Assessment in Vocational Programmes in the Further Education Sector in England

National Survey Report

January 1995

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This report is concerned with assessment in programmes leading to the award of vocational qualifications which are offered by colleges in the further education sector in England. It does not include any evaluation of the provision made by private training organisations, or by companies operating their own training schemes. Inspectors visited 45 colleges. Assessment practices across eight broad subject areas were examined and the work of over 3,000 students was inspected.

This is the third survey of aspects of vocational education provision in England undertaken by the inspectorate during 1993-94. Not surprisingly this report identifies similar strengths and weaknesses to these highlighted in the recently published reports on NVQ and GNVQ provision. However, since this survey was concerned with all vocational programmes offered by further education sector colleges, it is worth recording that some of the features noted are also associated with the programmes which NVQs and GNVQs are replacing. For example, across all vocational programmes, few colleges have established systematic procedures for monitoring the standards of internal assessment, moderation by the awarding bodies is not fully effective, and colleges need to involve employers more in the assessment process and rely less on simulated work environments. NCVQ and awarding bodies are already addressing instances of unclear specifications, poorly-designed tests and grading criteria, and too much emphasis on assessment at the expense of learning which have been referred to in previous inspectorate reports on NVQs and GNVQs. As a result, towards the end of the inspection, significant improvements were in train which augur well for the future.

The report highlights and gives examples of good assessment practice in vocational education and training programmes. It also draws attention to those areas in which the assessment associated with the award of vocational qualifications could be improved: the internal assessment arrangements in colleges, the involvement of employers in the assessment process and clarification of the role of external verifiers by NCVQ and the vocational awarding bodies.

ASSESSMENT IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

1   This national survey report is concerned with the assessment of students attending all types of vocational education and training programmes offered by further education sector colleges in England. The impact of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) on assessment practices in colleges is also examined. Previous reports from the inspectorate include two national survey reports: *National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England*, September 1994, and *General National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England*, November 1994.

CONTEXT

2   Most colleges in the further education sector have a long, and largely successful record of running vocational courses. In the past, the assessment requirements for these courses were determined by the awarding bodies. The main awarding bodies in the further education sector are the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) and RSA Examinations Board (RSA), but there are many others. Some professional associations also set examinations in their particular vocational subjects. Typically, each college department or course team dealt directly with the appropriate awarding body, carried out any necessary internal assessments, and administered any external examinations which were required.

A National Qualification Framework

3   The introduction of NVQs and GNVQs is creating a system of qualifications within a single national framework. The different assessment requirements of NVQs and GNVQs have a significant influence on the way courses leading to these qualifications are designed, organised and delivered.

NVQs and GNVQs

4   NVQs are designed to recognise that a person in employment has acquired the competences, assessed in a work setting, necessary to perform a specific job at a specific level. There is normally no requirement, as is the case with GNVQs, for students to demonstrate competence in core skills. NVQs form the qualification goals of most part-time students attending college on release from employment and are well established in many occupational areas including business administration, construction and health.

5   GNVQs are designed to recognise the attainment of knowledge, skills and understanding relevant to a broad vocational area, assessed through coursework and external tests. Students are required to demonstrate competence in mandatory core skills (communication, application of number and information technology) and other core skills (problem solving and working with people) are available as additional units of study. GNVQs have been introduced in three phases since September 1992. During the period of inspection, GNVQs were established in five areas: business, health and social care, leisure and tourism, art and design, and manufacturing. They were also being piloted in science, construction, and hospitality and catering.

6   It is the government's aim to secure the accreditation of NVQs covering 90 per cent of occupational groups by 1997. During the same period, the provision of GNVQs will have been extended to cover additional occupational areas: distribution, engineering, information technology, land-based industries, management, and media and communications.

Centre Approval

7   Colleges and other centres wishing to offer NVQs and GNVQs have to be approved by an awarding body whose qualifications are accredited by the NCVQ. Codes of practice issued by the NCVQ and guidelines issued by the awarding bodies underpin the criteria for centre approval. These criteria require approved centres to demonstrate that they can ensure the quality of their provision and set and maintain appropriate assessment standards. Further education sector colleges are also required to respond to national requirements relating to assessment which are set out in the Charter for Further Education and amplified in their own charters.

