

Level 2 Adult Vocational Learning – a Qualitative Study of Motivations, Experiences and Outcomes

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National Centre for Social Research

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a Qualitative Study of Motivations,
Experiences and Outcomes*

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

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SUMMARY

Chapter 1 Introduction and research design

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study that explores the benefits of level 2 vocational qualifications for adult learners. The research was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills.

The Government has a stated policy aim of increasing the opportunity for people to undertake and gain qualifications, particularly at level 2, and have launched a range of initiatives to support this policy objective. These objectives ensure both employers and individuals have the skills required for success.

The aim of this study was to increase understanding of the experience and effects of level 2 vocational learning. Specifically, it sought to understand the motivations for and experience of undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification, the range of returns from attaining a level 2 vocational qualification, and the way level 2 vocational qualifications are viewed in different business and skills sectors.

The research included four distinct types of respondents:

- Adults who had gained a level 2 vocational qualification in the past;
- Adults undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification at the time of interview;
- Employers from selected business sectors who had employees in pursuit of level 2 qualifications;
- Representatives from a diverse range of Sector Skills Councils.

The sample of learners included 47 eligible respondents who had diverse characteristics, including learners of different age and gender, who pursued different types of NVQs in a variety of settings. Respondents were drawn from four sectors - care, customer service, construction, and hospitality – and were clustered in three broad areas of the country - the Midlands, Yorkshire and the Northeast, and London and the Southeast. Potential participants were recruited via assessment centres by means of an opt-out exercise and subsequent telephone screening.

18 interviews were conducted with employers, including at least three from each of the aforementioned business sectors, and a further four from the engineering sector. Employer organisations were diverse in nature comprising local authority, public sector and commercial organisations and these varied in size and structure, from large, multi-national organisations to smaller, UK-based operations. All had staff who were in pursuit of level 2 learning to some degree.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 Sector Skills Councils. The SSC representatives interviewed were generally senior with some responsibility for

the development of National Occupational Standards and Qualification Frameworks in conjunction with employers in the sector.

Interviews were conducted with the three groups of respondents between August 2004 and February 2005. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of respondents and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using 'Framework', a content analysis method for analysing qualitative data.

Chapter 2 The business context for level 2 learning

The context of level 2 learning differs across the sectors included in this study. These distinguishing features comprise:

- *The general attitudes towards vocational qualifications*
Broadly positive views about vocational learning and qualifications were held though employers reported some negative views related to concerns around the value, delivery, access and funding of vocational qualifications. Those with the most positive attitudes described a longstanding commitment to training within their organisation, good support for learning and were involved with the development of vocational qualifications via local business forums.

- *The perceived need for level 2 skills*
The perceived need for level 2 vocational qualifications differed across sectors. It was greatest where it was perceived that level 2 could provide the skills needed by a sector reflected, in part, by targets or regulations that encouraged certification in some sectors such as care and construction. There were some SSC representatives who felt that the current skill need within their sector was either above or below level 2. Even where the current need was for skills at level 2, it was recognised that this could change in the future, for a variety of reasons. Where sectors are made up of distinct industries or business areas, the need for level 2 could also vary across these.

- *The value placed on level 2 qualifications*
Individual sectors valued level 2 qualifications to a greater or lesser extent. Value was interpreted in three ways:
 - as a vehicle for ensuring competence and skill within the workforce;
 - as a way of re-introducing existing employees to learning;
 - as a 'stepping stone' to further levels of qualifications and progression within the workplace.There was not, however, universal appreciation of the value of level 2 qualifications throughout every sector.

- *Employer recognition of level 2 qualifications*
Recognition of the benefits of level 2 vocational qualifications was inconsistent. Greater awareness had been prompted by workforce targets for certification at level 2 in some sectors but, where recognition was not so extensive, this was

attributed either to a perceived lack of relevance for the sector or a lack of promotion within it. Smaller employers were said to have less awareness of the range of level 2 vocational qualifications available and lower recognition of their value.

- *Workforce demographics*
The characteristics of learners differed across and within sectors. Sector representatives described learners with different levels of engagement with learning, a range of commitments outside the workplace, and diverse prior experiences of undertaking and achieving qualifications.
- *How level 2 qualifications are resourced*
Employers reported several sources of funding for level 2 vocational qualifications, including the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and relevant SSCs.
- *The ways in which level 2 learning can be accessed*
Level 2 vocational qualifications are delivered both as unique learning opportunities and as part of apprenticeship schemes. Some sectors used a combination of both approaches where NVQ2s were used to plug specific skills gaps and apprenticeships to give a more broad based foundation in the skills needed for work in that sector.
- *The range of level 2 qualifications available*
There was wide disparity between sectors in terms of the number of level 2 vocational qualifications available. Where the chief demand for skills within a sector is at a higher level or the industry has been traditionally well served by academic qualifications, there tend to be fewer level 2 vocational qualifications. However, the need for a workforce qualified in a range of specialisms generated a greater range of qualifications at level 2 in other sectors. The number of vocational qualifications available in any sector is, however, not a reliable measure of how well that sector is served at level 2. Some sectors, such as care or logistics, are well served by a handful of level 2 qualifications.

These different features have implications for the provision of vocational qualifications by affecting employer willingness to engage with vocational learning. Each issue, either alone or combined with others, can either encourage or discourage employers to invest in level 2 qualifications for their workforce.

Chapter 3 The path to learning

The decision to pursue a level 2 qualification was not a straightforward one. Learners' diverse accounts of this decision-making process indicate that they perceived varying degrees of control over the overall decision to learn, the level at which to learn and the type of qualification to pursue. A key influence on learner

perception of choice was the contribution of the employer to the initial decision to learn and to the level or type of qualification they would pursue.

Learners had different levels of awareness of vocational qualifications and of the distinct levels of qualification available. Even where awareness of vocational qualifications was high, there was not always complete understanding of what the learning process involved and what outcomes might mean. This was partly due to the quality and sources of information they received both prior to beginning a course and at the outset of learning. There was a range of sources that learners used to build their awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications, including colleagues, training providers, employers, friends and family.

The impressions formed provided important context for learning experiences. However, learners were also guided by their own personal motivations to pursue a level 2 qualification. Broadly, three sets of motivations were apparent:

- *To improve current work situation*
Learners sought to achieve this by increasing knowledge and skill within their current job role and enhancing levels of job satisfaction.
- *To develop as a person*
Learners wanted to improve as people by increasing general knowledge and abilities and by acting as a role model to others.
- *To influence future employment options*
By achieving a level 2 qualification, learners hoped they could enhance their opportunities for employability and career progression. Financial gain and meeting sector targets or expectations were also desired outcomes.

Learner accounts of the journey to level 2 learning pinpointed a range of issues that made it easier or more difficult for them to engage in the learning process. This array of barriers to and facilitators of learning related to a similar set of issues. These comprised:

- Availability of suitable qualifications;
- Convenience of learning;
- Confidence in learning aptitude;
- Understanding of what learning involved and required;
- Cost;
- Nature of personal commitments and responsibilities.

Chapter 4 The NVQ level 2 learning experience

The diversity of level 2 qualifications available meant that it was possible to learn in a variety of ways. Access to learning was via one of three ways: at work; at college; or

a combination of work and college. The mode of learning used to pursue level 2 qualifications impacted on the experience of learning. However, no one mode emerged as favourite amongst either employers or learners. Instead, views were guided by how appropriate the mode of learning was for the work role and how the mode of learning corresponded with learner or employer characteristics. Though this research cannot support any conclusions about which learning route is best, it can illustrate the factors underpinning different preferences. These relate to the implications of learning mode for the process of learning and for the individual and business more generally.

The experiences recounted by learners highlighted a range of aspects regarding the content and structure of the qualifications they pursued which had an important influence on the learning experience, irrespective of the subject or the sector. These related to the relevance of the course to the learner's job role, the degree of choice in qualification structure, the clarity of course instruction and guidance, and the pace of learning. In addition, three distinct learner characteristics had important implications for the quality of interaction with the learning process and, to a certain extent, guided the views they expressed about the course content and structure above. These concerned learners' own perceptions of their aptitude for learning, the pre-existing level of skill and experience, and their expectations about the learning experience.

The process of gathering and presenting evidence was an important part of the learning experience and learners spent much time on it. Views about the value of the evidence gathering and presentation process were mixed. Some saw it as appropriate means of evidencing learners' everyday roles however others saw some of the required evidence as unnecessary, irrelevant and hard to generate. Learners' experiences of the evidence gathering process varied in terms of the clarity of qualification requirements for evidence gathering and presentation, the level of learner responsibility for this, and the degree to which this process was perceived as flexible.

The role of the assessor is to assist the candidate in planning and collating evidence for assessment and monitoring progress against this plan. Learners, however, varied in their understanding and experience of the assessor role and this affected their perception of the assessment process and level 2 learning more generally. Assessors generally set tasks and verified their completion, and provided more general support for the learning experience. This sort of role was generally valued by learners. However, there was also evidence to suggest that some assessors in both work and college-based settings fulfilled a more didactic function.

In the discussion of the roles played by assessors there emerged a range of qualities that learners felt were crucial to successful learning. These concerned the degree of skill assessors had within the vocational area, the depth of experience they had as an assessor, how accessible and approachable they were perceived to be, their ability to anticipate and be receptive to learner needs, and the consistency of approach.

The final aspect of the learning process that was deemed to be of importance to learners was the support available to help them. Discussion of support permeated the interviews with learners and there emerged a range of sources that enabled them to achieve their learning objectives, including assessors, employers, tutors, colleagues, fellow learners, family and friends. The degree of access that learners had to support had significant implications for the quality of their learning experience.

Chapter 5 The impact of level 2 learning

The range of returns identified in this study suggests that level 2 learning and certification has direct and perceivable impacts for learners that are central to the learner experience. They comprised:

- *Workplace skills*
Workplace skills were affected in two ways. First, the range and expertise in specific skills among learners improved. This was supported by more generic skill development, in terms of a wider skills base and the development of non-specific work skills.
- *Personal development*
Learners reported feeling an increased sense of validation, self-esteem and pride from undertaking learning at level 2. This had implications for their interaction with others, in particular, at work.
- *Confidence*
Changes in levels of confidence were reflected in people's behaviour at work, in particular how they felt about their ability to perform their job role. This confidence stemmed from level 2 learning in two ways: from the day-to-day experience of undertaking learning and the reassurance provided by interaction with assessors and tutors; and from certification because it was seen to constitute proof of competence in a job role.

A further set of returns was also identified. While these were important for the learner, they were generally perceived to be a more indirect consequence of learning at level 2. They encompassed:

- *Further vocational learning*
This included other vocational qualifications at level 2, level 3 qualifications, and qualifications undertaken outside of the workplace. The experience of level 2 learning could either encourage or discourage an individual from considering or embarking upon further learning.
- *General employability*
Learners reported a general feeling that more qualifications meant better prospects for employment. There was a general expectation that undertaking and gaining qualifications would improve their work prospects by acting as proof

of competence in a job role, and demonstrating commitment and a willingness to learn. This expectation was supported by the positive experiences recounted by some past learners.

- *Career progression*

Level 2 certification was seen to lead either directly to career advancement, through improved opportunities for promotion or alternative employment, or be an important precursor to it, by leading to further qualifications which enabled progression. It was also said to help define career aspirations by helping learners to assess how well suited they were to a particular sector or career path.

- *Wages*

There were inconsistent reports of whether level 2 certification had any effect on pay. While some learners reported very small pay increases as a result of certification, this was not a universal experience. This inconsistency is perhaps explained by employers' varied motivations and systems for linking pay with the achievement of qualifications.

The combination of these two sets of returns for the learner was seen to produce a further range of returns for the employer:

- *Staff retention*

The issue of retention was a common concern, however, employers and SSC representatives disagreed about the nature of the impact of vocational learning on retention. Certification was seen by some to equip employees to find alternative employment and therefore hamper retention efforts. Alternatively, investment in training was believed to foster loyalty among employees.

- *Staff recruitment*

Level 2 vocational qualifications were seen to assist in the recruitment of staff in two ways. First, the offer of vocational training and development was said to attract some candidates to a business or sector. Second, having a level 2 vocational qualification was said to provide a useful insight into the quality of candidates and therefore assist employers in recruitment decision-making.

- *Performance and productivity*

The positive effect of learning for employees was believed to foster gains in business performance and productivity. For example, improved workplace skills were said to have positive implications for people's performance at work which, in turn, impacted on the productivity of the business as a whole. Certain drawbacks of vocational learning were also highlighted. There was a general view that businesses suffered under the weight of the extra administration brought about by vocational qualifications, particularly those that were set within

the workplace. This was said to be particularly prohibitive for smaller employers where resources were sometimes scarce.

Finally, all those impacts for the learner and employer had ramifications for the sector by improving sector image and developing industry standards.

The experience of these impacts are, however, mediated by a set of factors relating to the circumstances in which level 2 learning takes place. These relate to:

- *The degree of learner engagement* - including the extent and nature of learner motivation, the perceived relevance or appropriateness of the qualification, and the fit with learning needs.
- *The role played by the employer and training provider* - comprising the content and timing of the learner induction, the nature of employer support, and the relationship between assessor and learner.
- *The design and execution of qualifications*— particularly the procedures for generating evidence and the nature of the work-based learning environment.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This final chapter summarises the main findings of the study and draws out the key implications for policy around vocational learning at level 2.

- This research highlights a broadly positive interpretation of the value of level 2 learning and a range of direct and perceivable impacts on those who engage in it, including returns for personal development, workplace skills, employability and attitudes to learning. These findings challenge the prevailing view that level 2 qualifications have little or no benefit for those who undertake them and lend support to any Government policy that aims to increase take-up of level 2 learning or to support business in the provision of level 2 vocational learning, such as the Adult Learning Grant, and the National Employer Training Programme.
- Attainment of level 2, however, has a less obvious effect on wages which presents a challenge to the marketing of these qualifications because learners cite financial gain as one of the range of motivating factors for setting out on the learning path.
- The impact of level 2 learning is not confined to learners. There are important returns for employers and for business more generally by contributing to a more developed and competent workforce, to increased performance and to greater productivity. Wider benefits for business include the creation of a more positive image and greater refinement and monitoring of industry standards.
- These returns are dictated by a range of issues related to the process of learning including the effective engagement of the learner, the employer and training

provider role and the design and delivery of the qualification. This information will be useful to those involved in the design and provision of qualifications.

- While it is clear that individuals will be guided by their own motivations for learning, this research highlights the advantages of having a diverse range of sources of information and advice about vocational learning and the important role of the employer in encouraging people to develop skills. This is an important consideration for the design of future marketing and information campaigns to increase the take-up of level 2 vocational qualifications.
- The matching of learning mode with an individual's work situation and their personal circumstances is important although no single recipe for the 'right' kind of learning experience emerged from this study. This underscores the importance of continued diversity in the provision of NVQ level 2s in terms of the mode, style and pace of learning, methods for gathering and presenting evidence, the role of the assessor and others who support the work-based learner.
- The provision of support at the outset of learning in helping individuals to make informed choices about career direction is also key. The extent of learners' prior experience of learning and work, and their personal characteristics such as self-esteem and confidence, also determine their need for support and guidance throughout the learning process which endorses the plans for support of adult learners outlined in the recent white paper (DfES, 2005b).
- The sectors consulted by this study differ in a whole range of ways. This diversity poses challenges for the design and delivery of policy that aims to enhance the take-up of vocational qualifications. These relate to the access and delivery of level 2 vocational qualifications and the need for vocational qualifications to be as flexible as possible. Development of vocational qualifications towards a system of accreditation that is credit- or unit-based was suggested to increase this flexibility. However, there are limits to the extent of flexibility that could feasibly be sustained without creating confusion amongst learners and employers.

1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study that explores the benefits of level 2 vocational qualifications for adult learners. The research was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills.

This chapter provides some background to the research, outlines the precise objectives of the study, and gives a description of the research methods used to conduct it, including the processes of sample selection and recruitment. It ends with an overview of the remaining chapters in this report.

1.1 Background to the research

In 2003/4, 667,000 people were awarded a vocational qualification at level 2 in England¹. Of these, 235,000 were awarded a NVQ level 2. This represents an increase of 30% on the previous year and a reversal of the falling numbers seen in previous years (DfES, 2005a). The Government has a stated policy aim of increasing the opportunity for people to undertake and gain qualifications, particularly at level 2. This commitment was enshrined within the white paper '21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential', which announced a new entitlement for any adult in the workforce to have access to free learning for their first level 2 qualification (DfES, 2003). A PSA target was set to increase the number of adults in England with a level 2 qualification to one million by 2006. A range of other initiatives have been launched to support this policy objective. These include the Employer Training Pilots, which offer financial assistance to employers who provide training to staff who lack level 2 qualifications, and the Adult Learning Grant, a payment of up to £30 per week for full-time learners studying for their first level 2 qualification.

The Government's commitment to these objectives was reaffirmed within the recent white paper on skills (DfES, 2005b). This reviews the progress made by the Skills Strategy since 2003 and outlines a range of measures designed to take it further. These proposals include the delivery of the new National Employer Training Programme, which will provide free training at level 2 and also in basic skills, the commitment to creating and acting upon Sector Skills Agreements to address current and future skills needs, and the development of skills academies to equip the workforce with the skills necessary for successful employment. The 2005 white paper also announced new proposals for financial and personal support for adults learning at level 2 and 3.

¹ The National Qualifications Framework comprises five levels. A qualification at level 2 is defined as gaining 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, intermediate GNVQs / VCEs, NVQ2 or a full VRQ at level 2. A table outlining the requirements for qualifications at different levels is included in Appendix A.

These objectives to ensure both employers and individuals have the skills required for success underpin the need to understand the contribution qualifications at level 2 can make, both within and outside the workplace. Previous research exploring the potential economic returns from level 2 vocational qualifications has found that NVQ level 2 qualifications have little, if any, effect on individual earnings (Dearden et al, 2004; McIntosh, 2002; Conlon, 2001; and Dearden et al, 2000). This research aside, however, there has been little empirical research which explores the full range of benefits derived from level 2 vocational qualifications or, for that matter, that explores the motivations of individuals for undertaking such qualifications, or their experiences of it. The perspectives of employers and the business community more generally have also received little recent attention². Up to date knowledge is undoubtedly key to ensuring that the provision, delivery, and content of level 2 vocational qualifications can meet the existing and future skills needs of industry, employers and employees.

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to address some of the current gaps in existing knowledge relating to level 2 vocational qualifications. The specific objectives for the research were to:

- map and understand the motivations for undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification;
- explore the experience of undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification;
- understand the range of returns from attaining a level 2 vocational qualification, including those occurring over the longer-term;
- explore how level 2 vocational qualifications are viewed in different business and skills sectors.

This study used qualitative research because of its ability to provide a detailed understanding of the experiences of learners and more generally for its ability to be responsive to the different circumstances and experience of employers and business representatives.

1.3 Sample design and selection

The research included four distinct types of respondents:

- Adults who had gained a level 2 vocational qualification in the past;
- Adults undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification at the time of interview;
- Employers from selected business sectors who had employees in pursuit of level 2 qualifications;

² There are some studies that have sought to explore the employer view of level 2 qualifications, particularly National Vocational Qualifications (Callender *et al.*, 1993; CBI, 1994; Sims and Golden, 1998; Spilsbury *et al.*, 1995). However, both the qualifications and the business context have evolved significantly since then.

- Representatives from a diverse range of Sector Skills Councils.

The various samples for this study were purposively selected to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables. This aim here is to map rather than mirror the parent population. So, the samples used do not statistically represent the wider populations, but important constituents of those populations are represented within them to ensure that the study objectives can be explored. Purposive sampling of this kind provides the opportunity to explore those factors, influences, and experiences that are thought to affect the issues being studied. The process of sample selection and recruitment of each set of participants is set out in the sections that follow.

1.3.1 Learner sample selection and recruitment

The sample of learners was designed to ensure that it captured both current experiences of level 2 vocational learning and insights into the potential outcomes of certification at level 2. To this effect, the rationale for sample selection was to include learners who were currently enrolled in level 2 learning programmes and those who had completed their qualification in the recent past. It was also decided at the outset to cluster the learners within a finite range of business sectors to ensure that the research could properly understand the context of learning within a set of defined parameters. In consultation with the Department, five sectors were chosen: care, customer service, construction, engineering and hospitality. These were felt to represent a range of business environments and learning challenges. Two of the sectors, care³ and construction⁴, also currently have specific initiatives or targets aimed at increasing the take-up of level 2. This was another reason for their inclusion, to allow comparison with sectors where no such explicit targets or regulations exist.

