		Number	%
How useful were the briefing materials supplied for the forum?	very useful	41	61
	useful	23	34
	not very useful	2	3
	did not answer	1	2
How well do you think the forum's aims were met?	very well	31	46
	well	35	52
	not met	0	0
	did not answer	1	2
Were you satisfied with the opportunities to give your views in the group sessions?	very satisfied	52	78
	satisfied	15	22
	dissatisfied	0	0
	did not answer	0	0
Were you satisfied with the venue (including access to the venue)?	very satisfied	33	49
	satisfied	31	46
	dissatisfied	3	5
	did not answer	0	0

Appendix A

Improving NVQS: User Forums (May and June 1999)

Briefing paper for morning group session

Improving the value of NVQs and other vocational qualifications

In the early part of 1999, QCA undertook an initial consultation with key partners (including awarding bodies and national training organisations) to identify the main challenges for the further development of NVQs and vocational qualifications. We now wish to explore a number of the issues that were identified in more detail.

Discussions need to take place with a wider range of organisations and individuals, including those directly involved in the delivery of NVQs. We therefore wish to take the opportunity of the NVQ User Forums to ask for your views on the following, for which considerable support was expressed in the initial consultation:

■ improving the flexibility of NVQ structures in order to make NVQs more widely and easily available;

■ exploring further the potential for the development of smaller packages of units to support the increased take up of full NVQs and discussing how combination rules would be determined.

These discussions will help QCA to form balanced proposals for further development.

With encouragement from QCA, flexible arrangements for combining core and optional units have been increasingly adopted for NVQs. This allows a relatively small number of NVQs to be used with sufficient flexibility to meet a range of needs. So long as the core remains a substantial part of the NVQ it is reasonable to claim that candidates with different optional units have the same underlying occupational competence.

Flexibility in NVQ structures

There is considerable interest in the possibility of allowing more flexible rules of combination in bringing together units to form an NVQ, but there is also a view that the system of core, optional and additional units is essentially correct.

It also seems to be generally accepted that there is a special role for the core units in an NVQ. It is the core that sets the transferable national standard for the NVQ. However, the optimum size of this core needs to be established.

Some employers are of the view that NVQs composed **only** of national occupational standards do not meet their specific needs. Because of this, they would wish to see a mechanism which allows their own requirements to be captured within an NVQ. This might be possible if employer (or provider) defined units could be added to the list of optional or additional units for an NVQ.

This is linked to a suggestion that it should be possible in some circumstances for an employer's name or logo to appear on a certificate. This would show that the award meets the employer's requirements and would increase employer involvement in NVQs.

Finally, there is the issue of 'multi-skilling' or 'multi-tasking'. This affects both larger and smaller employers, although in different ways. In each case, however, it creates a demand for NVQs made up of units covering several occupational areas.

Issues for consideration

In considering the following, it would be especially useful if you could identify examples which illustrate the issue, and suggest specific proposals as to how QCA might proceed.

- What are the appropriate rules for combination in designing an NVQ?
- What is the importance of the 'core' of an NVQ? What should it contain and what is its optimum 'size'?
- Should there be a role for employer (or provider) specified units in an NVQ? If so, should these appear in the core, optional or additional units component?
- Should there be any external quality assurance of the specification and/or the assessment of employer specified units?
- Should employers be allowed to have their names or logos on certificates? If so, what are the rules that should govern the use of this facility?
- Does more need to be done to make cross occupational qualifications available to meet the demand for multi-skilling? If so, what should be done?
- How should the minimum number of successful awards, with the maximum flexibility in terms of structures, be achieved to ensure a rational and coherent framework?

Smaller packages of NVQ units

Interest has been also generated in exploring other ways in which NVQs might develop in order to better suit different employer and candidate needs.

There is interest in the possibility of allowing more flexible rules of combination to bring together smaller packages of NVQ units which will support the take up of full NVQs.

There is also support for exploring the possibility of hybrid vocational awards that might bring together NVQ and other types of vocational qualification units, to meet the needs of particular candidate groups in particular education and training contexts.

Issues for consideration

In considering the following, it would be especially useful if you could identify examples which illustrate the issue, and suggest specific proposals as to how QCA might proceed.