Assessment Practices and Procedures

8   Assessment practices in vocational programmes are in state of flux as GNVQ and NVQ qualifications are progressively introduced and experience is gained in the application of new assessment arrangements.

9   Vocational courses have traditionally been subject to a range of assessment arrangements depending upon the policies and practices of particular awarding bodies. Some relied on end-of-course examinations, others used a mixture of end-of-course and continuous assessment and a few relied entirely on internally set and marked assignments with little emphasis on moderation. The advent of NVQs and GNVQs has led to some necessary modification and rationalisation of assessment practices.

10   GNVQs are assessed using both internal assessments which are set and marked by teachers, and tests which are set and marked externally. Internal assessment occurs throughout the programme of study and students retain their assessed work in a portfolio of evidence which demonstrates the skills, knowledge and understanding which they have

acquired during their course. External written tests are set for each GNVQ mandatory unit and students are required to achieve a mark of 70 per cent in each test to achieve a pass. Towards the end of the programme of study the student's portfolio of evidence is used by teachers to award an overall grade. Grading criteria are published by the NCVQ and students can be awarded a pass, merit or distinction grade. A merit grade is awarded if a third or more of a student's work meets all of the merit grading criteria and a distinction is awarded if a third or more meets the distinction grading criteria.

11   NVQ assessment is based on judgements by teachers and workplace assessors about whether specified performance criteria have been met. Performance must be demonstrated and assessed in conditions as close as possible to those in which it would normally be practised. Most NVQs do not involve external testing but it is the practice in some vocational areas, often at the request of employers, to provide access to additional externally-tested awards. Unlike the assessment of GNVQ, there is no grading in NVQ. The outcome is pass or fail. Either students demonstrate the competence or they do not.

The Role of Industry Lead Bodies and Awarding Bodies

12   The competences which have to be demonstrated for the award of an NVQ are determined by employers through an industry lead body. Lead bodies are widely based, incorporating employers, employees, and educational and professional interests. GNVQs, which cover broader occupational areas, are developed by working groups which include representatives of industry lead bodies, professional and awarding bodies, schools, higher and further education and employers.

13   The industry lead bodies often work in conjunction with the education awarding bodies which are responsible for assuring standards through their procedures for validation, centre approval and external monitoring. There are currently over 70 awarding bodies offering qualifications accredited by the NCVQ. Standardising assessment practice and procedures across such a range of awarding bodies is a challenge to which the NCVQ has responded by issuing a code of practice, the *Awarding Bodies Common Accord*, to which all awarding bodies are expected to conform. The code of practice suggests the use of common terminology, requires the certification of both assessors and verifiers to national standards, defines key roles in quality assurance and outlines the criteria for centre approval.

14   To ensure the standards of its NVQs and GNVQs the awarding bodies employ trained external verifiers to visit institutions to check that centres have established suitable internal verification processes and procedures and that appropriate standards are being set and achieved.

THE SURVEY

15   The survey covered eight vocational areas (science, agriculture, construction, engineering, business, hotel and catering, health and community care, and art and design) in 45 further education sector colleges including general further education colleges, tertiary colleges, sixth form colleges and specialist monotechnic colleges. The assessment processes and procedures associated with programmes leading to the awards of NVQs, GNVQs, BTEC national certificates and diplomas, C&G certificates and diplomas, RSA single subject examinations and other professional body awards were inspected. The survey also drew on the findings of the inspectorate's surveys of GNVQs and NVQs and on information provided by the Further Education Unit (FEU) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

16   During college visits, inspectors examined assignments, tests, work-based projects and other examples of assessed student work. They observed students being assessed and also met with course leaders and senior college managers responsible for co-ordinating assessment and maintaining standards. A number of visits were timed to coincide with assessment of portfolios of evidence at the end of the academic year. This enabled inspectors to attend meetings of college staff and external assessors, and to evaluate the part played by external moderators and verifiers in maintaining the standards of vocational qualifications.