In the design stage, different ways of achieving a sample with such diverse characteristics were reviewed. It was initially anticipated that the sample of past learners could be obtained from the 2002 National Adult Learning Survey carried out by NatCen on behalf of the Department, and that current learners could be sampled from current records held by assessment centres. However, closer analysis of the survey dataset revealed only 136 learners who had achieved a level 2 qualification and only a small portion of these fell within the chosen sectors described above. It was decided, therefore, that this would not be an effective sample frame for the current study and both current and previous learners were sampled from assessment centres. These are recognised organisations where learners can carry out vocational qualifications, such as certain businesses, training providers and learning institutions.

³ The Care Standards Act 2000 requires that 50 per cent of care staff in homes for older people be trained to level 2 by 2005.

⁴ The Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card is an individual identification and registration card. The CSCS card shows that the holder is regarded as competent within their job role. It lists any relevant certificates and also shows that the holder has undergone health and safety awareness training or testing. By 2010, all construction sector employees will need a card to work on site. The award of CSCS cards is directly linked to achieving NVQs. To get the basic card, a construction employee must attain at least an NVQ level 2 in a construction subject.

This chosen method of sample development, selection and recruitment was multi-staged. The starting point was a national list of assessment centres that potentially offered level 2 vocational qualifications within the identified key sectors, provided by DfES to NatCen. These assessment centres worked with the full range of awarding bodies within these sectors. Three broad areas of the country were chosen to cluster the recruitment – the Midlands, Yorkshire and the Northeast, and London and the Southeast. This was felt to represent a range of different geographical environments as well as different business contexts. Initial telephone contact was made with centres to establish whether they had eligible learners (past and/or current) and, if so, whether the centre was willing to cooperate in the selection process. Assessment centres were excluded at this stage either because the learners registered were under the age of 19 or because the qualifications offered did not fall within the chosen subject areas. Centres themselves also withdrew at this point because they did not feel they had the resources to be involved or because they felt that learners were over-researched.

Centres that were eligible and who agreed to participate then conducted an ‘opt-out’ exercise on behalf of NatCen. Letters were sent to eligible learners informing them of the research and explaining its objectives. This letter asked permission to pass on their details to the research team. It also gave explicit instructions about how to prevent disclosure of contact details. The contact details of learners who did not opt-out were then passed by the assessment centre to NatCen. These potential respondents were sent a further letter, re-iterating the purpose and nature of the research and advising learners of potential further telephone contact by NatCen. Copies of all letters used in the course of recruiting learners are contained in Appendix B.

This list of learners comprised our sample frame for selection of learners. The sample was selected according to the following criteria:

- *Learning status*
Cases were selected to include those who were currently learning at level 2 as well as those who had completed their qualification up to two years previously
- *Age*
Because the research was focused on adult learners it included only those aged over 19 at the time of learning. The selection process also sought to include adults of varied ages
- *Mode of learning*
Vocational learning can take place in a range of different settings. The aim of the selection process was to include people who had learned in the workplace, at college, and whose mode of learning was more mixed
- *Gender*
The research aimed to include both men and women;

- *Sector*

The aim was to include equal numbers from the five selected sectors: construction, care, customer service, engineering and hospitality

- *Qualification type*

The research sought to include only those who had completed an NVQ level 2 within the relevant sectors. The focus on NVQ level 2s over other vocational qualifications at level 2 (for example, BTEC First Diploma, City and Guilds Craft, GNVQ Intermediate, RSA Diploma) was guided by the status of the NVQ as the most commonly undertaken vocational qualification at level 2. Those who completed their level 2 qualification as part of an apprenticeship scheme were generally excluded. Within each of the five sectors a range of different types of NVQs was sought, where they existed.

Potential respondents were then contacted by telephone, screened against these criteria for eligibility and, where appropriate, an appointment for interview was arranged.

1.3.2 *The characteristics of learners interviewed*

The final composition of the learner sample included 47 eligible respondents. Two additional interviews were also conducted but not included in the final sample because they did not fit the primary criteria identified above. This appeared to be the result of inaccuracies in the information provided by assessment centres, which wrongly indicated the type of qualification.

The achieved sample includes a rich diversity of learner characteristics (Table 1.1). It contains learners who were currently in pursuit of a qualification, as well as those who completed a year and two years ago. The range of sectors represented is not as broad as anticipated. The achieved sample does not include any learners from the engineering sector. During our discussions with assessment centres it became clear that the dominant mode of learning at level 2 within the engineering sector was through an apprenticeship. Consequently, it proved extremely difficult to locate learners who completed a stand-alone NVQ level 2 within this sector. Because the aim of this study was to focus on stand alone level 2 qualifications it was decided, following discussions with the Department, to exclude engineering learners from the sample.

In the other sectors, learners were pursuing or already held a range of relevant level 2 qualifications (Table 1.2), with the exception of three customer service learners who had undertaken their NVQ as part of an apprenticeship in customer services. However, they were included in the sample because in each case they were able to distinguish the NVQ element from the other elements of their apprenticeship. The range of qualifications is broader in some sectors simply by virtue of the diversity of level 2 qualifications available. For example, the dominant level 2 qualification in the care sector is the NVQ level 2 in care, while a much broader range exists within the hospitality sector.

Table 1.1 Overview of achieved learner sample

Sector	Care	12
	Customer Service	12
	Construction	11
	Hospitality	12
Learner type	Current	15
	Completed 2004	17
	Completed 2003	7
	Completed 2002	8
Mode of learning	Work	32
	College	9
	Mix	2
Location	Midlands	19
	North East / Yorks.	10
	South East	18
Age	19-25	16
	26-35	11
	36-45	13
	46-55	6
Gender	Male	15
	Female	32
Ethnicity	White	36
	BME	9
Total number of learners		47

The sample contains a good spread of age and includes learners from a range of ethnic backgrounds. It was expected that the number of women would outnumber men in the care and customer services sectors and that the opposite would be true in the construction and engineering sectors. Hospitality was thought to have a more even gender distribution. The achieved sample in each sector reflected this gender disparity. Furthermore, the exclusion of engineering learners further contributed to a bias towards female learners.

The greater propensity for employers and other training providers to participate over learning institutions accounts for the larger number of learners undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification through the workplace than through a college or 'mixed' (work- and college-based learning) route.

All learners were in full- or part-time work at the time of interview though held varied attitudes towards their employment. Some felt enthusiastic about their work and wanted to learn more and others felt discontent and in need of a new challenge.

Learners' views about learning and qualifications varied between those who held well-developed plans for learning and those without any.

Table 1.2 Range of NVQ Level 2 qualifications included in the study

Sector	Qualification title	Number of learners
Care	Care	11
	Play-work	1
Construction	Construction	4
	Roof Sheeting and Cladding	2
	Trowel Occupations (Bricklayer)	2
	Wood Occupations (Carpentry & Joinery)	2
	Construction & Civil Engineering Services (Highways Maintenance)	1
Hospitality	Food Preparation & Cooking	6
	Hospitality and Catering	3
	Reception	1
	Bar Service	1
	Food and Drink Service	1
Customer Service	Customer Service	12

The chosen selection and recruitment process posed significant challenges to the success of the study. The use of assessment centres, in practice, meant that the research team had to deal with a multitude of gatekeepers to even establish a sample frame and several more to gain access to learners. This resulted in an unhelpful reliance on the help, support and cooperation of others to develop the sample. While some assessment centres have been particularly helpful in granting access to learners, others were much less cooperative, or verbally agreed to help, only to later refuse. Unsurprisingly then, it took many months to get a sample frame and the process was beset with delay. It is, however, difficult to imagine another way of accessing an adequate purposive sample of work-based learners and, whilst this process was not ideal, it did ensure that a very diverse sample of learners was created. The challenge of accessing adult learners should not be underestimated by researchers conducting research studies in this area in the future.

1.3.3 The employer sample

The sample frame of employers was drawn up using potential contacts supplied by relevant Sector Skills Councils (hereafter SSCs) and from training providers who had helped in the development of the learner sample. Letters explaining the purpose and nature of the research were sent to all potential employer respondents, to introduce the study and advise them of the possibility of further contact by a NatCen

researcher. Again a copy of this letter can be found in Appendix B. The sample was then screened to confirm the nature of the business, the presence of learning at level 2, and to gather information regarding the qualifications at level 2 being undertaken by staff and the size of the business.

18 interviews were conducted with employers, including at least three from each of the five key business sectors. The achieved sample of employers is illustrated in Table 1.3. Employers were recruited from the same target sectors from which learners were drawn, although while engineering learners were eventually excluded from the study, employer representatives were included to provide as diverse a range of employer views as possible. Employer organisations were diverse in nature comprising local authority, public sector and commercial organisations. These varied in size and structure, from large, multi-national organisations to smaller, UK-based operations. All had staff who were in pursuit of level 2 learning and certification to some degree.

Table 1.3 Overview of achieved employer sample

Sector	Size of employer			Total
	Small 1-24	Medium 25-249	Large 250+	
Care	0	2	2	4
Construction	0	2	2	4
Customer Service	1	2	0	3
Engineering	0	2	2	4
Hospitality	0	2	2	3

Smaller employers were the most reluctant to take part in the research. The size of such businesses often meant that the person in charge of training and development also held a key management role and, as such, felt unable to commit to participating in an interview. Moreover, these employers had few staff undertaking level 2 qualifications and, despite being encouraged to participate, felt they had little to contribute to the research.

The extent to which employer representatives were involved with training and development in their workplace varied. Some held HR Management or Training and Development positions with day-to-day responsibility for the administration of training and qualifications within the organisation. For others, in particular within small- to medium-sized businesses, training and development was only one part of their job which they combined with other, non-training-related roles. Where vocational qualifications were run in-house, employers sometimes had responsibilities for internal assessment and verification.

1.3.4 The Sector Skills Councils consulted

Sector Skills Councils are employer-led organisations established to address issues regarding skills, learning supply, business and individual productivity and performance. They are UK-wide, independent bodies, engaging with a wide range of sector stakeholders including trade unions and professional organisations⁵.

Table 1.4 Sector Skills Councils consulted

SSC Name	Sector coverage
CITB	Construction
e-skills UK	Information technology, telecommunications and contact centres
Financial Services Skills Council	Financial services industry
Lantra	Environmental and land-based industries
People First	Hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism
SEMTA	Science, engineering and manufacturing technologies
SkillsActive	Active leisure and learning
Skills for Care and Development	Social care including children, families and young children
Skills for Health	All staff groups working in NHS, independent and voluntary health organisations
Skills for Logistics	Freight logistics industry
SkillsSmart Retail	Retail

The histories of individual SSCs are diverse. Some have been established as SSCs for a relatively short time though existed as Industry Training Boards, originally set up by Act of Parliament in 1964, later coming out of statutory arrangements and eventually becoming National Training Organisations, such as SEMTA, the SSC for the engineering sector. ConstructionSkills, SSC for the construction industry, is part of one of the two surviving statutory Industry Training Boards (the other is the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board). Others have more recently been established as their own skills council, such as SkillsActive. As might be expected, e-skills did not have this sort of genesis either, covering occupations that have

⁵ Further information about Sector Skills Councils can be gained from the Sector Skills Development Agency web-site (www.ssda.org.uk).

emerged more recently. This diversity in their foundations, in part, accounts for quite significant differences in the extent to which sectors have begun to review their existing qualification provision in light of the sector's skills needs, identifying gaps and planning and executing strategies to fill them. The retail sector, for example, reported beginning this process several years ago and was in the process of developing a qualification framework to reflect the needs of employers within the sector. Newer SSCs, such as the Financial Services Skills Council, established in 2004, had embarked upon this process of auditing sector qualifications more recently. The Sector Skills Councils differ also in their size and structure.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 Sector Skills Councils. The SSCs consulted are listed in Table 1.4. The study included some 'trailblazers', such as Skillsmart Retail, which have been established for longer than others.

The SSC representatives interviewed were generally senior with some responsibility for the development of National Occupational Standards and Qualification Frameworks in conjunction with employers in the sector. All those interviewed had varying degrees of responsibility for the development of qualifications within their sector.

1.4 Data collection

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the respondent groups to allow for rapport to develop between the researcher and the respondent, and facilitate open and interactive discussion. Telephone interviews were held with two employers to facilitate their involvement in the study.

It was originally intended to engage current learners through a series of group discussions as it was felt that the dynamics of this method could make for greater understanding of the key features of the learning experience. However, it was not easy to achieve sufficient clusters of learners and this meant that the group approach had to be abandoned. Nevertheless, the depth interviews with current learners did have benefits for the study as it was possible to cover current experiences of learning to the same degree of depth as with past learners and to explore the linkages between individual motivations, expectations and experiences. This level of detail would not have been possible in a group setting.

The interviews with each type of respondent were conducted using responsive questioning and probing to ensure that all relevant issues were fully explored. They were conducted using a topic guide to ensure that a similar series of issues were explored with each respondent. Topic guides for each stage of the work were designed in conjunction with the Department. Separate guides were developed for each type of respondent. The first few interviews with each respondent group were conducted by researchers working in pairs which allowed the research team to reflect on fieldwork approaches and strategies and pinpoint any slight changes that were

needed to the content or structure of the topic guide. A copy of each topic guide used is contained in Appendix C.

Interviews were conducted with the three groups of respondents between August 2004 and February 2005. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half. Learners who participated in the research were given £20 to thank them for their participation, though other respondent groups were not paid for their contribution. Interviews with learners took place either in their own home or in their workplace. The employers and SSC representatives were usually interviewed in their own office but some interviews took place at NatCen. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of respondents and transcribed verbatim.

1.5 Data analysis

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were analysed using 'Framework', a method developed by the qualitative unit at NatCen (Ritchie et al, 2003). The first stage of analysis involves familiarisation with the transcribed data and identification of emerging issues to inform the development of a thematic framework. This is a series of thematic matrices or charts, each chart representing one key theme. The column headings on each theme chart relate to key sub-topics, and the rows to individual respondents. Data from each case is then summarised in the relevant cell. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes is noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or extract text for verbatim quotation. This approach ensures that the analysis is comprehensive, consistent and that links with the verbatim data are retained.

Organising the data in this way enables the views, circumstances and experiences of all respondents to be explored within a common analytical framework which is both grounded in and driven by their own accounts. The thematic charts allow for the full range of views and experiences to be compared and contrasted both across and within cases, and for patterns and themes to be identified and explored. The final stage involves classificatory and interpretative analysis of the charted data in order to identify associations, explanations and hypotheses.

In this study, data from the three respondent groups were charted on separate analytical frameworks to reflect the different coverage of the interviews. However, each framework shared certain key themes to allow views to be compared across respondent groups. A copy of the thematic framework generated from each dataset is included in Appendix D.

1.6 The coverage of the report

The report is divided into five further chapters:

Chapter 2 describes the business context for level 2 learning and explores the range of features that can affect employer willingness to provide level 2 qualifications.

Chapter 3 describes learners' circumstances prior to learning and describes how learners made decisions about their learning, the influences upon this, and the varied motivations they had for setting out on the path of learning. It also considers the barriers to and facilitators of learning at level 2.

Chapter 4 explores the actual experience of learning, presenting learners' views about the mode and content of learning, the process of assessment and the support available.

Chapter 5 examines the impact of learning at level 2, incorporating the views of learners, employers and SSC representatives. It also presents a range of factors influencing the experience of impacts from level 2.

Finally, **Chapter 6** draws together the key findings from the research and presents recommended areas for development relating to the provision, delivery and content of level 2 vocational qualifications. It concludes with a discussion of the potential implications for policy in this area from this research study.

The report uses verbatim quotations throughout and case studies in some of the chapters. Where necessary, the details of the contributors or their subjects have been moderately changed to protect anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used for all quotations and in all case studies. Learner quotations and case studies indicate the gender and age of the respondent, the type of learner (whether current or past) and the type of qualification. Employer quotations are attributed to the business sector and size of the organisation (small, medium, large). Given the nature of the SSC consultation it is possible that personnel may be identified from some of the quotations used. We have sought to avoid this where possible, though respondents were told of this at the time of interview and gave their agreement. However, quotations are attributed only to an 'SSC representative'.

The study was qualitative in design and this has made it possible to describe the range and nature of the perspectives held by the different types of participants in the research. It has also been able to identify the factors that have contributed to different outcomes. However, the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of views, experiences or factors leading to different outcomes. Where any such conclusions are suggested by the data, they are presented only as hypotheses to be tested.

2 THE BUSINESS CONTEXT FOR LEVEL 2 LEARNING

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the wider context of level 2 learning within the sectors consulted in this study. The views of 10 different SSCs were consulted in the course of the research and, in five of these, individual employers were also interviewed. From these interviews it is clear that the context of level 2 learning is not the same within the various sectors. To enable a better understanding of the benefits, drawbacks and areas for development outlined in the remainder of the report, this chapter pinpoints the key distinguishing features that have implications for the provision of level 2 qualifications and for the pursuit of level 2 learning. These comprise:

- The general attitudes towards vocational qualifications;
- The perceived need for level 2 skills;
- The value placed on level 2 qualifications;
- Employer recognition of level 2 qualifications;
- Workforce demographics;
- How level 2 qualifications are resourced;
- The ways in which level 2 learning can be accessed;
- The range of level 2 qualifications available.

Each of these issues is addressed, in turn, in the subsequent sections of this chapter. However, it should be noted that while they are outlined separately here, there are close connections between the different features. These relationships will be drawn out in the context of the discussion that follows. Furthermore, these different features combine to affect employer willingness to provide level 2 qualifications. This is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

2.1 The general attitudes towards vocational qualifications

There was, perhaps understandably, great enthusiasm for vocational learning and qualifications amongst the SSC representatives interviewed. At the heart of each SSC's mission statement is an espousal of the value of vocational qualifications and recognition of their role in developing a competent workforce, in creating the right 'skills for business', to use the words of the SSDA. Each representative of the SSCs consulted reaffirmed this commitment and vision for vocational qualifications. SSC representatives described a range of activities aimed at spreading this message to employers and other important stakeholders within their sector. Moreover, a key part of the SSC's role is concerned with translating employer and sector needs into workable and fulfilling learning programmes and this central role in skill development illustrates the widespread support for vocational qualifications.

Employers did not consistently express the same level of enthusiasm for vocational qualifications as SSC representatives. Indeed, a range of attitudes were expressed

and while they were, for the most part, broadly positive, some negative views were also voiced. Employers who displayed the most positive attitudes were keen that they and their staff should have the opportunity to benefit from vocational qualifications. They perceived value from undertaking learning for both themselves and learners and recognised the potential benefits it conferred, for example in terms of improved interpersonal and workplace skills.

'We do take it [vocational learning] very seriously. It's an opportunity to improve the company, develop the company by developing the personnel within it and umm, you know, whichever business you're in, the people that are actually working in the company are probably the biggest thing that you have.'

(Employer, engineering, medium)

Even among employers with broadly positive views of vocational qualifications, there were elements of these qualifications which provoked negative attitudes. Such negativity encompassed concerns around the delivery of qualifications, and issues around access and funding. It also concerned the value of vocational qualifications for the employer and staff.

'The trouble with NVQ is [...] the NVQ is just to a seal to say 'yes, they know what they're doing', it doesn't make them a better carer [...] by that time, they've already learnt the skills, it's the experience that they need. They can put pen to paper but [...] they're still not experienced carers.'

(Employer, care, medium)

The most positive attitudes were rooted in organisations that possessed a culture in which employee development was high on the agenda and where there existed good support for learning. Such attitudes were also evident where an employer described a longstanding commitment to training within the organisation. They also, unsurprisingly, related to the degree to which employers were engaged with the development of vocational qualifications. Those employers actively involved in local business forums and communications with other sector stakeholders regarding the development of vocational qualifications tended to express greater enthusiasm for them. Such involvement meant that these employers had a better understanding of the activities being undertaken by SSCs in relation to vocational qualifications and therefore shared their positivity about the future for vocational qualifications and learning. Employers who felt dissociated or perceived that they had been excluded from consultation about how vocational qualifications should develop generally held the least positive attitudes. SSCs too observed that employers who were more closely involved in sector organisations were more inclined to have positive attitudes about VQs, which did not always filter down to grassroots employers.

2.2 The perceived need for level 2 skills

Level 2 vocational learning and qualifications played a different role across sectors depending on the need identified by employers and the sector overall. Where sector stakeholders perceived that the skills needed by the sector could be provided by level 2 learning, for example in the care, construction and land-based sectors, certification at level 2 was seen as very important and individual employers tended to be very engaged with the provision of vocational qualifications. Where targets for certification of the workforce at level 2 had been introduced, this was, in part, driving the need for level 2 qualifications.