- What type of 'packages' are needed, ie NVQ only, hybrid NVQ/vocational?
- What added value would they offer?
- Who should have the authority to determine combination rules?
- Should the smaller packages conform to a prescribed size?
- How would they relate to a full NVQ?
- Should there be any compulsory units?
- What should these packages be called?
- How should the minimum number of successful awards, with the maximum flexibility in terms of structures, be achieved to ensure a rational and coherent framework?

Appendix B

Improving NVQS: User Forums (May and June 1999)

Briefing paper for afternoon group session

1 Consistency in awarding body documentation and procedures

Participants at last year's NVQ user events stressed the need to reduce bureaucracy. It was felt that a major improvement would be an increase in common systems and approaches between awarding bodies.

The following aspects of the new arrangements for the statutory regulation of external qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will help to achieve greater consistency in awarding body documentation and systems.

- Awarding bodies must use procedures consistent with criteria specified by the regulatory authorities when approving centres: for NVQs they must use the Approved Centre Criteria, as set out in *The Awarding Bodies' Common Accord*. The use of these common criteria should provide a platform for standardisation of documentation across awarding bodies. They should lead to consistent standards being applied across centres and the mutual recognition of approval decisions between awarding bodies.

- Awarding bodies must adopt the principles for assessment and external quality control as specified by the relevant standards setting body. These include specifying which aspects of the standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace, the extent to which simulated working conditions may be used to assess competence, the occupational expertise requirements for assessors and verifiers, and the amount and type of evidence to be collected.

- Administrative obligations for centres must be as clear and streamlined as possible, and any requirements to maintain records and evidence and provide data must involve a minimum of bureaucracy while guaranteeing the integrity of the qualification and associated awards.

- Each awarding body must maintain a register of external verifiers. In order to ensure consistency in external verifier practice, awarding bodies will work with QCA on the development of a code of practice.

To contribute to QCA's discussions with awarding bodies on the practical steps that will be needed to reduce bureaucracy and develop compatible, consistent documentation, we are seeking users' views on the following:

- What are the most significant problems caused by the differing demands of awarding bodies?
- Where is the greatest need for documentation that is common, or compatible, across awarding bodies? Are there any examples of good practice that you can tell us about, where this need is already being met?
- Which aspects of the Common Accord approved centre criteria, and possible sources of supporting evidence, are most appropriate for recognition by more than one awarding body?
- Which aspects of the approved centre criteria are likely to require different sources of evidence from different awarding bodies? For example, the different evidence that may be required for differing types of centre to be approved and types of NVQ to be delivered?
- Which aspects of external verifier performance and practice should be addressed in a code, in order to ensure consistency of external verifier performance across awarding bodies?

2 Identifying risk

QCA has started to work with NVQ awarding bodies on ways of identifying risk: which centres have practices that give rise to concern, and which centres have a good track record in meeting centre approval and quality assurance requirements. By using a 'risk management' approach, they should be able to target monitoring activity and support where it is most needed.

Risk management strategies should contribute to overall quality improvement. They should also result in fewer external verification visits to those centres with a good track record. The demands on these centres should therefore be lessened, and their good performance formally recognised.

Where centres have particular practices that give rise to concern, awarding bodies can use risk management to identify where support is most needed and which aspects of centre performance should be monitored more closely. In some cases, intervention at an early stage should lessen the likelihood of malpractice and the resulting damage to the credibility of NVQs.

It is important that any risk management strategies and resulting requirements on centres to provide data involve a minimum of bureaucracy. Procedures need to be consistent with other centre arrangements, including ongoing action planning and any self assessment strategies that centres are using. It is also important to ensure that the analysis of any data collected results in an accurate picture of the level of risk, taking all contributory factors into account.

QCA is working with awarding bodies to identify existing best practice in risk management, with a view to developing suitable models which could be used by all awarding bodies.

To contribute to this work we would like to ask users the following:

- What factors (or combinations of factors) do centres see as relevant in establishing risk levels?

- How should centres and awarding bodies act in response to such risk analysis?

- What information should awarding bodies ask centres to supply to help assess risk?

- Should key risk factors be consistent across awarding bodies?