17   Inspectors met representatives of the three major awarding bodies, BTEC, C&G and RSA, and representatives of the NCVQ to discuss external moderation. Meetings were also held with representatives of nine colleges participating in the FEU project, *Managing Assessment*. These nine colleges were collaborating in the development of assessment policies and procedures to meet the requirements of NVQ and GNVQ assessment, the Charter for Further Education, and Department for Education regulations on the publication of information on students' achievements.

18   The inspection findings are presented in the next four sections of the report. The first section, the **management of assessment**, considers how effectively colleges are developing assessment policies and procedures in response to changing requirements. The second section, **learning and assessment**, is concerned with the impact of assessment on learning as students progress through the different stages of vocational programmes. The third section, **assessment and the workplace**, examines the liaison between colleges and employers associated with the assessment of competences. The final section, **assessment and standards**, is concerned with the extent to which the current systems of assessment and external monitoring promote consistent national standards for vocational qualifications.

THE MANAGEMENT OF ASSESSMENT

19   The introduction of both NVQs and GNVQs has had a substantial impact on assessment practices across the further education sector. These major curriculum changes have not been achieved smoothly. Teachers and students have had to adjust to externally-imposed curriculum and assessment changes, year on year, as feedback has indicated the need to eliminate flawed practices and procedures. Examples 1 and 2 indicate the turbulence created by some of the changes with which both staff and students have had to cope.

Example 1

On training schemes for construction, teachers were operating a different system of assessment for each intake of students. Students in the third year of training were completing their studies under the C&G advanced craft scheme; second-year students were being assessed under the Construction Industry Training Board and C&G 'blue book' scheme, and first year students were working towards the assessment criteria of the Construction Industry Training Board and C&G 'green book' scheme.

Example 2

The awarding body had changed the floristry units twice in three years because of the changing requirements of the industry lead body. This had created a sense of uncertainty amongst teachers and students. Staff were managing different schemes of assessment for each intake of students. Unit specifications were not available for one of the programmes until two months after students had enrolled on the programme.

Improving Assessment Practices

20   Although there is often effective co-ordination of assessment at the course team level, few colleges have developed comprehensive, college-wide policies and procedures for assessment to ensure consistency of standards across the institution.

21   Many teachers have become adept at planning and developing assessments even when national guidelines lack clarity. They have worked together effectively to review and refine practice, through regular team meetings and the preparation of annual monitoring and review reports. This was particularly evident where colleges had developed GNVQ and NVQ assignments and assessments based on their experience of running previous vocational programmes, such as BTEC national diploma and certificate courses.

22 Students' experience of assessment varied from one curriculum area to another because course teams had different approaches to managing the assessment process. Many colleges however, have recognised the need for more consistent standards and were implementing measures to achieve this. Examples 3 and 4 illustrate the assessment procedures which colleges are beginning to develop.

Example 3

During induction, each student received a booklet which described the assessment regulations and outlined the students' rights and responsibilities. End-of-course meetings, known as assessment boards, were held for every vocational programme. Teachers reviewed students' work and assessments, and agreed final results with the external assessor. Each assessment board was chaired by a senior college manager in accordance with the college's well-established quality control procedures. All decisions were minuted by a member of staff from the registry. This process allowed a full consideration of each student's assessment profile and a thorough evaluation of the complete set of results. It also allowed the external assessor's comments to be fully recorded and circulated to teachers.

Example 4

The roles and responsibilities of NVQ assessors and internal verifiers were outlined in the college's quality assessment documentation. The types and extent of assessment sampling and moderation to be undertaken by internal verifiers were also included. External verifiers and moderators visiting the college were provided with copies of the college's quality assurance documentation before their first visit to the college. They were also provided with comprehensive guidance on where to send their reports and how any action would be dealt with in response to issues raised in the reports.