In other sectors, SSC representatives and employers identified some need for level 2 qualifications but also a need for training and development at other levels. In several hospitality roles, certification at level 2 represents a certain specialism and the workforce need was seen to be at level 1. Conversely, other sectors identified a more advanced need for level 3 and above, notably in the financial services sector where entry level roles were said to require a qualification at level 3. There were also instances of sectors acknowledging a current need for workers to be at level 2 but also a recognition that this need was likely to change. It was suggested, for example, that the effects of globalisation on manufacturing has reduced the need for basic operators in the engineering sector and created a greater demand for employees qualified to the level of technician, which is usually at level 3.

'The future of engineering is really in research and development, in design, in the higher level skills [...] there is a need for up-skilling to level 3 and level 4 and there's going to be a reduced number of operators, reduced numbers of level 2s [...] in order to remain competitive globally, you've got to compete against the companies that are in China and Japan and all the rest of it. You're not going to compete on the low-cost basis, so you've got to compete on product quality and at the higher value added end.'

(SSC representative)

The potential for flux in what level of qualification was needed was also remarked upon by other sectors. For instance, it was suggested that the ever increasing attainment of IT skills amongst children would mean that soon the majority of school leavers would have IT skills at and above the equivalent of level 2. This would mean a greater pool of potential employees for the e-skills and related sectors but would also produce a greater demand for vocational qualifications at levels higher than level 2.

Whilst sectors could identify a general need for certification at level 2 or otherwise, they also recognised some differences within sectors by sub-sector. For example, in the land-based sector, it was felt that new entrants and current staff in non-supervisory roles needed to be qualified to level 2. However, Farriers needed

certification to at least level 3. E-skills recognised a need for level 2 certification in contact centre roles but felt that higher level qualifications were required by IT professionals and people working within the telecommunications industry. Across many industries, whilst level 2 was recognised as an appropriate level of competence for the majority of staff, level 3 and above was necessary for a certain proportion of the workforce involved in supervisory roles.

2.3 The value placed on level 2 qualifications

This diversity of need across the sectors consulted meant that individual sectors valued level 2 qualifications to a greater or lesser extent. Value was interpreted in three distinct ways. First, level 2 vocational qualifications were seen to benefit in their own right, as a vehicle for ensuring competence and skill within the workforce. It was, in many sectors seen to be a level which suits new entrants to a sector or job role and confers a useful skills set. Construction, for example, had identified a shortage of skills in the workforce at level 2 and the connection with obtaining the CSCS card placed great value on certification at level 2. Second, level 2 was valued as a way of re-introducing existing employees to learning, igniting an interest in their own development, and at the same time giving them a recognisable qualification. Here the nature of such qualifications was felt to suit the aptitude of individuals who had perhaps been less successful with academic qualifications.

'We encourage people into a learning environment, many of whom have not really been in a learning environment since leaving school [...] and that's what we want umm it's not the only route into that environment but it is one that will give them a nationally recognised qualification.'

(Employer, engineering, medium)

Finally, vocational qualifications at level 2 were seen to facilitate future development by acting as a '*stepping stone*' to further levels of qualifications and progression to more senior roles within the workplace. The health and social care, land-based, engineering and e-skills sectors, whilst recognising that workers were needed at level 2, also saw this level as a route to progression within the sector and placed importance on having a workforce qualified at different levels.

There was not said to be widespread appreciation of level 2 qualifications within every sector. Within the leisure industry, for instance, it was felt that there was a general disinterest among employers in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and more of a preference for specific National Governing Body Awards. Similarly, larger employers in the retail sector, and some employers in the IT sector were said to place much more value on their own in-house or brand related qualifications than in NVQs at any level.

'They [employers] tend to immerse you in the training programme no matter what experience you've had before [...] A lot of it is about teaching people the brand, because the brand in retailing is the difference between one retailer and the other [...] One of the main problems at the moment is there's so few people getting NVQs that when somebody turns up with an NVQ, people will dismiss it and say 'right, okay, now we'll train you.'

(SSC representative)

Employer views about the specific benefits of level 2 vocational qualifications are discussed in Chapter 5.

2.4 Employer recognition of level 2 qualifications

Even where employers and SSC representatives appreciated the value of level 2 vocational qualifications, they acknowledged that recognition of the benefits of vocational qualifications was not consistent amongst industry stakeholders. In some sectors, there was felt to be widespread recognition, most notably in the health and social care and construction industries where workforce targets for certification at level 2 had prompted greater awareness. In engineering and hospitality, recognition was reported to be broad though it was said that preferences existed amongst sub-sectors and individual employers for different types of level 2s, or those from particular colleges or awarding bodies.

In sectors where recognition was not so extensive, this was sometimes attributed to a perceived lack of relevance for the sector and a subsequent lack of promotion, for example in the financial services sector. Across industries, recognition amongst smaller employers, who were perceived not to have the resources to offer level 2 vocational qualifications themselves, was reported to be lower. This was particularly true of the logistics sector where smaller employers were perceived to be unaware of the qualifications available. Consequently, Skills for Logistics, the SSC for that sector, was engaged in a range of outreach activities to increase recognition amongst employers and employees.

2.5 Workforce demographics

The varied characteristics of their learners further distinguished the different sectors represented by this study and indeed SSC representatives recognised that these characteristics were important in developing a system of qualifications to meet individual sector needs. The retail and care sectors, for example, acknowledged the high number of women and part-time workers in their sector with caring responsibilities and family obligations. Future level 2 provision would therefore require a flexible approach to learning whereby qualifications could be undertaken in 'bite-sized' pieces. The logistics sector identified a predominantly male, middle-aged workforce, traditionally uninterested in qualifications, who would have to be engaged

in order that level 2 learning successfully addressed sector needs. It was suggested that this might be achieved through demonstrating better the career paths and progression potentially offered by level 2 qualifications, particularly in terms of pay and other benefits for the individual. By contrast, the workforce of the financial services sector was said to be highly qualified. This posed a different challenge for the sector in identifying where the need for level 2 vocational qualifications lay and how best to engage a workforce that may already hold other qualifications.

2.6 How level 2 qualifications are resourced

The sources of funding available for level 2 vocational qualifications varied somewhat across the different sectors consulted. While it was usual for funding to trickle down from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC), some sectors also had access to additional sources of funding. For instance, employers in the care sector were said to receive funding from TOPSS⁶ England as staff completed NVQ units. Construction organisations reported receiving an amount of money from CITB per staff member who completed a relevant NVQ2. As an ITB, CITB is entitled to raise a levy from the sector's employers. Employers generally recognised that funding was available to those who understood the various funding structures and were aware of the range of sources available. They also reported improved access to funding in recent years though it was unclear whether this was the result of increased funding provision or better awareness of how to access it.

'Everybody always said that there is funding but to get your hands on it was a nightmare, you had to jump through so many hoops. It has improved [...] because you are more aware: there's more alliances to make you aware, everybody is, you know, invited to join these alliances. Now, we still get the people who aren't interested so they aren't aware of what they're entitled to - people have kept their head in the sand for a long, long time.'

(Employer, care, medium)

2.7 The ways in which level 2 learning can be accessed

Sectors further differed in the way qualifications are accessed. Level 2 vocational qualifications are, in some sectors such as care, delivered as unique learning opportunities where, for example, a NVQ level 2 can be undertaken on its own. Alternatively, learning at level 2 in other sectors such as engineering and the land-based sector is offered, in the main, as part of an apprenticeship scheme. These usually combine a level 2 qualification with other components. Some sectors used a combination of both approaches, for instance customer service and hospitality. Here, standalone NVQ level 2s were used to plug specific skills gaps whereas

⁶ Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services

apprenticeships at level 2 were seen to give a more broad based foundation in the skills needed for work in that sector.

2.8 The range of level 2 qualifications available

There was wide disparity between sectors in terms of the number of level 2 vocational qualifications available. The financial services sector, for instance, offer very few vocational qualifications at level 2. The chief demand for skills within that sector is at level 3 and above so the industry has traditionally preferred its own professional qualifications and tends to place a higher value on academic rather than vocational qualifications for entry to its occupations. However, there are roles within that sector that are not catered for by such qualifications and would be of a level 2 standard – such as customer service. To develop skills of this nature amongst its staff, the financial services sector uses vocational qualifications developed by the customer service sector. By contrast, in construction, the wealth of level 2 qualifications reflects the need for a workforce qualified in a range of specialisms at this level.

This was in part related to the different stages SSCs were at in the review of qualification frameworks. Some sectors, such as retail, e-skills and care, had completed comprehensive reviews and had or were in the process of consolidating or expanding the range of qualifications available. Other sectors, such as the financial services sector, recognised that such a process would be beneficial, but were yet to initiate it.

The range of level 2s offered by employers also differed, both within and across the sectors included in this study. Where organisations had been engaged with level 2 qualifications for some time they tended to offer a wider range of level 2 qualifications to their employees. For example, a large employer in the customer service sector offered only Customer Service NVQ level 2 when the organisation first engaged with vocational qualifications two and a half years ago. At the time of interview, they offered a range of NVQs at levels 2 and 3 including customer service, care and support services. Alternatively, more established employers had been able to identify a select list of qualifications which they believed met their needs well. For example, a large employer in the engineering sector described a lengthy process to find the right NVQ level 2 for his workforce but felt the NVQ Performing Manufacturing Operations, the only level 2 qualification provided, met his organisation's needs very well. Other employers were offering few level 2 qualifications, describing themselves as '*testing the water*' before deciding which would best suit their organisation and employees. Another, medium-sized, engineering employer began offering NVQ level 2 Team Leading a year ago. When this was deemed successful, the business expanded its level 2 provision to include NVQ2 Performing Manufacturing Operations which some staff had begun recently.

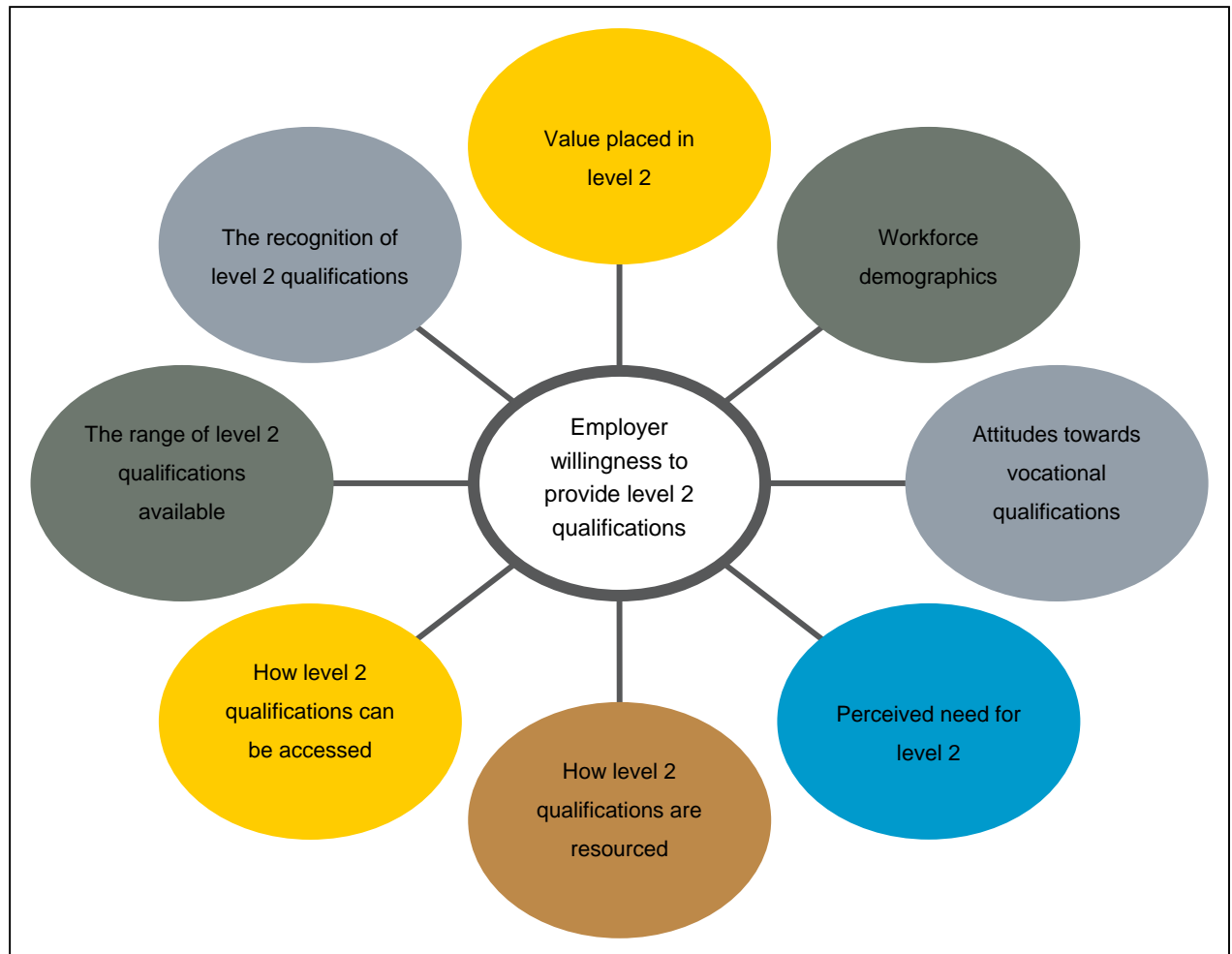
The number of vocational qualifications available in any sector is, however, not a reliable measure of how well that sector is served at level 2. For example, the health and social care sector have few qualifications at level 2 but, having recently redeveloped the main sectoral qualification, the NVQ level 2 Care, it was felt that the sector's skill needs were well served at level 2. Similarly, the e-skills sector have in recent years developed the ITQ, a re-branding and reshaping of the NVQs in that sector and it was felt that this was a useful and flexible vehicle to meet current and future skills needs within that sector. The logistics sector too has very few vocational qualifications at level 2 but again they are deemed appropriate for the sector's skills needs. Conversely, as mentioned earlier, the construction sector described many level 2 qualifications that more than adequately meet the current and future needs within that sector.

Other sectors did identify gaps in level 2 provision, where current qualifications were in need of revision or updating, or where additional qualifications at level 2 were needed to meet new or emerging skills needs. SSC representatives for the hospitality sector, for example, recognised that the gambling industry was less well provided for than the sector as a whole, and the SSC for the leisure industry.

2.9 Employer willingness to provide level 2 qualifications

These different features were said, by employers and SSC representatives, to have implications for the provision of vocational qualifications, by affecting employer willingness to engage with vocational learning across different sectors. Each issue, either alone or combined with others, can either encourage or discourage employers to invest in level 2 qualifications for their workforce. This is depicted in Figure 2.1. For instance, the perceived need for level 2 qualifications in some sectors, such as construction, can move employers to provide them. Similarly, where level 2 qualifications are seen to be of value, either in their own right or as a stepping stone to higher learning and role advancement, employers are, understandably, much more willing to provide them. Where this value is enshrined in regulations or targets, as it is in the care and construction sectors, this has knock-on effects for the level of learning happening in those sectors, and for the recognition of level 2 qualifications across the sector. As recognition increases, this can only serve to increase their take-up. Conversely, where the range of level 2 qualifications available are seen to be out of date, or not suited to the specific needs of the business or the sector, this can discourage employers from engaging with them.

Figure 2.1 Factors influencing the willingness of employers to provide level 2 vocational qualifications



Two further examples serve to illustrate this relationship further. First, the diverse attitudes towards vocational learning and certification displayed by employers were reflected in their organisations' commitment to systems for training and development. Where employers expressed the most positive attitudes towards vocational learning, the provision of vocational qualifications was generally well-established in the culture of these organisations. Consequently, it was said that resources were in place to identify learning needs and to support staff development. Conversely, pockets of negativity towards vocational qualifications could impact on their provision within an organisation. Some employer representatives interviewed, who themselves supported vocational learning, reported difficulty in persuading those at more senior levels in the organisation of its advantages. This lack of belief in vocational qualifications at every level resulted in limited resources being allocated to them.

Second, the way in which level 2 qualifications are resourced was said to have implications for employers' capacity and willingness to provide them. It was noted, in a range of sectors, that much of the funding available favoured learners under the age of 25. While this enabled the provision of qualifications to certain employees,

particularly to new entrants, it acted as a significant barrier to more widespread provision, particularly to attainment of level 2 qualifications amongst older or existing workers⁷. Alternatively, the channelling of funding towards level 2 qualifications was seen to disadvantage sectors whose skill need was either at level 1 or level 3. The current arrangements for funding were, for example, said to directly affect the type of qualifications pursued within the hospitality sector. The major skill need within hospitality was said to be at level 1, but funding available tended to favour level 2 qualifications, either encouraging employers to put staff through qualifications they did not think were relevant or not to provide them at all. Finally, the direction of funding in some sectors towards apprenticeships and away from stand-alone qualifications was said to affect employer willingness to provide vocational learning at level 2. Where employers had a preference for stand-alone qualifications but the funding available was for apprenticeships this was said to affect willingness to engage with vocational qualifications at level 2. Here it was felt that the extra requirements of an apprenticeship were not always relevant either to the employer or desired by the learner. Furthermore, the apparent focus on apprenticeships as the preferred mode of level 2 learning in some sectors was perceived by some employers to undermine the real value of the NVQ as a work-based vocational qualification.

The context for level 2 learning is, therefore, not uniform across the sectors consulted as part of this investigation. It is against this varied backdrop that we now turn to the experience of learners. In the next chapter we explore how learners become engaged in level 2 learning, while Chapters 4 and 5 respectively deal with the experience of learning and the perceived impacts for learners, employers and sectors.

⁷ Since this research was completed, the Government has begun trials of Apprenticeships for adults in three sectors - health and social care, construction, and engineering. The trials will initially focus on apprenticeships at level 3.

3 THE PATH TO LEARNING

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the key influences on the path to level 2 learning. It comprises four main sections. The first explores routes into learning, specifically looking at the decision to undertake a level 2 qualification and the degree of influence learners and employers brought to the decision. The second examines the motivations that influenced the decision to learn at level 2. The third section describes barriers to and facilitators of learning. The fourth and final section explores the implications of learning choices in terms of learner awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications and the factors influencing these. The chapter draws primarily on learner data but, where appropriate, this is supplemented by employer data.

3.1 Making the decision to learn at level 2

Making the decision to pursue a level 2 qualification is not a straightforward task. Rather, it involves a range of interconnected choices. Broadly, these encompass:

- whether to pursue vocational learning at all;
- what level of qualification to embark upon;
- which subject / skill to focus upon.

At each of these junctures learners can be faced with a range of choices, the outcome of which can greatly influence their learning experience, or indeed whether they decide to learn at all.

The learners interviewed gave diverse accounts of this decision making process and their accounts did not always delineate these three distinct stages. There was clear recollection amongst some learners of each stage of the process as outlined above. They were able to give a clear account not only of the different sorts of information they relied upon at each stage, but also of the different factors that they weighed up. Conversely, other accounts were less complete and described the different stages involved to varying degrees. For instance, some recalled only making a decision about whether to learn, but not about at what level or which subject area, while others did not feel they had any part in the decision to learn, but did feel that they had some choice in what qualification they pursued.

In interpreting these different accounts, some consideration must be given to the effect of respondent recall. Some learners had completed their level 2 qualifications a couple of years ago and could have made the decision to learn a few years previous to that. The expectation that they would remember every precise detail about that decision is perhaps ambitious. However, current learners who had more recent experience of the process also gave accounts of the decision making process that emphasised different degrees of choice. It is important also to remember that there could be very practical reasons why learners did not necessarily announce

each stage of the process. The work role of a learner, or the sector they work in, sometimes required them to make a decision about whether they wanted to pursue a vocational qualification or not, though subsequent choices about the level and subject area were either obvious or implicit. For example, learners in the care sector sometimes recalled making the decision to learn but said that the only obvious qualification for their work role and skill level was a NVQ level 2 Care.

Notwithstanding these issues, learners' accounts indicate that they perceived varying degrees of control over the overall decision to learn, the level at which to learn and the type of qualification to pursue. A key influence on learner perception of choice was the contribution of the employer to the decision making process. This was evident both in learners' accounts of how the decision to learn had come about and how it was decided which level or type of qualification they would pursue.

3.1.1 Employer influence in the overall choice to learn

Learners gave varied accounts of employer influence over their decision to pursue a vocational qualification. Of central importance here was how the idea of vocational learning was introduced and who had instigated the discussion. Where the idea had originated with the learner, there was a greater feeling of self-determination and undoubtedly a greater perception of choice. Even where the idea was instigated by the employer, this did not necessarily mean a reduced perception of choice. Rather, some learners felt that although the initial idea came from their employer that they had made the final choice about whether to pursue a vocational qualification.