Quality Control

23 Where assessment practice was well developed across the college, it was often characterised by the following features: the availability of course handbooks with comprehensive information on assessment; a formal system of assessment review boards; clearly-defined procedures for internal verification and the moderation of assessed work; comprehensive student appeals procedures; and systematic monitoring of data on students' achievements through the analysis of retention, completion and pass rates.

24 The NCVQ and the awarding bodies require colleges to establish a rigorous approach to internal moderation of standards and to have procedures in place for dealing with student appeals against assessment decisions. Despite these requirements, some colleges were running NVQ and GNVQ programmes without adequate internal verification and student appeals procedures in place.

Staff Development and Training

25 Besides acting as assessors some teachers also serve as internal verifiers. In the latter role they carry out internal checks on assessment records and are required to assure that all assessment procedures have been followed correctly. Training for the roles of assessor and internal verifier is based upon the NVQ standards developed by the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB). It is offered to college staff by private training organisations and also as part of colleges' own internal staff training. Assessor training is progressing more rapidly than internal verifier training although colleges are giving the latter a high priority in their staff-development programmes. In some colleges, teachers have been able to gain assessor qualifications through the accreditation of their prior experience. Concern has been expressed by some college staff that the standards of different trainers are not comparable. Few colleges systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the assessor and verifier training which their staff receive.

LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

26 The process of assessment plays a more central role in teaching and learning on NVQ and GNVQ programmes than on the programmes they are replacing. This is because the NCVQ and the awarding bodies require all aspects of national standards to be met.

The Recording of Assessment

27 Teachers maintained extensive documentation for the recording of assessment judgements against the performance criteria on NVQ and GNVQ programmes. Many course leaders were spending over a fifth of their time maintaining students' assessment records. Some of the assessors and students found the terminology used for describing aspects of the assessment system difficult to understand.

Students' Guidance

28 Most colleges provided students with guidance on assessment. For example, students were normally given a handbook outlining the structure of the course, the methods of assessment and the responsibilities of students for the completion of work and of teachers to provide appropriate information. However, such guidance did not always provide information on the assessment regulations. On GNVQ programmes for example, the documentation often contained detailed information on each of the units including the scheduling of assignments,

but it failed to indicate the overall requirements which students had to meet to gain the final award.

29   Guidance before entry through diagnostic testing and the accreditation of students' prior learning (APL) was rarely developed as a college-wide service for all students. Where APL was in operation, it was often confined to a particular occupational area, such as business studies or construction, and operated by individual course teams. There was seldom any attempt to relate APL to college policies for increasing access for particular groups in the community such as adults with extensive work experience.

30   The involvement of students in the assessment process was a positive feature of many NVQ and GNVQ programmes. Substantial time was devoted to tutorials in which individual students, in consultation with tutors, set their own learning objectives and subsequently evaluated their attainments against the objectives which had been agreed. Students readily participated in this process and valued the opportunity to take responsibility for monitoring their own progress.

The Vocational Dimension

31   Much of the teaching on NVQ and GNVQ programmes made use of successful practice developed on vocational courses such as the C&G diploma of vocational education and the BTEC national diploma and certificate awards. For example, there was extensive use of assignments and project work which students enjoyed and valued. Examples 5, 6 and 7 indicate how assignments were planned so that assessment could take place in a simulated work environment.

Example 5

Students on an NVQ 3 business administration programme worked through a set of tasks, all of which were based in the college's simulated electronic office. The student group was divided into a team of supervisors and a team of clerical assistants. Roles were rotated each week. The assessment criteria were explicit and well understood by the students who were provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their competences when they felt ready.

Example 6

Students on a GNVQ advanced catering course were preparing a silver service four- course meal in the college restaurant. The group was divided in two: one group responsible for preparing the menu, costing and ordering, and the other for cooking and serving the meal. The students reversed roles to ensure all gained maximum experience. The assignment covered many units of the programme and was evaluated by the clients as well as by the teachers.

> **Example 7**
>
> A final year project for the Association of Accounting Technicians students (NVQ level 4) required them to prepare an audit of an organisation. They followed systematic audit procedures throughout which included: letters of engagement, attending the general meetings, checking articles of association, and devising questionnaires to establish the validity of accounting procedures. Part-time students produced audit reports on their own employing organisation, which in many cases led to changes in practice. The college was unable to gain employer-based audit assignments for full-time students and consequently devised a scheme linking their audit projects to companies set up through the Young Enterprise scheme. This benefited students, who were able to develop appropriate auditing skills through a realistic simulation.

Subject Knowledge

32 Although the new assessment arrangements associated with the introduction of NVQ and GNVQ programmes are intended to clarify what students should be able to do, and what they need to know, teachers were often unclear about the depth of subject-based knowledge required. For NVQ qualifications, the ways in which the underpinning knowledge aspects of the qualification were specified and described varied between lead bodies. In some cases, the range statements were brief and provided insufficient clarification of the knowledge needed to underpin successful performance in the workplace. On GNVQ programmes, external tests for mandatory units provided the only clear indication of the extent and depth of knowledge students were expected to acquire.

33 In some subject areas, students were supplementing NVQ qualifications with other qualifications in order to certificate the acquisition of particular skills and knowledge required by employers. In business administration, for example, it was common for students to sit single-subject RSA examinations in typing and word processing, in addition to completing assessments for the NVQ award.

External Tests

34 The introduction of external tests in GNVQ programmes is influencing the pattern of course delivery. For example, compared with the precursors of GNVQ courses, there was less emphasis on integrating the content of different units through common assignments and projects. There was greater emphasis on ensuring that students had covered the content of each discrete unit in preparation for the external tests. Some of the early GNVQ external tests were unreliable as assessment instruments because they contained ambiguously-worded questions. In

addition, colleges received insufficient advance notice about the style and format that the tests would take. The introduction of a code of practice on external assessment has helped the awarding bodies to improve the reliability and appropriateness of the external tests.

Grading Criteria

35   Teachers and students were unclear about how the criteria for determining the overall grading of GNVQ awards should be applied. Students found it difficult to understand the broad themes, such as planning and evaluation, which determine the grade awarded. Teachers in different colleges were adopting different approaches to grading students' assignments. In some cases, indicative grades were being provided to students, but how such grades related to the final grade for the award was unclear. The NCVQ has clarified how the grading criteria should be applied by issuing two guidance booklets to colleges in May 1994 and a further two booklets in September 1994. At the time of inspection, it was too early to judge the effectiveness of these.

ASSESSMENT AND THE WORKPLACE

Employers and Managing Agents

36   Few of the employers with whom the colleges generally dealt had work-based assessors, trained to TDLB standards, able to support the colleges by assessing students' performance at work. Consequently, they had little involvement in the assessment of college-based students' competences on NVQ programmes. This was the case even for students who were in employment and attending colleges on a day-release or block-release basis. Where assessment was carried out on the employers' premises, it was usually dependent upon teachers visiting the workplace to review students' progress and achievements. For example, on agricultural courses, college representatives visited farms regularly to collect evidence of the competence of students from employers and farm staff.

37   Another common pattern was for the co-ordination of workplace assessment on NVQ programmes to be undertaken by managing agents. Such agents operated in close co-operation with employers and colleges. Students completed log books to record the various activities which they had undertaken and these were confirmed by their supervisors at work. Staff from the managing agents had responsibility for ensuring that students' work tasks gave opportunities for assessment to NVQ standards.

Simulated Work Environments

38   The NCVO, in their guide on NVQs has indicated that if assessment in the workplace is not practicable, simulated work environments may be used instead, and that these environments should be sufficiently realistic to allow teachers to predict that the competences assessed can

be sustained in employment. The majority of assessments of students seeking NVQ qualifications were taking place in such simulated work environments on college premises. These workplace simulations are designed to re-create, as far as possible, the conditions in employment so that a candidate's demonstration of competence takes place under similar pressures and with similar facilities to those in employment. Although there were some instances of inadequate simulated work environments, most were effective and some were of high quality. Many colleges, for example, had developed well-designed hairdressing and beauty salons, training restaurants, travel bureaux, vehicle repair and servicing workshops, training offices, creches, horticultural and nursery outlets and construction workshop and practical project areas. Without such facilities, students would have had insufficient opportunities for assessment to complete their NVQ awards.