'Well she [employer] said 'would I like to do an NVQ?'. So I said to her, 'yes, I wouldn't mind but I'll think about it' and she sort of said, 'well, customer service or hotel service' [...] So I said to her, 'well, I've been doing customer service for the last 20-odd years you know, I think I'll probably be better off to do customer service'. But I didn't give her the answer there and then. I went away and I thought about it and discussed it with my husband and he just said to me, 'it's up to you, you know, you're the one who's gonna do it but if you feel you can do it, go for it' so I went for it'.

(Female, 45 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Customer Service in 2004)

The employers interviewed sometimes expressed a preference for this type of approach. Here it was felt that the decision to learn should rest with learners to ensure maximum engagement with the learning process and to prevent any waste of resources.

In stark contrast to these experiences, it appeared from the accounts of other learners that the decision to learn had not been made by them but by their employers, with little or no consultation with them. There is, of course, one practical

reason for this, which was not always entirely obvious to learners. In the care and construction sectors, industry-wide targets or regulations either require or seek to persuade employers to encourage level 2 learning within their organisation. Employers in the care sector reported that they strongly encouraged staff to do a level 2 qualification and, in some cases, required them to do so as part of their employment contract. Similarly, employers in the construction industry told how the growing emphasis on certification in the sector meant that they required all staff to undertake at least a level 2 qualification. It is unsurprising, therefore, that learners within these sectors had a reduced perception of choice than in other sectors. However, this aside, there were learners in other sectors such as customer service and hospitality who felt that they had little say in their decision to learn. Rather, employers were seen to have usurped this decision.

There was little discussion of compelling learners to pursue qualifications amongst the employers interviewed. Indeed, many subscribed to the view that learner involvement in decision making was key to their engagement in the learning process.

3.1.2 Employer influence on decisions about the level and type of qualification to pursue

The accounts of learners suggest that employers exerted a similar range of influence over the decision about what to learn and at what level, as they did over the overall decision to pursue a qualification. There was discussion amongst some learners of how they had settled on level 2, and a key influence was their own perception of the level of difficulty. Level 2 was chosen because level 1 was perceived as basic and therefore not suitable for those with some experience in a sector, while level 3 was generally eschewed as a first line qualification because of its perceived difficulty.

‘[NVQ level]1 is very basic and that is more for people that are starting off in the catering industry which I felt I’ve done so much on that part and even the tutor the said ‘cos I said when I started ‘did I need 1 to be able to go on to 2?’. He said ‘No, not necessarily’ because of the experience that I had. He said in his view it would’ve a total waste of time because it would just been starting off basics again which I already knew. He did ask when I finished the course if I wanted to go on to do NVQ3 but I just felt that there’s still a lot that I’ve got to learn and I think that’s a little bit over my ability at the moment.’

(Female, 40 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Food Preparation and Cooking in 2003)

However, other learners had much less perception of choice around the level of qualification. Indeed, some had very little awareness that choice was even possible and displayed little or no understanding of the different levels of vocational qualification possible. Alternatively, learners with more experience of a sector or job sometimes said they had expressed a desire to learn at level 3 but were prevented

from doing so by their employer. Similar differences were evident in the choice of subject area. There were those who recalled weighing up the merits of different types of qualifications, where others said emphatically that they were given no choice and were not even aware that there were other level 2 qualifications within that sector. Learners in these circumstances were simply told which qualification they were going to undertake.

'I was just told [by employer] 'this is what you're doing'; it was an NVQ Level 2 in sheeting and cladding and that was it.'

(Male, 30 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Roof Sheeting and Cladding)

These accounts had some resonance with those employers interviewed in the study. As outlined in Chapter 2, there were a range of features that affected employers' willingness to provide level 2 qualifications, one of which was the channelling of resources to the level of qualification. As this affected employer willingness, it also, to some extent, curtailed learner choice. Moreover, some employers were of the view that they were best placed to make decisions about which type and level of qualification would suit business skill needs. They spoke of how important it was that qualifications were relevant to employees' job roles and because of this they restricted either the level or types of qualification offered. For example, one medium-sized hospitality employer suggested that her staff were not allowed to undertake a level 3 in Food Preparation and Cooking, as the company had no need for the skills learned at this level. The skills needed were those that could be gained at level 2.

Alternatively, employers described a process of selection which was inclusive of the employee and which aimed to find the right kind of qualification for them, within the overall context of the skill need of the business. Some employers conducted assessments of staff to ensure they undertook a qualification which best suited their needs as an employee and as a learner. In some cases, employers met with training providers and employees in order that relevant qualifications could be tailored to employees, and to provide support for those who were apprehensive about learning.

There are, then, different degrees of choice evident amongst the learners and, on the whole, varied perceptions of the decision making process. While any learning can be beneficial for learners, whatever path they take to achieve it, there was some evidence to suggest that those with more involvement in the decision-making about their learning experience and more understanding of the possibilities available were more engaged in their learning experience. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.2 Awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications

As suggested by the discussion so far, there were different levels of awareness of vocational qualifications amongst learners and the distinct levels of qualification available. The level of awareness and understanding learners possessed impacted

on the experience of learning, forming the basis of their motivations and initial attitudes to learning and providing an important context for learning experiences. Even where awareness of vocational qualifications was high, there was not always complete understanding of what the learning process involved and what outcomes might mean. This was, in part, due to the quality and sources of information they received both prior to beginning a course and at the outset of learning. There was a range of sources that learners used to build their awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications. These encompassed:

- *Past vocational qualification experience*

Where learners had already undertaken a vocational qualification at level 2 or another level, their awareness and understanding of how NVQ2s were structured, how they were assessed, what they aimed to do and what was expected of them was unsurprisingly high. In contrast, those who had little or no experience of vocational qualifications were less aware and had lower levels of understanding about the aims, requirements, structure and assessment procedures of NVQ2 qualifications. Indeed, there was a particular lack of awareness and understanding in construction due to the low number of respondents with experience of post-compulsory education.

- *Colleagues, friends and family*

Learners who knew colleagues, friends or family who had experience of vocational qualifications found this a very useful way of gaining information about vocational qualifications. Former learners were regarded as useful first-hand sources of what level 2 learning was actually like in practice. This insight was especially valued by learners who said they lacked confidence at the outset. Here, former learners were seen as proof that learning was possible and achievable.

- *Training providers / college tutors*

Awareness and understanding was sometimes high where training providers and college tutors had met with learners to explain what level 2 learning would involve, how it could operate and what learners might achieve through participation. This sort of information was useful at two points: while employees were making a decision about whether to learn or what qualification to pursue; and also just before the course commenced to remind learners of what was expected of them and what learners could expect of assessors, tutors, and employers. Employers too talked of the value of inviting training providers into the workplace to hold information days, whereby staff could increase their awareness of the possibilities for learning. However, provision of this information was not always employer-led and learners reported arranging for such advice themselves.

Where training providers and college tutors did not explain requirements until after learning had begun or did not provide a useful and informative induction process, awareness and understanding amongst learners was lower. For instance, some learners reported '*knowing nothing*' on their first day of learning.

'They [training provider] didn't really tell us anything about it [laughing]. We just went into the office and met the assessor and she talked us through and we were handed out lots of work and we just got on with it and that's how it's carried on.'

(Female, 49 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Care)

This meant that learners were less aware of what they were getting into which, for some, contributed to a lack of confidence.

- *Employers*

Employer awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications filtered to learners and was crucial to learner awareness and understanding. There was a high level of awareness and understanding of NVQs amongst some employers, particularly of level 2, but also level 1, level 3 and, to some extent, level 4. There was understandably high awareness amongst employers in construction and care because of the regulations and targets for level 2 learning within those sectors.

Where employers did not have high awareness or a good understanding of vocational qualifications there was some evidence to suggest that this also compromised employee understanding and awareness. Some learners recounted instances where they had tried to get more information or advice from their employers but failed to receive it, even where employers had instigated the learning.

3.3 The motivation to learn at level 2

Given the Government's emphasis on increasing attainment at level 2, it is important to understand the sorts of factors that underpin learner motivation to undertake such qualifications. Those interviewed voiced a range of motivations for learning at level 2. In some cases, embarking upon learning was based on a single motivating factor, while for others motivation was based on a range of factors. Broadly, three sets of motivations were apparent:

- to improve current work situation;
- to develop as a person;
- to influence future employment options.

These are described in the remainder of this section and summarised in Figure 3.1

Figure 3.1 Summary of motivations for level 2 learning

Motivations for Level 2 learning		
<i>To improve current work situation</i>	<i>To develop as a person</i>	<i>To influence future employment options</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase knowledge and skill within current job role • Enhance job satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve as a person (confidence, self-esteem, sense of achievement) • Increase general knowledge and abilities • Act as a role model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance employability • Improve career progression • Meet sector standards or expectations • Financial gain

3.3.1 The desire to improve current work situation

The wish to improve one’s current work situation was an important motivating factor for some learners. It comprised two elements. The desire to:

- *Increase knowledge and skill within current job role*

Learners across sectors were motivated to learn by a desire to perform better in their roles by deepening their level of skill and their understanding of the job. Here, learners wanted to become more able to deal with specific work situations, providing better service for their clients and employers alike through better developed skills and increased efficiency. This was particularly the case for those who were unfamiliar with or new to their job roles. For instance, Jane, a care learner, was eager to pick up tips for working with children, an area of work she was new to and in which she felt inexperienced. This was also a clear motivation amongst those who did have experience but had recently changed career direction.

‘I want to know how to deal with people, how to care for people in a more correct way; I want to be trained on how to do things right [...] I used to work in the community and when you actually go and work in a residential home it is totally different, it’s harder to start off [...] you’re accountable for 15 residents that’s on your wing and you’ve got to know what’s wrong with them: if they’re not eating, why aren’t they eating?; are you doing your best trying to get them to eat?; if they’ve got sores, why have they got sores, what are you doing?; how are you going to help them?’

(Female, 45 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Care)

- *Enhance job satisfaction*

Accompanying the wish to increase skills was the hope of achieving greater satisfaction at work. For some, it was hoped that the opportunity to learn new skills would relieve the sense of boredom they reported with their current work and provide stimulation. The ability to perform one's role better, either through improved skills or simply a greater understanding of one's role, was expected to increase job satisfaction.

'I wasn't getting any job satisfaction, you know? That's what prompted me even more to want to do something, you know, to feel like I've done something, job satisfaction and to making me feel good inside...Level 2 will give me ... it's given me job satisfaction because it's my work, I've done all the research and all the evidence, everything, so I feel umm I've done a lot of work there so it's like a satisfaction to myself'

(Female, 45 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Customer Services)

3.3.2 The wish to develop personally

A second set of motivating factors were less related to the current job or role and more concerned with the potential effect of learning on personal life. By undertaking a level 2 qualification, learners hoped to:

- *Improve as a person*

The desire to develop as a person was another important motivating factor. Here learners sought the sense of achievement they felt they would get by successful completion of a learning programme. This was particularly the case amongst older learners, with few or no qualifications, who considered they had achieved little in their past working lives. Here there was a sense that level 2 would be a worthwhile challenge and means of bettering themselves. Undertaking the challenge of learning, and achieving a successful result, was also seen as a way to develop confidence, self-esteem and to earn other people's respect.

- *Increase general knowledge and abilities*

The desire to learn was, for some, simply guided by the wish for increased knowledge and understanding. Learning, regardless of the subject or level, was seen as a way to improve and deepen knowledge. Others were attracted by what they felt would be a stimulating experience. The role that previous educational attainment could play in this should not be underestimated. Some learners had few or no qualifications and the chance to learn at level 2 was seen to be a way of conquering learning fears and rectifying negative past educational experiences. Alternatively, where learners came from countries outside the UK, learning was seen

as a way to gain a recognised British qualification, or as a way to improve their English language skills.

- *Act as a role model*

This desire to achieve a qualification had a specific importance for those with children. Parents sometimes suggested that by engaging in learning they could demonstrate its importance to their children and in doing so encourage them to engage more fully and to recognise its currency in the world. For those parents who had little previous experience of education or few qualifications, it was also a way of demonstrating to their children and siblings – who they regarded as high achievers – that they too could achieve on the learning path.

'I've got two sisters and a brother [...], I wanted the same [as them]. They all have certificates and I just wanted to say that I can do what I've been doing and do it well.'

(Female, 40 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Food Preparation and Cooking in 2003)

3.3.3 The hope to influence future employment options

The final set of motivating factors concerned individual's hopes and fears about future employment options. By achieving a level 2 qualification, learners hoped that they could:

- *Enhance employability and improve career progression*

Some learners were motivated to learn at level 2 so they could increase their employability and advance their careers. A level 2 qualification was seen to add *'another string to the bow'* or be a means of eventually *'climbing the ladder'* and moving into more senior roles or management positions in their current sector. Alternatively, it was regarded as a passport to a new job, in the same or a different sector. Here learners recognised the value of level 2 qualifications because they were 'national' and had government recognition. Learners recognised that certificated evidence of abilities were important in enhancing employer confidence in their abilities and there was a general view that achieving level 2 communicated a good reputation as a worker and was a widely recognised mark of achievement, valuable on any CV. Consequently, learners felt that attainment would gain them an *'extra edge'* when trying to change jobs or secure promotions in the future. Furthermore, in some cases level 2 qualifications were seen as a way for respondents to develop the necessary skills for eventually starting their own business, although no learners reported having begun this process.

Some learners had very clear career objectives from the outset and saw level 2 as a stepping stone to further learning at level 3 and, in some cases, at University. For instance, Marianne, a hospitality learner who did not leave school with many GCSEs

thought that if she gained a level 2 qualification it might spur her on to further learning, allowing her to gain more qualifications.

These perspectives chimed with the views expressed by the employers interviewed who said that they valued concrete evidence of skill and experience. Indeed, employers across sectors were keen for employees to have proof of their ability and experience.

- *Meet sector standards or expectations*

The sector-wide initiatives within care and construction, described earlier in Chapter 1, was an important influence on the decision to learn amongst employees in those sectors. There was a general perception that failure to achieve at least NVQ level 2 would make it difficult or impossible to secure or maintain work within those sectors. It was sometimes felt by those interviewed from the care sector that failure to achieve a level 2 qualification would mean that they could lose their current job and be ineligible for future employment. In these circumstances, meeting these sector targets was the primary motivation for undertaking a level 2 qualification:

Respondent: ‘What made me do it [Level 2 learning]?’

Interviewer: ‘Yes.’

Respondent: ‘Because if I didn’t do it, I would’ve been out of a job.’

Interviewer: ‘Why is that?’

Respondent: ‘We were [...] told that if we hadn’t done it, really I’ve escaped it for so many years, because they [employer] kept saying ‘you really ought to do your NVQ level 2’ and I’m thinking ‘well, what am I gonna gain from it?’ Because I’ve done hands-on experience for all these years so I couldn’t see what I was gonna gain, and then you were given the option if you don’t take it before the year 2005 [...] you’re not gonna have a job anyway because it’s government ruling.’

(Female, 56 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care in 2004)

Where learners were initially motivated to learn by such initiatives, they sometimes developed a range of other motivations to guide their learning experience. However, there was some evidence to suggest that this was not always the case and that the requirement to learn was viewed negatively by learners and adversely affected their engagement. In the construction sector, there was not widespread understanding of

the rationale for learning, especially amongst those who had many years of experience or had older qualifications that were not recognised by the CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) initiative. It is clear that unless required to by their employer, these employees would not have sought learning independently.

- *Gain financially*

The decision to undertake a level 2 qualification was for some guided by a perceived financial incentive. Here learners were motivated by expectations that qualification at level 2 was likely to result in pay increases. Across sectors, expectations of increases in pay were formed on the basis of discussions with employers, training providers and fellow and past learners. However, these expectations were generally vague and, when questioned, learners were typically unable to give exact details of exactly how the qualification would impact on wage levels. Alternatively, some were clear that level 2 qualification in itself would not result in any direct pay increase, either on completion or soon after. Nevertheless, it was expected that a level 2 qualification would assist in promotion to a new or better job role which, in turn, could have pay implications.

Even where there was a perceived connection with pay, this did not always mean that it was a motivating factor for learning. Where the potential pay increase was low – perhaps a few pence per hour – then this had little effect on individuals' motivation to learn.

3.4 Barriers and facilitators to level 2 learning

Learner accounts of the journey to level 2 learning pinpointed a range of issues that made it either easier or more difficult for them to engage in the learning process. These 'barriers' and 'facilitators' are described in this section.

It should be noted that all learners interviewed had actually embarked on level 2 learning. As such, the barriers described here, while mentioned by learners, were clearly not significant enough to prevent them from learning. Consequently, a greater understanding of the barriers to level 2 learning would undoubtedly be gleaned from research with those who considered level 2 learning, but who did not undertake a qualification. This was, however, outside the scope of the current investigation.

The array of barriers to and facilitators of learning encompassed the same types of issues. These encompassed:

- *Availability of suitable qualifications*

The specific nature of some individuals' job role meant it was difficult to find a suitable Level 2 qualification. For example, a medium-sized employer from the care sector wanted two separate NVQ2s in care – one for residential care employees and another for those who worked as community-based care workers. This meant that learners had to opt for the qualification that most closely matched their skill needs in

order to attain a level 2 qualification. This, as pointed out in Chapter 2, can be related to sector. Some SSC representatives and employers remarked on certain gaps in the current range of qualifications and it is not surprising that learners also experienced this. By contrast, other learners found it relatively easy to locate a qualification that matched their skill need or job role. This undoubtedly facilitated their entry onto the learning path.

- *Convenience of learning*

A key feature of NVQs is that they can be delivered in a work environment. This was considered by some to make learning more convenient and it was said to facilitate entry onto the learning path and to underpin engagement throughout. Of key importance here was the chance to earn and learn at the same time. Conversely, qualifications that were wholly or partially located in college were seen to present some difficulty. This was sometimes because the right kind of qualification was not available in the immediate vicinity. Here learners either had to travel to achieve their learning objectives or opt for a closely related qualification that was available at a local college. Fitting college-based courses around work commitments was also a worry for some learners, and for some presented some difficulty and inconvenience. This was particularly problematic where only one local college offered the relevant course. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of different learning modes are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

- *Confidence in learning aptitude*

Self doubt was a significant barrier to learning for some learners. Some were quite apprehensive about embarking on a qualification, mainly because they felt that they were 'not academic' and lacked confidence in their ability to cope with the requirements of learning. Such fears encompassed the level of paperwork or the learning environment, particularly where learning was college-based. This was a particular barrier for older learners who had not been involved in any sort of learning for many years or for those who had minimal or negative experience of learning. Learners overcame these fears simply by persevering with the qualification - as they learnt more about what was expected of them, the NVQ became less daunting. Learners reported utilising the support offered by their employer, assessor and colleagues to help overcome their own self doubt. It is, of course, entirely possible that lack of confidence could contribute to non-completion. Exploration of these factors, however, were beyond the scope of this investigation, which focused on learners who were engaged with or had completed their NVQ.

'It's not a thing that I wanted to take because I was really frightened and didn't want to do it [...]. 'Cos it's been such a long time since I sat in a classroom with a group of people and it's just frightening, a really frightening experience.'

(Female, 50 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care in 2003)

Those who had recent experience of formal learning were, by contrast, much more confident in their aptitude to learn. Recent experience of vocational learning or contact with a colleague or friend who had done so also eased people's fears and concerns.

- *Understanding of what learning involved and required*

As noted in Section 3.2, clear understanding and awareness of what learning involved was an important factor that helped learners set out on the learning path. Conversely, where learners did not understand what learning involved or what would be required of them, they viewed the experience with some apprehension. However, knowledge of vocational learning did not always facilitate learning. Where individuals had previous unsatisfactory experiences of vocational qualifications, they were, understandably, reluctant to go through the same experiences again.

- *Cost*

The cost of the courses was generally not borne by learners. However, that is not to say that learning did not have cost implications for them and there were suggestions that cost constituted a significant barrier to learning. For instance, hospitality learners were sometimes concerned about having to pay for essential course equipment such as knives and aprons.

Others were more concerned with the opportunity cost of learning. Some learners were fortunate to be paid by their employer for all or part of the time spent learning, either at college or in the workplace. However, others were not paid and this did constitute a barrier for some learners.

- *The nature of personal commitments and responsibilities*

The nature of some people's personal circumstances either served to facilitate or complicate engagement in the learning path. This was particularly the case for learners who had childcare responsibilities. Here there were fears that learning would take up extra time and mean that less time was spent with children. The nature of some people's childcare arrangements - or lack of them - constituted a considerable barrier to learning:

'I never had no chance to go to college to do it because of the kids, because of the children there was not time for me to leave them, nobody to leave them with to go to school whilst I'm doing it, 'cos I wanted to do in the evening but if I want to go to evening classes and they're at home in the evening then I've got nobody to stay with them.'

(Female, 41 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Hospitality and Catering in 2004)

Such barriers relating to childcare were overcome with the support of friends or relatives who were willing to assume some childcare duties or, alternatively, by pursuing a qualification through the work-based route.

There was also some concern about the effect of learning on one's household and family. For example, Christine, a hospitality learner, was concerned that if she used her time for learning she would neglect her household tasks and reduce the time she could spend with her husband and family.

More generally both male and female learners of various ages described how undertaking a qualification meant that they would have to forego or neglect other personal activities such as hobbies or socialising and this constituted a barrier for some.

The path to learning at level 2 is, then, one that is replete with a range of choices and a journey which can be influenced by a range of motivating and facilitating factors, and beset by a range of barriers. The next chapter continues this by exploring the actual experience of learning.

4 THE NVQ LEVEL 2 LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The purpose of this chapter is to explore perspectives of the learning process. It draws primarily on the perspective of learners: those who were currently pursuing an NVQ level 2 and those that had recently completed one. Where appropriate this is supplemented by the views of employers. The chapter comprises five main sections. The first explores the way in which people learn, looking specifically at learner and employer preferences about learning modes. The second examines views about the content and structure of NVQ level 2 qualifications. The third and fourth sections explore processes of evidence gathering and assessment at level 2. The final section describes the sources of support learners drew upon and the implications this has for the quality of their learning experience.

4.1 The mode of learning

Vocational learning is designed and delivered in such a way that it is possible to learn in a variety of ways. Some qualifications are delivered wholly through colleges or other such institutions. By contrast, others are pursued entirely in the context of one's usual work activities. It is also possible for qualifications to involve a mix of learning modes where some units are completed on the job and others are delivered in a classroom environment. NVQs are intended to be vocational and closely connected with actual or potential work activities and roles. They are not intended to be associated with a programme of learning, rather they are seen as a process through which competence in a particular area may be determined and certificated.

All the learners interviewed for this study were employed, either full or part time, and they carried out their learning in the variety of ways described above. The different ways of learning undoubtedly created very different experiences of learning. Those who pursued work based learning were required to undertake tasks and be observed and assessed in their work environment. In some cases this mode of learning meant learners were paid while they learned, while others completed tasks at work, but not during their paid shifts. Where learning was carried out at college, learners were expected to attend regularly at local colleges, both within and outside working hours, usually on a weekly basis. Here, all tasks, observations and assessments were conducted at the college, though learners did draw upon work experiences to inform their learning. Regardless of learning mode, learners also reported using their own time to complete pieces of 'homework' that supplemented work and / or college-based assignments.

While work-based learning was reported across all the sectors in which learners were interviewed, wholly college-based learning was limited to the hospitality and customer service sectors. This is understandable given that the nature of the others sectors, construction and care, perhaps necessitate on the job learning. Employers

too felt that it was rare that the skills needed for these sectors could be effectively taught or assessed in a college environment.

4.1.1 Factors underpinning preference about the mode of learning

The mode of learning attracted a range of views from both learners and employers. However, no one mode was favoured by either group of respondents. Rather, views about the mode of learning were guided by two main considerations. The first of these was how appropriate the mode of learning was for the sector or learner work role, including the requirements of the employer. The second was how the mode of learning corresponded with the learner's other life commitments. Consequently, no conclusions can be drawn from this research about which learning route is best. However, it can illustrate the factors that lie beneath learner preferences about learning mode. These are outlined in the remainder of this section and summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Summary of the factors affecting the preference for learning mode

Factors related to the process of learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenience of learning mode for employers and learners • Flexibility of learning mode • Environment of learning and inherent learning style • Accessibility of relevant expertise
Factors related to the effectiveness of learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suitability of learning mode for job role • Effectiveness of assessment • Effectiveness of training provider
Factors related to the consequences of learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost and opportunity costs • Effect on company productivity • Burden on employers • Burden on learners

Factors related to the process of learning

The first set of factors influencing preferences about learning mode related to the different implications they had for the process of learning. These encompassed:

- *Convenience*

Key to learner preferences was the perceived convenience of a learning mode. Work-based learning was seen to facilitate the completion of tasks, observations and assessments during work time and allowed learners to get on with their jobs. In this sense it was portrayed as causing minimum disruption to normal working practices. Learners and employers also valued this way of learning because it allowed learners to work towards a qualification in their day to day environment and did not involve any travel, which was sometimes required of college-based learners. Those who favoured work-based learning did so because almost all of their learning took place during work time and did not impinge on other parts of life, or adversely affect other types of responsibilities such as parenting.

By contrast, college-based learning was seen to be convenient because it meant that a specific time could be set aside each week for learning and other commitments, to do with work and family, could be arranged around this. This convenience was felt to be compromised, however, when schedules were changed at short notice to times that were incompatible with personal or family commitments, such as childcare. Furthermore, where college-based learning involved significant travel for the learner, then this was also seen to lessen its convenience.

- *Flexibility*

Work-based learning was depicted by some as more flexible than college-based. An important consideration here was the degree of freedom surrounding when learning tasks could be carried out and how they could be combined with other life and work activities.

'I did enjoy it [the NVQ2 Care] because it was in my own time. You don't have to go to college, you don't have to go anywhere else, you can do it when you want and I think that was a lot better. Whereas [at college], if you were given a piece of work [...] and you only had so long to do it, I think it would be a bit more stressful.'

(Female, 33 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Care)

- *The environment of learning (including the learning style)*

Preferences about learning style understandably varied between different learners. The extent to which the styles inherent in their chosen mode of learning matched their own preferences influenced how effective that mode was seen to be. Consequently, college-based learning was seen by some as a positive environment in which to learn as it provided an opportunity to spend time with other learners. This was considered valuable not only in a social sense but also because of the

contribution other learners were seen to make to the learning process. The classroom environment was initially daunting for some, particularly for older learners who lacked recent experience of education. However the support and help provided by college tutors was said to allay these fears, not least in the guidance provided on portfolio development. This was said to make the process of learning less stressful than had been expected. The relaxed, 'hands-on' approach of college-based learning was valued as it was seen as different from paperwork-focused school learning, in which learners had sometimes felt uncomfortable and under pressure.

Others saw work-based learning as equally supportive. Having access to a peripatetic assessor, or having an on-site assessor to specifically talk through learning tasks, was valued as a useful source of one-to-one attention. This contact with an assessor was seen as an important way of ensuring tasks were completed correctly and on time. This was valued particularly by those who had concerns about their aptitude for learning.

Both work and college-based environments were, however, seen to have some drawbacks. Work-based learning was regarded by some learners as less supportive. Some learners bemoaned the paucity of attention received and there was some feeling that the level of help and guidance received in the workplace from both assessors and employers was not sufficient. Both assessment and learner support are discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter. College-based learning sometimes involved the use of computers, particularly in terms of written tasks, and some learners did not welcome this. Older learners in particular were unfamiliar and wary of this way of learning. Those who were in jobs where computers were not used found this to be an unexpected and undesirable aspect of learning in college.

Factors related to the effectiveness of learning and assessment

Another set of factors influencing the preferences for different learning modes related to how effective each mode was perceived to be in imparting knowledge, developing skills and assessing competence.

- *Access to relevant expertise*

Employers who offered employees a combination of work and college-based learning valued the ability of college-based learning to provide specific training that they did not have the expertise or resources to provide on site. For instance, care learners attended college in order to gain certificates such as Food Hygiene that formed part of their Level 2 qualifications. Conversely, both learners and employers felt that work-based environments exposed learners to more practical and, ultimately more useful, experience and skills through colleagues and supervisors.

- *Suitability for work role*

How well the chosen learning mode suited an individual's job role was said to be important. The nature of some occupations was seen by both learners and

employers to necessitate work-based learning. Also key was that learners were able to utilise work experiences to enhance learning and develop skills, ensuring that the learning process was relevant to their daily working life. For instance, customer service learners reported that completing the majority of their qualifications at college would not have provided successful learning experiences, as they needed genuine contact with customers to demonstrate and develop their skills. Conversely, others could see the advantages of a college-based learning experience for the quality of skills learned. Although learners in hospitality did pursue level 2 qualifications in the workplace, employers and learners reported that some roles in this sector also suited college-based learning. This was because some colleges furnished the opportunity to develop practical knowledge, skills and abilities on site, for example by preparing dishes in a college-based restaurant. This was portrayed by some as a more appropriate way of learning new skills.

- *Effectiveness of assessment*

Views about the implications the learning mode had for the quality of assessment guided some preferences about where learning should ideally take place. Assessment in the workplace was preferred by some employers, despite the administrative burden it placed on them. Some had embraced this to such an extent that they had established assessment centres within their company. They argued that only through such a system could it be guaranteed that assessments were based on real work situations and that observations and assessments were conducted by staff members who had spent a long time with learners, and so, were in an appropriate position to assess them. Even where assessment was conducted by assessors from external training providers, employers felt that it made for greater relevance to the work role. This was not, however, a universal view. Both employers and learners suggested that peripatetic assessors viewed progress and decided upon competence sometimes without a good enough grasp of the specific work environment.

Those employers who championed workplace assessment often regarded assessment in a college environment as inappropriate, '*contrived*' and '*devoid of reality*'. The views of some college-based learners also support this argument. Here it was felt that some competencies would have been better developed and assessed in the workplace, particularly where the job role was particularly practical or client focused, for example those employed in care.

- *Effectiveness of training provider*

Preferences about the mode of learning were undoubtedly influenced by how effective local training provision was seen to be. Those employers engaged in work-based learning felt that they were not always kept properly informed of, and therefore did not feel fully in control of, the learning process. Others had concerns about the quality of support and assessment, as mentioned previously. Furthermore, there was sometimes a view that external training companies did not always give due consideration to the needs of the business. Here it was felt that training providers

timed their involvement – such as induction or assessment visits – to suit their needs rather than those of the learner or the business.

Equally, employers and learners alike sometimes questioned the effectiveness of college-based learning. Here again, people questioned the ability of college-based learning to impart the practical insights needed for some roles. Christine, a learner in the hospitality sector, felt that her skills needs were not adequately met by her college-based NVQ2 in Food Preparation and Cooking. She recalled how the fruits of her work were rarely sampled and instead were only judged on presentation. She also felt that the opportunity to learn by observation of others was more limited in a college based setting. Concern was also raised by other learners about the quality of delivery in some colleges and the level of support available for learning.

Factors related to the consequences of learning

The final set of factors influencing preference related to the implications of each learning mode for the individual and the business more generally.

- *Cost*

The expense of learning was a consideration for both employers and learners. Work-based learning was valued in part by employers because it was perceived as being cheaper than paying for their staff to attend college. Employers also reported that having employees attend college could be expensive, particularly where they missed paid shifts in order to attend and cover had to be brought in. For learners, travelling to college sometimes meant they lost their own time and money because they were not compensated for money and time spent travelling or, in some cases, the shifts they missed in order to attend college. However work-based learning was also perceived to have opportunity costs, not least in the staff time expended in supporting and guiding learners.

- *Effect on productivity*

Employers were conscious that both modes of learning could have consequences for productivity. Work-based learning was portrayed by some as less detrimental to productivity particularly where the assessment of competences did not take up valuable staff time. Alternatively, college-based learning was preferred by some employers because it was felt that having employees attend college meant time at work was dedicated to work tasks and productivity was relatively unaffected by the learning process.

- *Burden on employers*

Some employers saw college-based learning as a way to absolve them of the responsibility and burden of arranging in-house training. College-based learning was valued as a dedicated time to learn and was seen to have little administrative burden for the business. Work-based learning was seen to require a significant administrative input from employers. While larger employers were said to have the

infrastructure and the turnover to absorb this, it was felt to be a major barrier for work-based learning amongst smaller employers.

- *Burden on learners*

Finally, both learning routes were dogged by criticism from learners about the amount of homework they were required to do, and therefore how much the learning process impinged on their personal lives. This has not always been anticipated or expected when they enrolled for their level 2 qualification.

4.2 The structure and content of NVQ level 2 qualifications

There is a vast array of NVQs available at level 2. For instance, in construction alone there are many different NVQ2s available, administered by a diverse range of awarding bodies. The learners in this study pursued a wide range of courses, covering vocational areas as diverse as joinery and care. It would therefore be impossible, and beyond the scope of this research, to evaluate the structure and content of specific qualifications. Nevertheless, the experiences recounted by learners have highlighted a range of aspects of the content and structure of qualifications which had an important influence on the learning experience, irrespective of the subject or the sector. These encompassed the:

- Relevance of course to the learner's job role;
- Degree of choice in qualification structure;
- Clarity of course instruction and guidance;
- Pace of learning.

In addition, three distinct learner characteristics had important implications for the quality of interaction with the learning process and, to a certain extent, guided the views they expressed about the course content and structure above. These concerned:

- Self perceptions of aptitude;
- The pre-existing level of skill and experience;
- Expectations about learning and certification.

Each of these factors is discussed below and summarised in Figure 4.2

4.2.1 Relevance of course to job role

The utility of a level 2 qualification was judged by learners and employers according to its relevance to the job role. Where learners completed units and tasks that applied to their work situations, this led to more positive interpretations of the course. Similarly, where qualifications fitted with the learning needs of staff and the types of activities carried out at work, this garnered more support for learning amongst employers. In contrast, where the content of qualifications and the learning tasks

involved were perceived not to apply to specific work roles, this undermined the value of learning that both learners and employers felt. In this sense, time spent on irrelevant tasks was considered to be time wasted.

While many learners and employers did feel that the qualifications available matched their needs, there was a view that getting an exact fit with a person's job was more difficult the more specialised the role became. In these circumstances learners and employers felt that generic level 2 qualifications did not always meet their needs and that there should be wider provision or more flexibility in the way specific units could be accessed. Alternatively, there was some concern that some qualification units were out of touch with real working practices and needed to be updated to ensure their relevance to modern employees. Finally, where qualifications were seen to be in some way repetitive, this was seen to undermine their relevance for the person. Learners, for instance, reported finding similar tasks appearing throughout courses and described it as a feature of badly structured qualifications. While it is standard practice in the structure of qualifications to test competence on a specific issue on several occasions, learners did not always understand why such repetition might be important or relevant to improving their skills or thinking about practice. Moreover, repetitive tasks meant learners found it harder to maintain their interest.

These views underscore the importance of learners and employers engaging with the content of qualifications prior to setting out on the path to learning. Where learners had inaccurate impressions of what a qualification would cover or unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved, this consequently led to disappointment with the experience and disengagement with the process.

4.2.2 *The degree of choice and flexibility*

NVQs are designed to maximise choice and flexibility over the exact content of the course. Qualifications are made up of a requisite number of subject units. Learners must fulfil a range of requirements in order to pass a unit and a certain number of units are needed to complete an award. Units are either mandatory or optional: mandatory units cover the key areas of an occupation whereas optional units are intended to allow employers and learners to maximise the relevance of the choice of qualification to their job role. Moreover, there is no prescribed order as to how units should be undertaken which means that they can be directly linked to the work activities of a learner. Hence, it is considered good practice that candidates have a plan first drawn up at their initial assessment that sets out what they will do about the assessment evidence they need to meet the standards within their given NVQ. This plan is thought to be best expressed in terms of opportunities to generate or gather the assessment evidence, and the order in which this might be done. As the candidate progresses, they update and change their plan as necessary until they have all the evidence necessary to gain the whole award.

The ability to choose the precise make-up and order of qualifications features strongly in the accounts of some of the learners interviewed. They described how

they did not have to follow a set course structure but were able to choose which units to do and when to do them. This was valued as it allowed learners to structure their course around their working life. Others valued how qualifications were designed to ensure that they suited their job role as much as possible. This flexibility and choice is seen to be one of the advantages of vocational learning amongst employers.

However, choice was not always unconstrained. This was sometimes due to the nature of activities conducted in the workplace. For instance, work-based construction learners reported that they were not able to tackle a particular unit unless their company had contracted work in that particular area. Similarly, hospitality learners found that they could only do certain units at certain times of the year because of the seasonal nature of their industry. Indeed, employers commented that though choice and flexibility in level 2 provision was desirable, those with specific job roles could not always consistently find units that matched their needs.

Furthermore, some learners reported having little or no choice over course structure and content. It appeared that these learners had their course structure and content decided for them by their assessors or employers, meaning content was not always perceived as relevant by learners who felt they were better informed about their specific job roles. Some employers saw a restriction in choice over structure and content as necessary. They argued that at level 2 staff should have limited choices to prevent them from choosing units that were not relevant to their job roles. Indeed, employers stressed the importance of their ability to dictate what type of learning was best for their business.

Nevertheless, the degree of choice and flexibility that learners have over their learning experience does have implications for the learning experience. Where learners had choice, it ensured their course was more relevant to their job role. It also served to engage them, as they were active in making decisions about their learning and could choose units that interested them. There is evidence to suggest that disengaging learners from the decision-making process about what they learn, or not considering their views, can lead to individuals becoming disengaged from the entire process of learning.

4.2.3 Clarity of course instruction and guidance

Each qualification comes with a set of written guidance that sets out the learning tasks and requirements for the learner. This, combined with the instruction and guidance received from tutors and assessors, aims to enable a learner to assemble a portfolio of evidence on which the competence in key areas can be assessed. Learner perceptions of the quality of this instruction and guidance varied. There were some reports that the wording of the requirements in questions or task descriptions was difficult to comprehend although it is unlikely that such instructions formed part of the central specification of the NVQ. Rather, this is more likely to reflect those learning materials developed by relevant awarding bodies on behalf of SSCs. Learners and employers spoke of poorly written questions, which contained difficult

language and 'jargon' and as such were hard to interpret. For instance, one small employer in construction felt that the questions in some of the qualifications within that sector were written in a style that was somewhat impenetrable:

'I would say in our trade the lads have to be pretty practical, you know, so what we found difficult was, even for meself as an assessor, the questions that we've got to ask them. When I looked at them I thought 'well, I'm used to reading documents' and I was looking and thinking 'there's no way the way this is written that the drillers is gonna understand that.' That's not belittling them, but it was like a solicitor that had wrote the questions.'

(Employer, construction, small)

While it appeared that learners did become accustomed to the style of instruction and guidance as they progressed through qualifications, this lack of clarity caused particular frustration and upset early on in the learning process. The struggle to comprehend requirements – even with the support of an assessor or colleagues - served to confirm to less experienced learners their own fears about their aptitude and make them more apprehensive about the learning process. This served to delay progress in the qualification and prompted some to consider whether they would indeed continue with the qualification. This effect was mediated by the degree of support received (discussed below).

4.2.4 The pace of learning

Another key aspect of the way NVQs are designed is that the pace can be varied according to learner aptitude and employer needs. There is no requirement to fulfil a qualification within a certain length of time although certain funding or programme restraints do exist. Consequently, the pace of learning differed amongst the learners interviewed – irrespective of sector. Of those who had completed their qualifications, the length of time taken ranged from six months to a couple of years. These different approaches are reflected in how learners describe setting out on the learning path. Some learners reported having a week or two to familiarise themselves with their qualification before the pace of learning quickened gently and workloads increased. This was generally appreciated as it allowed learners to 'settle in' and gain confidence in the process of learning and in their own ability to achieve. In contrast, other learners recalled a heavy course workload from the outset. More generally, learner perceptions of the level of work required and the amount of time to do it within varied considerably - irrespective of learning mode.

Workloads were not always in line with learner expectations. Some regarded them as much heavier than they had anticipated. In particular, learners found it hard to find time to complete paperwork and to generate the required amount of evidence. Angela, for example, who was pursuing an NVQ level 2 in care described working on qualification tasks at home for more hours in one night than she had expected to

spend in a whole week. Conversely, other learners felt that the level of work involved was lighter than expected. Level 2 qualifications are not uniform in their requirements. This undoubtedly impacted on the perception of workload. However there was no consistent message from learners about what was considered to be an adequate workload; people with similar levels of workload had different interpretations of it. Rather, several issues influenced learner perception of workload. These encompassed:

- *Flexibility about deadlines*

The potential for flexibility over when and how deadlines were met was valued where it occurred. This appeared to be guided by both employers and assessors. However, learner involvement in the fixing of deadlines was not consistent. Some recounted how they were able to structure their qualification to suit their own needs and circumstances or to suit their work commitments. This was seen to be a valuable way of reducing pressure, especially when work was busy or the level of outside commitments was high. The accounts of others indicated little or no flexibility in how the work was completed. For example, Laura felt she had done very little work towards her NVQ in customer service, even though she had started almost three months earlier. She wanted to speed up the amount of work completed, and take on more units, but found she was unable to do this. She felt that the slow pace of learning was affecting her engagement with the qualification. Other learners were not even aware that flexibility was built into the structure of the qualification.