39   Simulated work environments were being regularly modernised by colleges to meet the changing needs of industry. This has involved colleges in making significant capital investment in new technology to provide students with up-to-date equipment which has in turn led to considerable expenditure on consumable items. These costs were rarely passed on to students or employers.

40   Nevertheless, in a recent CBI report on NVQs, *Quality Assessed*, some employers were reported to be sceptical of the value of NVQs achieved mainly through assessments carried out in simulated work environments. The report goes on to suggest that, where candidates cannot be assessed in the workplace, it would be preferable for them to pursue an alternative GNVQ qualification. Inspectors found no evidence of students working in simulated work environments being certified as having practical competences they did not possess.

Co-operation between Colleges and Employers

41   Whilst employer's involvement in the assessment of college-based students was rare, many were assisting students in other ways: by providing work experience placements for full-time students, through work shadowing schemes and by supplying information for and help with students' projects. Examples 8, 9 and 10 indicate the value to students of effective co-operation between colleges and employers.

Example 8

In a hairdressing programme, close links were maintained with employers by teachers visiting students on work experience. During their work placement, students completed an assignment on health and safety standards in commercial salons. This enabled them to gain an appreciation of the importance of hygiene in the industry. Employers appreciated the vocational relevance of the assignment and made useful contributions to it.

> **Example 9**
>
> An NVQ painting and decorating programme for women was devised jointly by teachers and local employers in response to market research which indicated that many women preferred female decorators working in their homes. The aim of the programme was to equip students with sufficient skills and knowledge to become self-employed. An important element of the training involved visits to construction sites and manufacturers' premises. Employers readily responded to requests for such visits and some also provided work experience placements. After completing their course the students formed a co-operative to promote the services which they offered.
>
> **Example 10**
>
> Work-based assessment was used in several nursery nursing courses where links with employers were strong. Comprehensive guides were produced by college staff to assist workplace supervisors with assessment procedures. Students maintained a detailed record of their activities in log books which were checked and countersigned by workplace supervisors. Colleges recruited staff to organise placements, liaise with employers and assist with work-based assessment.

ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDS

42   Prior to the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs, the content of vocational courses was determined by awarding bodies after consultation with representatives from education and employment. The emphasis on internal assessment and external testing varied between the awarding bodies, as did their approaches to external moderation.

43   During the period of the survey, a system of specialist external moderation was still operating for many qualifications not accredited as NVQs and GNVQs. Typically, a moderator or external assessor had responsibility for a group of courses within a subject area. External monitoring was achieved by a moderator agreeing the programme of assessment at the start of the course and checking samples of assessed student work during and at the end of the course. The moderator would visit the college on two or three occasions each year to confirm that teachers were assessing the awards in accordance with agreed procedures. Teachers generally welcomed the contact with moderators and valued their subject knowledge. The recommendations of moderators were usually readily accepted by the teachers.

Internal and External Verification of NVQs and GNVQs

44   Assessment leading to the award of an NVQ qualification is carried out mainly by the training provider. In contrast, assessments associated with GNVQ programmes involve both internal assessment and external testing. In both cases the internal assessment is subject to both internal and external verification. The TDLB has defined the standards of performance expected of assessors and verifiers who are involved in the assessment of trainees and students on NVQ and GNVQ programmes.

45   The role of the external verifier, as defined by the TDLB, is broader than that of the specialist moderator described in paragraph 43. A central part of the external verifier's role is to evaluate the college's own procedures for managing assessment and assuring consistent standards. In order to discharge this function effectively, the external verifier liaises closely with the internal verifier, who is normally a teacher at the college. The role of the internal verifier is to monitor the standards of internal assessment by sampling assessed work and co-ordinating the team of teachers who are assessing students. The internal verifier, therefore, has a pivotal role in assuring standards of assessment on NVQ and GNVQ courses. Given the broader function of the external verifier within the NCVQ assessment system, it is sometimes the case that the awarding bodies appoint external verifiers on the basis of their knowledge of assessment rather than for their subject or occupational expertise.