Employers did sometimes admit that they wanted their staff to be qualified as quickly as possible and that this caused them to set a faster pace for the learning. Also, in both care and construction, employers said they felt under a certain amount of pressure to get staff through level 2 in order to meet regulations or targets. At the same time, however, employers were aware that pushing too hard could be detrimental to the experience of learning. Indeed, learners' experiences support this, suggesting that a hefty pace does not make for an enjoyable learning experience.

- *Level of support, guidance and tuition within workplace*

Where employers made time available for work-based learners to complete tasks and meet with their assessor, learners were better able to complete tasks to the required standard and to progress quickly. Similarly, where learners had access to support and guidance within the workplace, from other learners, colleagues and supervisors, then this was said to make the workload more manageable. Conversely, where there was less support for learning within the workplace, or where learners were expected to complete assignments in their own time, without the advice and support of work colleagues learners struggled to complete tasks to the required standard and to meet deadlines, resulting in frustration and disengagement with learning.

Employers too were aware that it was important to make time for learning within the work environment. However, they also highlighted that the requirements of some roles meant that this was not always possible. Alternatively it was seen to reduce

performance and damage productivity. This was felt to be particularly difficult for smaller employers with limited resources.

- *Intensity of other commitments*

Commitments outside of work affected perceptions of workload and the experience of learning. These commitments affected how much time learners had to deal with the requirements of their qualifications. Younger learners who did not have many outside commitments, and who sometimes had more flexibility in their lives outside work, found their level 2 workloads to be manageable. Older learners, particularly those who had childcare responsibilities, found fitting in homework tasks difficult. Those who had active hobbies, interests and commitments to social activities found that these affected the time they were willing to devote to learning tasks. Those with significant outside commitments found the workload of level 2 learning demanding and hard to fit in, particularly where it involved significant levels of homework. One learner commented that *'the last thing you want to do when you've had a hard day at work is [do] work for [an] NVQ'*.

4.2.5 Learner perceptions of aptitude

Learner perceptions of their aptitude for learning undoubtedly affected the way in which they interacted with the learning process. Older learners, who had not experienced formal learning for a number of years, sometimes felt apprehensive about learning because they doubted their own learning ability. For some, vocational learning at level 2 was a new and unfamiliar form of learning. In these circumstances, learners sometimes found adjusting to learning at level 2 difficult and stressful. Both employers and learners reported how the requirements of qualifications could initially hamper confidence and intimidate them. However, employers acknowledged that the continuous assessment and contact afforded by the vocational nature of the NVQ2 meant that such knocks to confidence tended to be short lived. Indeed, learners found that as their courses progressed their concerns about learning aptitude dissipated as they gained confidence in their own ability to learn.

4.2.6 The pre-existing level of skill and experience

Level 2 learners varied in the degree of experience they had in their job and sector and had correspondingly varied skill needs. The existing level of skill and experience in a job or a sector had a significant effect on their interaction with the learning in various ways. For instance, those with many years of experience and considerable skill did not always consider that they needed to undertake a level 2 qualification. In sectors such as care and construction, regulations or targets for demonstrating competence meant that some staff were engaged in the learning process even though they felt they had little to gain by it. Alternatively, those with significant levels of existing skills and experience were not adverse to the idea of qualifications but found the level of qualification too basic. They were of the view that rather than having regulations to guarantee a certain level of competence, more account should be taken of the needs and aspirations of individual employees.

Nevertheless, the content of level 2 qualifications was sometimes advanced enough to encourage the development and work of experienced learners. Indeed, employers felt that level 2 made some of the more experienced employees question their existing practices and re-consider how they did their jobs, encouraging staff to *'think for themselves'*. In construction, for example, employers felt that regardless of learner experience, level 2 led to better practice and higher safety standards in the sector.

Alternatively, having experience and existing skills was seen to ease the burden of learning because tasks were familiar and had been already covered in learners' working lives.

'I was fortunate because I'd been on the job so many years that I'd covered most aspects of [NVQ2 Care] so I didn't really have any difficulty covering any of them [units] 'cos most things had come to light in me way of work really.'

(Female, 54 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care 2004)

4.2.7 Expectations about learning and certification

People's interaction with the course was guided, in some respects, by their expectations about learning. Where people perceived qualifications to be purely about certification, and this was what they experienced, then the process was viewed as broadly satisfactory. Similarly, where people expected to learn new things, and did so – either in the workplace or in college, then this led to similar positive interpretations of the learning process.

'I was semi-skilled before I actually took it [NVQ2 hospitality and food preparation] but there was a lot things in there that I learnt [...] it was amazing actually, I learnt a hell of a lot more, a hell of a lot more, definitely [...] I like to pick up on something new every day you know 'oh, I've found this out today' or 'I did this today' or 'this really worked today' or that; I like to put a ... put effort into the day and actually try and find out something new every day'.

(Female, 38 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Hospitality and Catering in 2003)

However, where people expected to learn but their experience was one of pure assessment then this led to dissatisfaction. Here, learners only covered aspects of their job roles in which they already perceived themselves to be proficient, rather than covering new topics or developing new skills and techniques. For example, Frank, a construction learner with a number of years experience and a prior experience of learning at college found his work-based NVQ2 did not develop his skills in the way he had expected.

'When I was at college you would spend 9 hours of the day in the classroom doing all your work and things have changed. Obviously a lot of building regulations change all the time, but basically it [NVQ2 Trowel Occupations- Bricklayer] was all the same, it was just refreshing your memory really and there was nothing new, I didn't learn anything new from it'.

(Male, 34 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Trowel Occupations – Bricklayer in 2004)

In line with this, employers who had experienced staff undertaking level 2 qualifications felt level 2 did not develop the skill level of their staff, rather it only assured competency. Here, employers and learners did not value the qualification, instead regarding it as bureaucratic requirement, a *'paper-chasing exercise'*.

4.3 The evidence gathering process

The process of gathering and presenting evidence is a central part of the learning experience. It comprises observations of work tasks and exercises that are designed to capture learner ability and competence. The precise nature of evidence requirements is dependent on the assessment specification of the NVQ in question. Evidence might also be presented using a variety of media, including written, audio, and visual methods, again depending on the assessment specification of the NVQ being followed by a candidate. The assessment evidence is often gathered and presented in a portfolio, though this is not generally a requirement of the central specification of the qualification.

There was a range of views amongst learners and employers as to the value of the evidence gathering and presentation process. It was recurrently seen to be an appropriate means of demonstrating proficiency. However, this positive view was more muted when the evidence required was perceived as unnecessary or irrelevant. The need to produce written work for a task that had already been observed and assessed was regarded as a waste of time by some learners and employers. Some learners felt that observations of their work were somewhat contrived, failing to provide a valid and genuine representation of their working practices. The impracticality of some requirements was emphasised by others, where it was felt to be difficult to generate appropriate evidence. For instance, Ruth, a customer service learner, found it difficult to collect three examples of when she had not dealt with a customer properly, as this was an extremely rare occurrence for experienced employees like her. There was also criticism amongst some learners and employers of the dominance of written work, particularly where this did not match the level of written work one would expect someone in a role or job to have to carry out. Written work was also said to be more difficult for those without computer skills and access

to computers. In addition, learners felt that the value of the evidence collected was limited and felt that more should be done to make use of portfolios.

Views about the evidence gathering process were influenced by three important issues:

- *The clarity of requirements*

Some learners were clear about what was required of them in terms of evidence gathering and presentation. In contrast, others were less clear about what they should gather and how it needed to be presented. Where learners lacked clarity about how to gather and present evidence the learning experience was frustrating and upsetting, and learners found it harder to engage with their qualifications. Similarly, some appeared unsure or uncertain about how much evidence tasks and units required them to gather. There were some who recalled that they struggled to match their everyday work activities with specific course units. Lack of awareness or understanding of the flexibility built into the process only served to confuse learners further.

The accounts of learners indicate a key role for employers, assessors or tutors in clarifying the evidence gathering requirements. When individuals had struggled to understand what was expected of them, the support of these individuals helped to set them on the right path. Alternatively, without this support, individuals were often felt isolated and became disillusioned with the task.

- *Flexibility in presentation of evidence*

There was not widespread knowledge of the variety of ways in which evidence could be presented. Some learners reported that the use of a variety of methods was permitted to gather and present evidence. These could be used so that gathering and presenting evidence was tailored to job role and learner preferences. For instance, Neil, a care learner with artistic skills, described using his ability to draw to generate evidence. In construction, learners used photographs to demonstrate their skills and work.

However, some learners were not able to make use of these evidence gathering and presentation options. For instance, Laura, a customer service learner, discovered that in practice, video and tape recordings of her work were not possible due to the Data Protection Act (1998). Similarly, the nature of care sector work meant that learners were restricted to written work and observations. For those who wanted to minimise written work, this was disheartening and disappointing.

- *Responsibility for gathering and presenting evidence*

The degree of involvement learners had in evidence gathering undoubtedly had implications for their perceptions of the process. Learners who gathered and presented their own evidence generally felt that the process had been a rewarding one, and had served to develop their knowledge and skills. Some did struggle with the responsibility for evidence gathering, either because of a lack of basic skills or

because of the demands of personal or family commitments. The accounts of other learners, however, indicate that they had less involvement in the collection and presentation of evidence to demonstrate skill and ability. This was sometimes a reflection of the level of support offered by assessors (discussed below). Some recounted how the assessor had played an important role in interpreting and setting out what evidence they needed. Alternatively, others spoke of how assessors did their written work for them on the basis of questions they had answered verbally. These different experiences reflect the variety of approaches to providing support for evidence gathering and presentation that assessors may adopt.

However, there were those who had little actual understanding of the process of evidence gathering and described little, if any, involvement in such a process. This was reported by both current and past learners and did not appear to be an issue about recall. This was particularly evident amongst the construction learners interviewed, although examples were also reported by learners from other sectors.

The inconsistency of approach by assessors towards gathering evidence has implications for learners' perceptions of this process and, indeed, their experiences of learning more generally. Learners report concern that their relatively minor involvement in the evidence gathering process served to limit the benefit to them of undertaking the qualification and undermines the value of the qualification in guaranteeing their competence.

4.4 The assessment of qualifications

Assessment of NVQ level 2 qualifications is conducted by qualified assessors from approved centres. The aim is to ensure that learners competently fulfil the requirements of qualifications by direct observation of tasks, verification of accounts of other tasks conducted, and the examination of knowledge and understanding. Assessors are also expected to assist learners in developing their own portfolio which catalogues all of the aforementioned items. These are then verified externally by the awarding body, internal verification is a centre responsibility and takes place at centre level, though external verifiers often advise on its development.

4.4.1 The assessor role

Given the centrality of the assessor role to the process of vocational learning, it is unsurprising that it featured heavily in the account of learners. There was, however, some diversity in how the role of assessor was understood and therefore depicted by the learners interviewed. Two distinct types of advisor were depicted. These were:

- those that were concerned with the setting and verification of tasks and who provided support around their completion; and
- those who also provided direction around learning or tuition.

These different roles are not a consequence of different modes of learning.

The first corresponds directly to the type of role envisaged for assessors. Here learners described how assessors explained tasks and requirements and clarified expectations around the type of evidence required. They were also said to have been involved in setting deadlines for the completion of tasks. Learners recounted how assessors helped in the planning of how requirements could be fulfilled, and discussing with learners what aspects of their work roles would be suitable to fulfil certain evidence requirements. Where there were gaps in portfolios, assessors were said to have offered useful advice about how best to fill them. This role of the assessor in verifying learners' skills and abilities was understood to be an integral aspect of vocational learning.

'Because it was a continuous assessment, I expected to be doing something for somebody to then say 'yeah, I'm happy that you know what you're doing with that, I can tick a box so I'm ticking you that you know how to cook a chicken, how to cook poultry, you know how to fillet that piece of fish', that sort of thing.'

(Male, 42 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Food Preparation and Cooking)

Assessors were seen to be an important source of support, encouragement and reassurance for learning. Learners talked about how assessors had bolstered their own confidence in their abilities. Similarly, others felt that their advanced experience meant that they were, if necessary, able to correct learners in how they went about the gathering of evidence.

'[The assessment] was fine because she [the assessor] was very helpful so I think that perhaps if she hadn't been helpful it would have been different but she was fine you know. She described everything in a way that I could understand. She used to write everything down that I needed to do so I wouldn't have to remember, it was always written down and she used to show me like whatever I've done if it was good she used to tell me why and how and the standard, so she like she got me involved in it really.'

(Female, 24 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Customer Service 2003)

The accounts of some learners depict a type of assessor that was even more supportive than that described thus far. Here assessors were portrayed as akin to trainers or teachers, demonstrating new skills, increasing knowledge and providing insights that helped individuals to perform better in their job roles. This is an important distinction because in these learners' accounts, the assessor was portrayed not just as someone who assessed competence and skill, but as someone

who helped learners to increase them. This is clearly beyond the usual role of an assessor.

This way in which the role played by the assessor matched with learner expectations of learning (described earlier in Section 4.2.7) had important implications for learner satisfaction with the overall experience. Where the assessor role matched learner expectations, this resulted in productive and enjoyable experiences of learning. For example, where a learner expected an NVQ to test existing competence, but not to teach them new things, then an assessor who set tasks and verified them was seen to be perfectly satisfactory. Conversely, where learner expectations were not met by the role their assessor adopted, they were, in the main, less satisfied with the learning experience. Learners who expected an assessor to increase their knowledge and to expand their skill set were puzzled by the perceived unsupportive nature of assessors who purely set tasks and verified existing competence. They longed for the sort of didactic relationship that other NVQ learners they knew had experienced. Where assessors did not meet these expectations, learners became disengaged and were generally of the view that the qualification did not meet their needs. This again emphasises the importance of clear induction processes so that learner expectations can be managed. However, it is also clear that different learners require different levels of support. Where assessors cannot be expected to provide this, then it is important that learners are directed to other potential avenues where these needs can be met.

4.4.2 The qualities of a good assessor

In the discussion of the roles played by assessors, there emerged a range of qualities that learners felt were crucial to successful learning. These encompassed:

- *Having first hand experience of the skills required*

There was a recurrent view that to be a good assessor one needed to have a wealth of direct and relevant experience of the types of jobs learners carried out or to have an established career in the sector more broadly. This was crucial to engendering trust and respect amongst the learners interviewed. For instance, Jake who was pursuing an NVQ level 2 in Roof Sheeting and Cladding, was uncomfortable with his first assessor who was a carpenter because he had no experience of roofing. Conversely, where learners knew that assessors had first hand experience of the sorts of skills and activities that they were assessing, this increased the level of confidence they had in the assessment process.

- *Having a good track record in assessment*

Similarly, learners placed more value in assessors who had a degree of skill and experience in the role. In contrast, where assessors were unfamiliar with assessing, or were uncertain how qualifications should operate and progress, this was a target of learner criticism.

- *Being available and approachable*

The frequency of contact with assessors varied, particularly for those engaged in work-based learning. However there was little agreement about what constituted the right frequency of contact. That said, cancellations and a lack of contact (for example not seeing an assessor for up to 2 months) were seen to indicate a lack of concern. Important considerations for learners were that the assessor was both available and approachable. Some learners needed a lot of reassurance about learning and so being able to get in touch with assessors by phone was valued, especially where they were peripatetic. Learners placed a high premium on being able to approach assessors for advice or guidance when they needed it. Assessors who were more distant or who eschewed that sort of contact were not valued.

- *Anticipation of and receptiveness to learner need*

As outlined above, a good match between the type of assessor and the expectations of the learner was beneficial for the learner. However, more broadly than that, assessors who were able to anticipate and meet learner need for guidance, support or just contact were respected. This sort of attention was seen to indicate interest and genuine support for learning. By contrast, assessors who were less concerned with individual need, and who appeared more concerned with meeting targets were not seen to be acceptable.

- *Consistency of approach*

Some learners had experience of several different assessors throughout the course of the learning experience. It was not always clear why this occurred but learners suspected that it was due to difficulties with the training provider. While change of assessor could have its advantages, particularly if the initial assessor did not match need or expectation, there was a general view that continuity and consistency of approach was important for a good quality learning experience. Learners felt it was beneficial for them to develop a bond with their assessor, so that the assessor could understand their particular way of working, and appreciate their skills and the context they worked within. Where assessors were temporary or they changed part-way through courses, this bond was more difficult to achieve. It also made those who were apprehensive of the learning process less confident or trustful of it.

4.5 Support for the learning process

The final aspect of the learning process that was deemed to be of importance to learners was the support available to help them. Discussion of support permeated the interviews with learners and there emerged a range of sources that enabled them to achieve their learning objectives. As is apparent from the discussion in the previous section, assessors were one important source. However, other avenues were also valued in particular, employers, tutors, colleagues, fellow learners, family and friends.

4.5.1 The range of support provided within the workplace

From the accounts offered by learners, there exists a range of sources of support within the workplace – whether or not learning itself was entirely or even partly work-based. Learners' descriptions of the learning process indicate a range of methods by which employers explicitly and implicitly supported vocational learning amongst their employees. One important form was financial support. Learners sometimes described how employers compensated them financially – in part or in full – for their time spent learning. This took a number of forms. Some were allowed to learn during work time and so were paid for their learning. Work-based learners were allowed to complete assignments at work, for example, while some college-based learners attended their courses during work time. Alternatively where learning was not funded directly by the employer, they did ensure that the employee did not suffer financially by their engagement in learning. For instance, where involvement in learning meant that someone had to give up a shift, employers ensured that this was replaced to ensure there was no loss of earnings. Employers also provided funds for equipment that was needed to complete qualifications.

However, employers' support for learning went far beyond purely financial methods. There were a range of practical steps taken by employers to help learners. These were simple but effective. Learners described how aspects of their work or role were altered or enhanced to allow them to develop the required set of competencies to fulfil qualification requirements. Some learners had been sent on additional short courses to enhance their skills in a particular area. Neil, a care learner, told of how his employer had facilitated his involvement in a series of local seminars about elderly care. This was not a requirement of the NVQ level 2 Care that he was pursuing but it did help to increase his knowledge and understanding of the area. Alternatively, where learners had specific deadlines to achieve, employers were flexible about workload requirements, making it easier for learners to complete tasks on time and without pressure. Learners were also given access to equipment in the workplace – such as computers – to assist in evidence gathering and presentation.

Learners identified a myriad of ways in which employers, managers and supervisors provided them with emotional support, encouragement and guidance throughout the learning experience. Of course, not everyone needed this, but even if they did not avail of it, the offer in itself was a source of reassurance

The employers interviewed were fully cognisant of the value of support to the learning process. There was considerable emphasis given to the importance of assessing learner need and providing the right kind of support. Some described how they had helped staff when they were struggling with specific requirements or with written work and saw being available to talk through issues with employees as a way of encouraging them to maintain and progress with learning. Learners who had less, or more distant, experience of formal learning were sometimes seen to require more intensive support. Similarly, employees with disabilities or language issues were seen to have requirements for specific sorts of help. Some employers had systems

or initiatives to support learners engaged in NVQs such as 'drop-in workshops' to assist learners in developing skills or understanding qualification requirements. Here, the emphasis was on helping apprehensive staff to engage and be more comfortable with the learning process. There was, amongst some employers, explicit encouragement to develop peer support networks amongst learners who were working towards the same qualification. Finally, there were some who attempted to match qualified employees with current learners. For instance, a medium-sized customer service employer had a system of 'puppy walkers', that is, a system where qualified employees who had experience of the learning process supported and guided newer learners.

Employers, however, also outlined the challenges of providing adequate support for learning within the workplace. There was some feeling that this was not always feasible within the context of working day. Indeed, some employers saw themselves as having a limited role in the learning process, rather considering that it was a matter for the assessors and learners.

4.5.2 Other sources of support

There was a range of other sources of support that featured in learners' accounts. Where learning was college-based, learners appreciated the support and encouragement offered by tutors. Many of the features of good support from tutors mirror the types of qualities of a good assessor outlined earlier. Tutors who were perceived to be knowledgeable, who provided guidance and explanation and who were available to help with problems were valued by learners and contributed to positive learning experiences. Similarly, where tutors were perceived to be dedicated to the needs of the learner, and were able to recognise and meet individual need, this was appreciated by college-based learners.

For college-based and work-based learners alike the support of other learners was considered beneficial. Those doing courses together offered help with assignments, advice or a friendly ear to talk through problems. Learners gave examples of how fellow learners were important sources of support and insight. Learners, in general, found it reassuring to have other people learning alongside them, whether that was in a college-based or work-based environment. For instance, Christine, who completed an NVQ level 2 in Food Preparation and Cooking in 2004 said that she felt part of a 'family' of learners, and that this was a crucial support to her.

In a similar way to peers, family members were said to offer their own experience and expertise to help with written work and to help think through approaches to qualification requirements and tasks. Partners, children and siblings alike were said to have encouraged and helped learners achieve their learning objectives. Sometimes this was in unconventional ways. For instance, Rose who was undertaking an NVQ level 2 Care at the time of interview, was determined to complete her qualification to avoid being labelled 'lazy' by her children. She felt that if she attempted to drop out of the qualification that they would 'get on her back'.

4.5.3 *The implications of support*

As is perhaps apparent from the discussion so far, access to support had significant implications for the quality of learning. Learners' progress was buoyed by the many resources available to them. Employer support was also said by learners to make the experience of learning easier, more rewarding and more enjoyable. The interest shown by superiors in the learning process also validated the experience for some learners, making the time and energy expended seem much more worthwhile. Similarly, when superiors got involved in observing tasks and writing statements of competency this reassured learners undertaking work-based learning that the qualification was important to their job and the development of skills and abilities was valued by their employer. The sort of support provided by employers and colleagues was even more important where people were underwhelmed by the support and guidance provided by their assessor. Moreover, where employers went to significant lengths to support learners, this improved the image of the employer in the learner's eyes.

Where support was absent in the workplace, this complicated the learning process and was interpreted as a lack of interest or respect for staff development. Lack of employer recognition of the time and effort expended by staff in the learning process was also seen to undermine the value of the experience.

In colleges where tutors appeared too busy to engage with problems this could affect the attitude of the learner and their interest in the qualification. Similarly, where tutors failed to support learners in their learning or to demonstrate belief in a learner's capabilities, this could have deleterious effects for a learner's engagement with the learning process.

Finally, where learners felt unsupported at home, this made it more difficult for them to devote the time needed to learning tasks and also meant that they lacked the encouragement needed to achieve their learning objectives.

There are, it would appear, different impressions of the learning process and different qualities of experience. The next chapter explores the impact of learning and considers what aspects of the learning experience are necessary to enhance the positive benefits of level 2 learning.

5 THE IMPACT OF LEVEL 2 LEARNING

This chapter examines the range of impacts perceived to arise from vocational learning at level 2, from the perspectives of the learner, employer and sector representative. It begins with a brief review of some of the key literature in this area. This is followed by an in-depth exploration of the perceived returns for individual learners and for business. These impacts are mediated by a set of factors relating to the circumstances in which level 2 learning takes place. The chapter concludes with a discussion of these and an explanation of how they affect the returns gained from level 2 learning.

It should be noted that while learner perspectives are based on their participation in NVQ level 2 qualifications, that employer and SSC representatives comments refer to all types of level 2 vocational qualifications.

5.1 Overview of existing literature on the returns from level 2 learning

The literature on the impact of vocational qualifications is far from comprehensive (Unwin *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, what research has been conducted on returns suggests that learning at level 2 carries little, if any, benefit for those who pursue it. Several quantitative investigations have attempted to estimate the returns to level 2 qualifications in the UK. Dearden *et al.* (2002) investigated the returns in terms of earnings and employment and found that NVQ level 2 qualifications have negative effects on earnings of approximately 10%, with slightly more encouraging returns for other types of non-NVQ level 2 qualifications. Complementary work by McIntosh (2002), focusing specifically on the earnings returns of level 2 qualifications, found that NVQ level 2 qualifications had no positive effect. A more recent and in-depth analysis of NVQ level 2 qualifications by Dearden *et al.* (2004), using both the Labour Force Survey and the 1970 British Cohort Study, has also concluded that NVQ level 2 offers no economic benefit to those who attain it.

However, while there is scant evidence of any positive economic return from NVQ Level 2s, there is some promising evidence of other kinds of impacts. Dearden *et al.* (2004) established that those who attain NVQ level 2s are more likely than similar individuals without an NVQ2 to move on and obtain higher qualifications, a point also supported by Unwin *et al.* (2004). Moreover, Unwin and her colleagues, having reviewed a range of sources, suggested there was evidence to suggest that attainment of vocational qualifications generally is beneficial to individuals' levels of self-confidence. Spielhofer (2001) also espouses the wider benefits of learning at level 2 and found that, as well as producing a range of personal benefits such as improved confidence and a sense of achievement, the qualification was seen by learners to have considerable value for their current work role, their future progression and their general employability.

5.2 Mapping the range of returns from level 2 learning and certification

All three respondent groups interviewed for this study held remarkably similar views about the types of returns derived from undertaking level 2 vocational qualifications although each brought a slightly different perspective. Moreover, specific returns appeared to have different emphases across sectors. Learners, employers and SSC representatives were also very perceptive when commenting on potential impacts for others. Learners identified a diverse range of returns for themselves and how they translated into gains for their employers. Employers, in turn, were able to identify returns for learners though tended to emphasise impacts that would eventually translate into favourable returns for themselves. Employers and SSC representatives presented a positive map of returns which emphasised benefits for both themselves and their workforce.

The range of returns identified in this study suggests that level 2 learning and certification has direct and perceivable impacts for learners. These are central to the learner experience, affecting learners' personal development, confidence and workplace skills. Another category of returns, still key for the learner, were also identified but perceived to be a more indirect consequence of learning at level 2. These impacts included an increased willingness to consider further vocational learning, actual experiences of further learning, enhanced employability, career progression and increased wage levels. The combination of these two sets of returns for the learner was seen to produce a set of returns for the employer: on retention of staff, on their performance and productivity, and their recruitment. These in turn have implications for the sector as a whole in enhancing the sector image and industry standards. This complex map of impacts derived from level 2 learning is illustrated in Figure 5.1 and the various layers of impact are discussed in the remainder of this section.

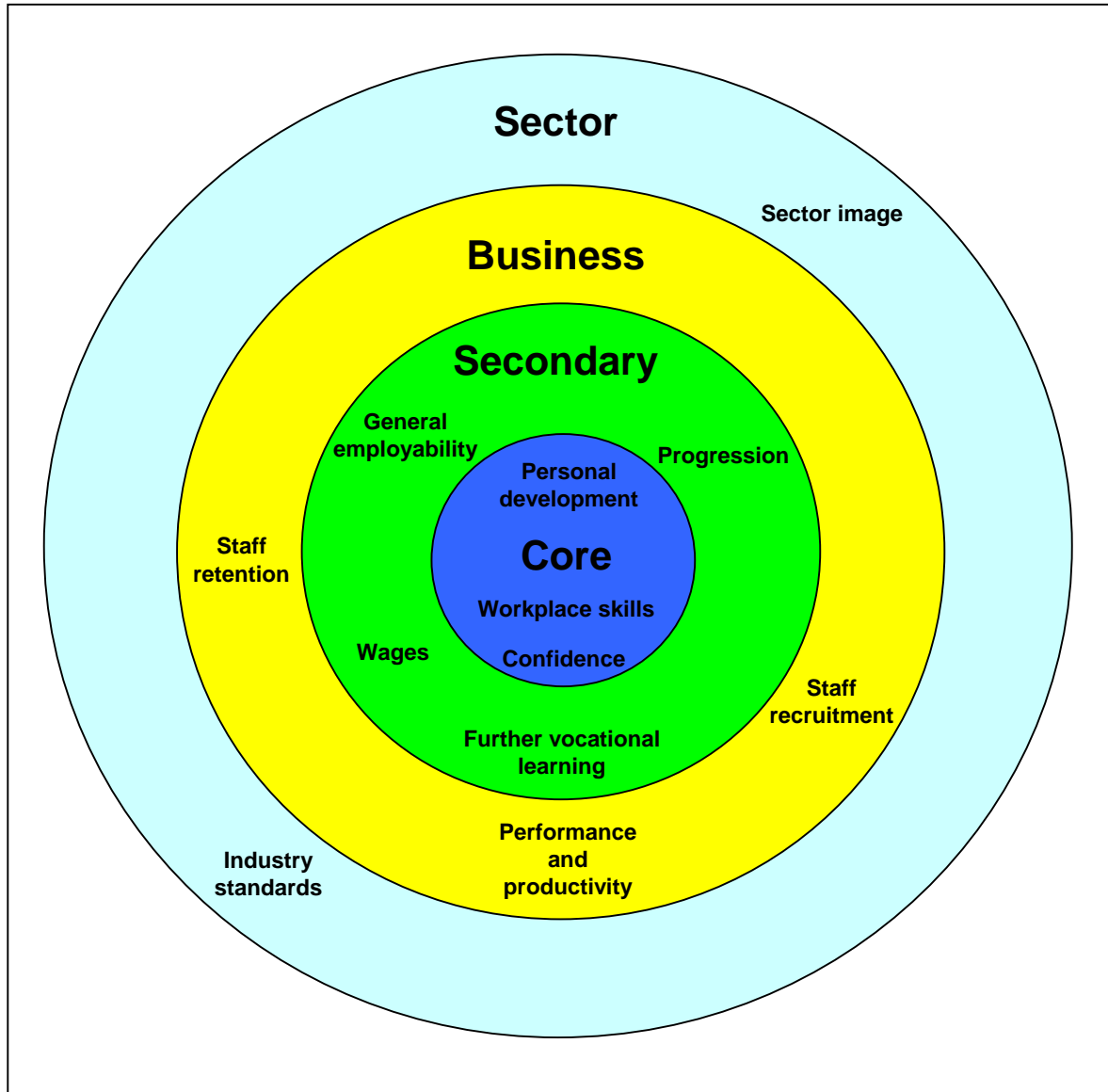
Before turning to those, it should be noted that whilst there was a clear emphasis on positive impacts from level 2 learning and certification amongst all those consulted, some negative repercussions were also highlighted. Where relevant, these are discussed in the context of subsections that follow.

5.2.1 Core returns for learners

A common set of returns for learners was identified consistently by all three respondent groups – improvement in workplace skills, personal development and increased confidence. These impacts appeared to arise as a direct result of undertaking level 2 learning and therefore may be said to be the 'core' impacts. These were not, of course, the only impacts of learning but these three sets of returns appeared to precede and, in part, trigger the experience of further sets of returns. They were also identified by employers and SSC representatives as important precursors to returns benefiting employer organisations and the wider sector.

The core returns were experienced both prior to and post-certification, whereas other types of returns for learners and for the business and sector were a product of attainment of level 2 only.

Figure 5.1 A map of the impacts derived from level 2 learning



Workplace skills

Learning at level 2 affected workplace skills in two ways. The range and expertise in specific skills among learners improved, as did an awareness and understanding of the job role more generally. This was supported by a more generic skill development, in terms of a wider skills base and the development of non-specific work skills, such as safety awareness.

Where specific skills were identified, these naturally varied across sectors though learners and employers within the same sector consistently described similar skills. In the hospitality sector, new or developed skills included new recipes or cooking methods for those undertaking relevant qualifications and participants from the construction sector described feeling better able to undertake specific tasks, for example, digging a trench to a safe depth. Improvements in skills began to be recognised during the learning experience, often well before full certification had occurred.

Where learners found it difficult to identify specific skills, they recognised a generally heightened awareness of issues salient to their work and understanding of their job role from their NVQ. In the care sector, for example, such improved understanding was said to lead to more reflective and careful approaches to working with clients:

'Like the well-being of the residents and that, I mean you can take things for granted like [...] it's not just a job, it's not like going to work in a shop, you're like their family and they probably haven't got families and you are their family, so it [level 2] just opens your eyes up to it about how they're feeling and the rights that they've got.'

(Female, 33 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care in 2004)

This potential for increased understanding and awareness was also recognised by employers.

Both learners and employers felt that learning at level 2 contributed to the development of a wider skills base for employees by exposing staff to a broader range of skills and experiences than they encountered in their everyday work. This was given particular emphasis by employers and SSC representatives who felt that as a result businesses benefited from a multi-skilled and therefore more flexible workforce.

Perspectives on the sustainability of these newly acquired and improved skills differed somewhat. Some learners felt that the skills they had acquired would remain with them forever whilst others felt that work-experiences would sooner or later 'overtake' any skills learned through their level 2 qualification. Learners felt that the process of undertaking a level 2 qualification had allowed them to develop skills more quickly than they might have in the course of their normal working life.

Personal development

Learners of all ages and backgrounds felt that learning had enabled them to develop and grow as a person and as an employee. This was evident in a variety of ways. Learners reported feeling an increased sense of validation, in terms of the respect they commanded from other people, in and out of work. There were also implications

for their self-esteem which was boosted by the sense of achievement associated both with undertaking and gaining a qualification. One learner likened this to feeling as if she had *'climbed a mountain'* by achieving a NVQ 2. These feelings of validation and self-esteem engendered a sense of pride in some learners.

Angela, a 56-year-old home carer, completed the NVQ level 2 in care 18 months before being interviewed. She had gained CSE qualifications at school but had undertaken no formal qualifications since then. Having initially worried about taking on a qualification *'at her age'*, she was very proud of her achievement and felt it had boosted her self-esteem: *'I thought, 'wow, I've passed it and I've done all that work', I was quite pleased with myself that I'd achieved it because I'm quite old and I've achieved NVQ [...] I was proud that I'd done it and after taking me GCSEs about 40 years since, I was pleased [...] and I did it, at 50-odd, I did it!'*

The positive effects of learning on individuals' own sense of self had important implications for their interaction with others. Within the workplace, learners perceived positive returns for their relationships as a result of gaining a qualification at level 2. For example, Jane, who was undertaking an NVQ level 2 in Childcare observed that *'you feel like you're not just another employee, you feel like people value you more because you've got your level 2'*. Others reported more frequent praise from superiors and other colleagues since embarking on the NVQ level 2, something which they felt demonstrated their enhanced value within the workplace. Learners who perhaps had lower levels of self-belief regarding their abilities at work felt *'on a level'* with colleagues since gaining their level 2 qualification, crediting their new found self-esteem with impacting on their relationships at work. They also thought that the commitment demonstrated by undertaking a qualification earned them respect from colleagues and superiors in particular.

'In my mind, it was sort of better for me as well because she [her employer] knew that I was always willing to learn, you know [...] she could tell that I was taking my own time out as well to do things for the company [...] it made them look good as well and, I don't know, also gave me more respect in their eyes as well which is good.'

(Female, 21 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Customer Service in 2004)

The qualification was also used as a form of currency when forging relationships with new staff at a similar level, to demonstrate competence and earn respect.

Confidence

A further dimension of the impact of level 2 learning upon an individual's personal development was evident in changes in their levels of confidence. This was reflected in people's behaviour at work, in particular how they felt about their ability to perform their job role. This confidence stemmed from level 2 learning in two ways. First,

learners who were undertaking a qualification at the time of interview reported increased levels of confidence from the day-to-day experience of undertaking learning and the reassurance provided by interaction with assessors. In this sense, the actual process of learning was sufficient for some to bring about an improvement. Kelly, for example, was just over three months into her level 2 NVQ in customer service at the time of interview. She reported already feeling more confident in her role at a nursery and expected this to improve further upon completion of the NVQ:

'It does give me extra confidence and I have learnt things since I started the course that have helped me in my job and I do find that I speak to people better and I feel more confident when I'm dealing with problems.'

(Female, 22 years old, current learner NVQ level 2 Customer Service)

Learners were also able to identify how their behaviour at work had changed as a result of increased confidence. For example, Rose, who had previously not participated in staff meetings reported feeling more able to voice her opinions since completing the NVQ in care because of the respect she felt it commanded and the confidence it had given her in her abilities in her job role. Contributing to this new confidence was the perception that as individuals gained more knowledge of different work situations, they felt less likely to be caught off guard by anything out of the ordinary.

Alternatively, certification, or its anticipation, contributed to increased conviction and self-belief because it was seen to constitute proof of competence in a job role. Jennifer, a care worker, predicted that once she had passed her NVQ2 in care, she would feel more confident at work.

'Having that qualification it just proves that I can do it and it gives you a bit more confidence actually because you know that you can do it.'

(Female, 33 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care in 2004)

Such instances of increased confidence were also recognised by employers, who noted that this impact was particularly relevant for staff who had no previous qualifications or who lacked self-confidence at work for other reasons.

Confidence was an important return as it had implications for other changes in outlook or behaviour attributed to undertaking level 2 learning. In particular, greater confidence impacted on people's likelihood to pursue other job opportunities and further vocational learning.

5.2.2 Secondary returns for learners

A set of 'secondary' returns benefiting learners was identified, again consistently by the three respondent groups, which appeared to derive directly from the experience of the core impacts described above. These encompassed learner attitude towards and experience of further vocational learning, their ability to demonstrate suitability for and ability to secure new job roles, the opportunities available for career progression and their resulting wage level. Experience of the core impacts described above appeared to be an important prerequisite for these secondary impacts to occur. This is perhaps reflected in the reluctance of learners, employers and SSC representatives to attribute the secondary impacts directly to participation in level 2 learning. They did, however, acknowledge that level 2 learning played some role but were less clear about how.

Unlike the core impacts which were experienced some time before as well as after certification, these secondary impacts tended to be felt towards the end of the learning experience or, more commonly, after achieving certification.

Further vocational learning

Learning at level 2 had significant effects on learners' openness to further vocational learning and to their actual experience of it. Further vocational learning included other vocational qualifications at level 2 (in related or other subject areas), level 3 qualifications and qualifications undertaken outside of the workplace, perhaps as a hobby. The experience of level 2 learning could either encourage or discourage an individual from considering or embarking upon further learning.

- ***Attitudes towards further learning***

Changing attitudes towards learning as a result of undertaking or achieving a level 2 vocational qualification were reported. Learners felt reassured that they need not be *'the brain of Britain'* to achieve a qualification and, where they had once thought a level 3 qualification was beyond their capability, they felt positive about the possibility of undertaking and achieving one. A familiar feeling was of being *'bitten by the learning bug'* or acquiring an *'itch to learn'* from undertaking a level 2 qualification. This desire for further learning was guided by different objectives. Some, particularly older learners, were interested not necessarily for vocational reasons but for personal or intellectual development. The drive to learn for others was motivated by the prospect of future career progression. Even where learners had no firm plans for further learning at the time of interview, they reported feeling more receptive and open to the possibility of undertaking another qualification in the future. This was especially true of younger people.

Learners who had returned to learning after many years were keen to capitalise on the momentum of the level 2 and progress quickly to a level 3, fearing that they would otherwise never again recapture it.

'I said once I started to get into it, it's like I didn't want to stop; all right then NVQ Level 3 now, while I'm on a roll, you know, while I'm on a roll.'

(Female, 38 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Care in 2002)

Employers cited expectations for further learning as a significant drawback for staff undertaking qualifications at level 2. They reported that employees automatically expected to be able to go on to level 3 and above, however, this was often neither useful to the employer nor were they necessarily able to fund it.

Learning at level 2 did not, however, necessarily lead to an appetite for further vocational learning. Where people felt that further learning would necessitate a change in job role, for example in care where the requirements for the NVQ level 3 include office-based work experience, it had less of an attraction. Similarly, older learners who felt *'too old in the tooth'* and were nearing retirement or who had found the level 2 qualification very challenging, were also reluctant to consider any further learning, feeling it would be irrelevant. Robert, a 56 year old construction worker, stated:

'I don't want the hassle for the last five years of me working life, you know what I mean, I don't want to spend two years bloody doing, you know, an Open University course or something every night, sat in here poking me brain when, at end of day, I don't know if I'm gonna benefit.'

(Male, 56 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Construction in 2004)

- *Experiences of further learning*

As well as marked positive changes in attitudes for learners, there was also evidence that a positive experience of level 2 had led to the pursuit of further vocational learning, specifically to experiences of level 3 learning. This urge to pursue further learning was attributed to two distinct sources. Some learners had long held an ambition to learn beyond level 2 and their career objectives were well delineated. This ambition was stimulated by positive experiences at level 2. For others, the desire to pursue higher levels of learning was a direct result of the change in attitudes described above.

Learners in the care sector had embarked upon a NVQ level 3 Care in order that they could gain a supervisory role and therefore a higher wage. In the customer service and hospitality sectors, people were undertaking level 2 and 3 qualifications in related areas, such as Team Leading, and cross-referencing work from their level 2 in customer service with requirements for their new qualification. There was little evidence, however, of further learning amongst those interviewed in the construction sector. This is unsurprising given that their common stated motivation for learning at level 2 was only to gain their CSCS card. Alternatively, learners in this sector, and also in the customer services sector sometimes felt their experience had exceeded

what they could learn from vocational qualifications and because of this they were less inclined towards further learning.