46   Few colleges have developed a systematic cross-college approach to internal verification. Where internal moderation was taking place it tended to operate informally through co-operation between teaching staff over the sampling of students' work and the marking of students' work by more than one teacher. Not all internal verifiers were qualified to TDLB standards and not many colleges had developed routine mechanisms for checking the rigour and consistency of student assessment.

47   Few colleges had developed criteria for the selection of internal verifiers or identified what resources were needed to enable them to discharge the role effectively. There was considerable variation in practice. In some cases, curriculum managers such as heads of department fulfilled this role, whilst in others, course tutors discharged the function. Frequently, an internal verifier had not been appointed several months after the start of the course. Some internal verifiers spent the majority of their time completing administrative records rather than sampling assessed work and ensuring consistency of standards.

48   External verification was often superficial. Some external verifiers lacked detailed knowledge of the full range of specialist courses for which they were responsible. They were, therefore, unable to provide detailed guidance to teachers on the assessment and grading of particular subject areas. Their written monitoring reports usually lacked

detailed comment on assessment standards and were not regarded as particularly helpful by course teams.

Regulation of Standards

49   Prior to the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs there were significant variations in the way in which some awarding and professional bodies, offering vocational qualifications in the same occupational area, regulated the standards of awards. Some monitored colleges through a controlled pattern of internal and external assessments. Others relied heavily upon teacher-designed assessments, subject to moderation through internal and external verification. Although the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs has reduced these variations, some still remain: for example, in the NVQs in accounting, the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) assessed students on the basis of centrally-set examinations in addition to college-devised assessments, whilst BTEC relied entirely upon the latter.

College Assessment Frameworks

50   Many of the colleges were taking steps to develop more systematic assessment frameworks in response to the requirements of the NCVQ and the Charter for Further Education. Data on retention, completion and other aspects of student achievement were being collected as part of college annual monitoring and review arrangements. However, these data were rarely collated and reviewed across the college to provide a systematic analysis of student performance across programme areas. A few colleges were comparing evidence from different external verifier reports in an attempt to determine common trends in assessment practice. Where college-wide systems were well developed, senior college staff had often entered into a constructive dialogue with the awarding bodies about the comments in external verifiers' reports and the appropriateness of the GNVQ tests.

CONCLUSIONS

51   The systems for assessing vocational qualifications in further education are still evolving as NVQs and GNVQs gradually replace existing awards. The NCVQ promotes quality assurance through the spread of best practice, a key example of which is the common accord on assessment and verification between the NCVQ and the awarding bodies. It also commissions its own quality assurance reports. Comprehensive systems for ensuring consistent standards of assessment for NVQ and GNVQ awards are in place and are rapidly being strengthened.

GLOSSARY

Terms used to describe NVQ and GNVQ courses include:

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

Vocational units normally consist 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 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.

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 students' portfolios of evidence must show that they have met all the performance criteria and understand 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 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.

ACRONYMS

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

APL   Accreditation of prior learning

BTEC   Business and Technology Education Council

C&G   City and Guilds of London Institute

CBI   Confederation of British Industry

FEU   Further Education Unit

GNVQ   General National Vocational Qualification

NCVQ   National Council for Vocational Qualifications

NVQ   National Vocational Qualification

RSA   RSA Examinations Board

TDLB   Training and Development Lead Body

TEC   Training and Enterprise Council.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Awarding Bodies Common Accord, 1993, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

Quality Assessed: The Confederation of British Industry Review of National Vocational Qualifications, 1994, Confederation of British Industry

Examining Assessment: Assessment Issues and Regimes in Post-16 Education and Training, 1994, Further Education Unit

National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England, National Survey Report, September 1994, Further Education Funding Council

General National Vocational Qualifications in the Further Education Sector in England, National Survey Report, November 1994, Further Education Funding Council

Guide to National Vocational Qualifications, 1991, National Council for Vocational Qualifications.