There were instances where learners had anticipated or desired further learning upon completion of their level 2 qualification but had been unable to progress. The reasons for this varied between a stated reluctance or inability to fund or find out about further learning themselves and a perceived lack of opportunity from their employer. This was particularly relevant for those over the age of 25 since, as discussed in Chapter 2, the age of the learner appears to restrict the level of funding available for vocational learning in some sectors. Some learners who wanted to continue learning were prevented from doing so unless they could finance it themselves or their employer was willing to fund it. This was a source of frustration for some however recent changes to the relationship between age and availability of funding should mean that this is no longer a problem.

General Employability

There was a general expectation among learners that undertaking and gaining qualifications, including those at level 2, would improve their work prospects. All learners, past and current, interviewed for this study were either in full or part-time work and saw positive returns for themselves in progressing within their current job role or in alternative employment. Among learners who were unsure about their future career path, there was a general feeling that *'all that counts these days is qualifications'* and that more qualifications meant better prospects for employment in the future, with less emphasis on the nature or level of the qualification itself.

For learners who saw themselves remaining in the same sector but potentially changing jobs, the level 2 was seen as useful *'proof'* for a prospective employer of being competent in a job role and therefore meant that they were more employable to a wider set of employers.

'[...] you have to prove to them that you've got the qualification to do the job [...] sometimes you can tell 'em 'well, I know yeah, I know what you can do, you've done the job before, the job's yours' but if you've moved to another firm that doesn't know you, you haven't proven yourself, you can say 'well, there's the certificate, I've done the job, there's the proof.'

(Male, 44 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Construction in 2004)

There was an expectation, therefore, that having an NVQ2 would remove some of the pressure of job interviews, with less emphasis on learners justifying their suitability for the role by virtue of their having an NVQ2.

In addition to the specific work competencies demonstrated by their NVQ2, learners felt that having a qualification showed a commitment to their job and the sector and demonstrated a willingness to learn that would be as attractive to employers as the

qualification itself. Employers agreed that such enthusiasm was valued in prospective employees and admitted that, all other things being equal, they would be more likely to interview someone with an NVQ2 than without. The employer perspective of employability, in terms of impacts on staff recruitment, is explored below in Section 5.2.3.

Career progression

There was common awareness that advancement in role was in part related to qualification level. Depending on the sector, level 2 was either seen to lead directly to career advancement or be an important precursor to it. For example, learners in the care sector recognised opportunities for supervisory roles and associated pay increases at level 3. They perceived certification at level 2 as an integral precursor to undertaking the level 3 in the way it re-introduced them to a learning environment and somehow suggested to them that they could achieve other qualifications.

Employers too recognised the role of qualifications as a way of developing staff and ultimately influencing progression at work. Involvement with and attainment of a level 2 qualification was said to afford employers a firmer grip on staff competence and enabled them to identify employees who could potentially contribute most to the organisation. Alternatively, it was thought that vocational qualifications could also hinder progression within an organisation where they resulted in greater staff satisfaction, lower staff turnover and therefore fewer opportunities for promotion.

Both current and past learners credited level 2 learning with clarifying their feelings about their job or the sector they worked in. For example, Marianne reported taking her work in the pub more seriously as a result of doing an NVQ2 in Bar Service after realising that this was what she wanted to do for her career.

'It's [NVQ level 2 in Bar Service] made me care about the job a lot more; it's made me realise now I've got to take it seriously, it's a proper job, I'm going to get somewhere, this is what I'm going to do as a career so I need to act like I'm going to use it as a career.'

(Female, 23 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Bar Service in 2004)

Learning at level 2 also had the opposite effect, indicating to some learners who were unsure about their future career that this was not the sector for them.

Learners who had gained certification some time ago could identify how their level 2 qualification had increased the offers of work made to them or how it had helped them gain new positions. Learners were, however, reluctant to attribute their success solely to the qualification itself and cited the increased confidence it had lent them and a resulting increased awareness of job opportunities as more important.

'It wasn't a requirement for applying, when applying for a job, to have this Level 2 completed, but I'm sure again it makes some difference, that they could see that I was doing that and even more to myself that I had done this [...] it just really depends on [...] your current position like how, whether you feel you are ready to take up the next one.'

(Female, 25 years old, completed NVQ level 2 Reception in 2003)

Attainment of an NVQ2 was not always associated with moving forward. In sectors with targets for level 2 learning, qualifications were seen to be a way of guaranteeing one's current position or enabling one to continue to work in a particular sector. In the construction industry, the achievement of the level 2 was very much perceived as the ultimate goal since it ensured the learner could get their CSCS card. Moreover, within these sectors with targets for certification at level 2, the resulting increased uptake of the qualifications was said to devalue the achievement of them. Learners perceived that the level 2 meant less because more people were gaining it. This also served to weaken it as a marker for progression over other colleagues.

Wages

The extent to which level 2 learning impacted upon pay varied greatly across the learner sample. Learners in the care sector consistently reported anticipating or receiving an additional 25 pence per hour for completing the NVQ level 2 in care. For example, Sarah reported that she had received an additional 25 pence per hour when she embarked upon the NVQ level 2 in care and expected another 25 pence per hour upon completion. Whilst learners in other sectors also reported such pay-rises, it was not consistent in any one sector.

This lack of clarity around the connection of the level 2 with pay pervaded all sectors and learners based much of their expectations for returns in the form of wages from undertaking a level 2 qualification on rumour rather than specific information from their employer. Though expectations differed among learners in the sample, most expected a positive impact for their level of pay, if not immediately, at some point in the future, by helping them secure a better job or from using their qualification as a bargaining tool for better wages. The SSC representatives interviewed generally reported no formal link between pay and attainment of level 2 vocational qualifications within their sector and indeed saw this as the greatest drawback for learners undertaking qualifications at level 2. Employers too commonly recognised no connection between level 2 qualifications and any increase in pay though some defended this, claiming that such a link would encourage staff to undertake training for the wrong reasons or would confer undue pressure to gain certification.

SSCs and employers did identify indirect links between the attainment of qualifications and pay. Where employers had integrated the various levels of NVQ with their Personal Development Programme, achievement of specific levels became pre-requisites for promotion to certain positions. In the care sector, pay-rises were often associated with job roles at level 3, for which level 2 was the natural precursor.

In construction, employers reported an indirect link between NVQ level 2 and pay through its association with attaining craft status, itself linked to pay scales. There were some concrete examples offered by employers and SSC representatives of how certification at level 2 did impact positively on pay, but this again was inconsistent both between and within sectors. Sector Skills Councils could identify individual employers who rewarded attainment through pay though these tended to be very small pay rises of, for example, a few pence per hour per NVQ unit completed or a slightly higher hourly rate upon completion of the whole NVQ.

Evidence for this apparent inconsistency in learners' perceptions and experiences was found in employers' motivations for linking pay with the achievement of qualifications. A number of factors appeared to underpin any relationship between level 2 learning and pay. Where employers saw level 2 as an entry-level qualification or solely as a demonstration of competence in a role, they felt reluctant to reward staff for continuing to perform the same role. Where employers could not afford to reward staff with increased pay, they were using the qualification itself as reward, as a nationally recognised qualification with some currency outside the organisation. Those employers who did link pay with attainment, whether directly or indirectly, reported doing so in a bid to retain staff who were better skilled rather than as a reward specifically for achieving the qualification.

5.2.3 Impact on the business

The combination of the core and secondary impacts experienced by learners produced a further set of returns for employers or the business more generally. These related to retention and recruitment of staff and to performance and productivity. These sorts of business impacts were seen to arise from the core effects on learners – such as increased workplace skills and improved confidence. However some impacts at the business level are admittedly unrelated to effect on learners. Rather, they are the simple and direct result of an employer providing level 2 vocational qualifications. For example, employers credited the provision of workplace qualifications with increasing an organisation's appeal to potential staff and therefore impacting positively on recruitment. This set of returns for the employer organisation tended to be anticipated or intended by employers and were often the stated reason for such level 2 qualifications being offered in the first place.

Staff retention

The issue of retention for individual employers and the sector as a whole was a common concern among both SSC representatives and employers. Whilst they concurred that level 2 learning did have implications for retention, there was disagreement about the nature of those impacts: some emphasised the negative ramifications and others the positive. The SSC representatives interviewed generally took the longer-term view that NVQ level 2s were slowing down any retention problems already present in a particular sector. Employers apparently perceived a

more complicated situation with both advantages and disadvantages for retention from providing level 2 training.

Where employers felt that offering level 2 would increase any existing retention problems, they described the NVQ level 2, a nationally recognised qualification, as like *'a passport to move down the road'*, especially where the qualification was teaching staff things they did not use in their current everyday work. Employers within the care sector in particular described experiences of losing staff post-certification at level 2 to the health sector (as nursing assistants) where wages are higher. This was recognised as a greater problem for the private and voluntary care organisations whose staff were said to earn less than those working for local authorities. There was also a fear across sectors that other organisations, who had not invested in training for their staff and could therefore offer higher salaries, would poach staff. Employees themselves were credited with the drive to achieve more post-certification at level 2 and with feeling more able to find and gain positions with other employers, as discussed in Section 5.2.2. Employers recognised that should they fail to reward their staff for achieving level 2, they risked losing them. Internal, non-accredited training was sometimes seen as a solution to providing training and being seen to invest in staff without giving employees the wherewithal to leave.

There was also recognition of the benefits for retention of providing qualifications at level 2. Sector Skills Councils perceived that for sectors where staff retention was already a problem, the provision of qualifications was slowing down loss of staff and improving retention. They reported that employers who weighed up the cost of recruiting new staff with providing qualifications found the latter to be more cost effective so provided them in the hope that staff would not leave. Employers themselves supported this view. For example, one employer in the customer service industry claimed that in first two years of providing the NVQ level 2 in customer service and reception, the organisation saved £200,000 in recruitment, training and development costs because fewer staff left. Another employer, from the hospitality sector, perceived that employees in hospitality roles tended not to plan to remain long-term. She saw the role for NVQ level 2 as one of increasing staff commitment to the organisation.

'The problem with hospitality is a lot of people, as I said, are transient, they don't look at hospitality as a career, yet if somebody is prepared to do an NVQ the chances are that they'd be looking at hospitality as their long-term career and are more committed to their role.'

(Employer, hospitality, large)

Employers of the view that the provision of qualifications improved staff retention hoped that employees felt more valued as a result of employer investment in them and so remained with the organisation for longer. As one medium-sized engineering employer who supported this view remarked *'why would you leave a business that*

develops you, and grows you, and offers you opportunity, where people actually care about you?'

Whilst some employers emphasised either the positive or negative ramifications of level 2 learning for retention, some acknowledged the validity of both arguments. Indeed, even those employers who feared negative implications found it difficult to justify not providing vocational qualifications. This somewhat ambiguous position was an illustration of how some employers embraced the needs of the sector as much as they did their own business interests. Here it was argued that by investing in training employers were creating a set of well trained employees for the sector. So even if employees moved between jobs, a sector wide emphasis on training would create a better pool of employees from which to replace them. SSC representatives too recognised the sector wide benefits pointing out how smaller employers, who could not afford to offer level 2 qualifications, did benefit from this movement of qualified staff, effectively *'riding the coat tails'* of the investment in training made by larger employers. Alternatively, some employers, particularly within the care sector, worried less about retention in their own business and were more concerned about ensuring that the sector as a whole retained trained workers so that all employers within the sector could benefit. Investment in employee development was seen to be an important way of retaining employees within the sector, regardless if it led to mobility between employers.

Staff recruitment

In addition to retaining staff in a business or sector, there were also impacts from level 2 learning for the recruitment of staff. Employers across the different sectors hoped that candidates would be more likely to consider them if they offered structured training and were seen to contribute to employee development. Employers in the care sector found that recruiting younger staff had become easier in some instances where they planned to use the NVQ level 2 as a stepping stone to a career in nursing. They had, however, found that older people were being dissuaded from working in care exactly because of the training requirements at level 2. Even where level 2 was not seen by employees as compulsory for carers, they perceived that it soon would be.

Employers in the construction industry felt that the NVQ level 2 assisted them in choosing between potential employees because those with the NVQ2 had demonstrated meeting a particular standard. This afforded them some kind of reassurance as to the quality of candidates. In other sectors, such as customer service, employers placed lesser emphasis on the NVQ level 2 and reported that they were likely to look for other qualities first. These employers did, however, acknowledge that the NVQ was another tool which could help to differentiate between candidates.

'I'm not going to say to somebody, 'right, well, you haven't got an NVQ so you're not getting the job'. Whereas somebody that has

got the NVQ, I mean, they're going to get a fair crack of the whip as well [...] I think I'd rather take the person on an individual merit and if they have got an NVQ then great 'cos I know that they're at that level.'

(Employer, customer service, medium)

Performance and productivity

Business performance and productivity were seen to be influenced by the core impacts on learners. Where learners experienced improved workplace skills, for example, this was said to have positive implications for their performance at work. This, in turn, impacted upon an individual's productivity and, ultimately, the productivity of the business as a whole.

The standards set by NVQs was felt by employers to make it easier to ensure that all their staff were *'singing from the same song sheet'*. This was particularly important for those sectors who felt open to the most public scrutiny, such as care, or in the construction industry where health and safety was a critical issue. Both employers and learners in this sector reported that staff had a better awareness and understanding of safety issues and of the procedures for reporting and dealing with hazards in the workplace. This improved performance had led to fewer accidents and a safer working environment.

The staff of a medium-sized employer in the engineering manufacturing trade have been doing NVQ2s in performing manufacturing operations. Following the first modules in health and safety and risk assessment, they approached their manager and demanded that they should wear safety glasses. This is something the organisation had been trying to encourage for some time without success. The manager sees this as a direct result of the training provided in the NVQ level 2.

'The first session was on risk assessment and straightaway they went out, they did the risk assessment, they came back and said 'we should be wearing safety glasses' and we said 'yes, we know, but try convincing you'.

Increased employee confidence and better understanding of job roles was seen to have positive implications for performance. For example, the chief executive of a medium-sized construction firm described change in his staff's ability to think independently and their levels of proactivity. He saw this as contributing to the organisation's productivity by encouraging employees to think for themselves and approach problems with logical and effective solutions.

Despite perceiving significant positive returns for productivity, employers also described drawbacks. Smaller employers, with fewer resources to replace staff temporarily than larger companies, found it difficult to release staff to college or on-site assessments because of the potential harm to their productivity. This issue was expected to worsen as more staff became aware of and wanted to enrol on level 2 learning though employers acknowledged that work-based learning was the best way

to minimise this effect. More generally, employers noted impacts on productivity from the administrative burden of the NVQ2, especially from in-house assessment. Overall though, the longer-term benefits for an organisation were believed to outweigh any initial detrimental impacts on productivity.

5.2.4 The impact on the sector

The combination of all those impacts for the learner and employer described above had ramifications for the sector as a whole. The resulting impacts affected the image of the sector in terms of how attractive it was perceived to be by current and potential employees. There were also impacts for the extent to which employers and the sector as a whole were perceived to be meeting industry standards for quality, safety and certification at level 2.

Improved sector image

Increasing the attainment of level 2 within individual organisations was seen by SSC representatives and employers as having very positive effects on the image of the sector more widely. Across many sectors, in particular the care and hospitality sectors, it was felt that the industry was benefiting from a change in image. The investment made by employers in learning and the returns experienced by individual employees was seen to contribute to an overall improvement in how whole sectors are regarded by those within it and by potential investors and employees. This is especially relevant for sectors like care who report being perceived as a 'last resort' by many job hunters.

'There was a perception that if you failed at everything else, you possibly drifted into this sector [care] and that has to change because we want to attract people who are much more career motivated, who are much more committed [...] you know, not just people who are taking it as an easy option because they can't do anything else. Our old people, particularly I think, deserve better.'

(Employer, care, medium)

Both employers and SSCs recognised that level 2 was very much an entry level qualification for those employees who had few or no other relevant qualifications and indeed saw level 2 as an effective way of introducing a learning culture to individual organisations and the sector as a whole. Again, this was seen as an important tool for changing the way sectors are perceived.

'I think the main benefit we get out of it is actively encouraging people back into a learning role [...] I think in terms of what this company has benefited from, it is that, you know, quite a few people that have achieved the NVQ Level 2 have since gone on and applied to do other

courses of their volition it's got them back into that learning technique, that learning environment.'

(Employer, engineering, medium)

Employers and SSCs were keen that these positive returns for sector image should not be undermined by sub-standard assessment and training by other employers and training providers. Indeed, they recognised that the sustainability of such positive returns depended on maintaining the quality of provision and assessment in the future.

Developing industry standards

Level 2 learning and certification was perceived by employers and SSC representatives to impact upon industry standards in various ways. First, the context and nature of the qualifications themselves were seen to be reflecting the development of industry standards, providing a benchmark for employees in assessing staff competence and providing instruction in key areas such as safety and quality. The attainment of level 2 qualifications by staff is therefore an indication that an employer and sector are meeting industry standards. Where sectors have specific targets for certification at level 2, in care and construction, the attainment of qualifications is further evidence of meeting those targets. Employers within these sectors were generally attempting to exceed targets for employees qualified at level 2 in anticipation of future regulations governing all staff working at this level.

Employers and SSC representatives in the construction, engineering and leisure sectors reported further practical benefits for meeting industry standards. Organisations in the leisure industry, with staff qualified at level 2, could reduce their insurance by demonstrating that staff had a certain level of health and safety awareness. In construction and engineering, employers used the fact their staff were qualified at level 2 to gain an advantage over competitors whose staff were not, demonstrating a level of competence and quality to prospective clients.

The full range of impacts described throughout this section are summarised in Figure 5.2

Figure 5.2 Overview of impacts derived from level 2 learning

CORE LEARNER	Workplace skills Sector specific skills Generic workplace skills Greater awareness & understanding of job role	Personal development self-esteem validation pride	Confidence increased self-belief in ability at work	
SECONDARY LEARNER	Further vocational learning affected attitudes Increased experiences	General employability proof of competence demonstrating commitment	Progression facilitated advancement	Wages higher rates of pay one-off payments
BUSINESS	Staff retention fostered loyalty equipped staff to leave	Staff recruitment attracting potential employees assisting employer practice	Performance & productivity improved employee performance greater business productivity	
SECTOR	Sector image improvement in how regarded by potential employees and investors	Industry standards contribute to development increased evidence of attainment		

5.3 Factors influencing the returns from level 2 learning

Whilst there were recurrent accounts of how job-related skills improved and how people developed personally as a direct result of level 2 learning, there were also instances where it was felt that the pursuit of a level 2 qualification was seen to have made little or no difference to people's lives. A multitude of factors can contribute to this perception – and these are discussed in this section. Unsurprisingly they relate directly to the path taken to learning and to the actual quality of the learning experience. They formed three distinct groups. The first related to the learner's engagement with the level 2 learning, the second to the role played by the employer and training provider and the third set concerned the design and execution of qualifications. These factors not only influenced the types of returns experienced but also when and how they were achieved and, as a consequence, give significant insight into how to maximise returns from level 2 vocational qualifications.

5.3.1 Learner engagement

The factors related to learner engagement encompassed the level of motivation, how appropriate or relevant they felt their qualification was and how well the qualification pursued fit with their learning needs.

Learner motivation

Each of the stakeholder groups interviewed saw the extent to which a learner was engaged with the qualification as key to determining the range and nature of returns. Where learners perceived they had little or no choice in deciding to undertake the qualification or felt ill-informed about its content and purpose, this had implications for their engagement with the qualification and, ultimately, their motivation for achieving it. Learners who were self-motivated and had perhaps even approached their employer about undertaking a level 2 themselves were more likely to perceive positive returns from the qualification, in particular in the form of benefits for their skills and self-development including self-esteem and confidence. Employers supported this view, recognising that forcing an employee to do a qualification was a waste of time for both parties.

'It's a waste of time, you know. The people that are made to do it, maybe we'd waste more time in their employment umm within their working hours, they might drag their feet a bit you know, I just don't it's not fair to push somebody into doing something they don't want to do, they've got to have a certain amount of, you know, willingness to do it.'

(Employer, customer service, medium)

Perceived relevance / appropriateness of qualification

Perceptions of relevance and appropriateness could often be traced back to a lack of information from the employer or training provider at the outset of undertaking a level 2 qualification. Where learners felt that they had been misled about either the content or the level of difficulty, they contributed to diminished perceptions of benefit.

Eileen achieved the NVQ level 2 in care in 2002 and works as a home help, carrying out duties such as cleaning and shopping for her clients. She had believed that achieving this qualification would 'passport' her to other types of care work yet found herself in exactly the same role nearly two years after certification. She described feeling 'fobbed off' by her employer whom she felt had limited understanding of the content of the NVQ level 2, having covered things that she felt she would never have the opportunity to use. Consequently, Eileen perceived no value from the level 2, stating she was 'neither better nor unhappy' as a result.

Age was a factor in determining the perceived relevance and appropriateness of the level 2 qualification. Older learners, who were nearing retirement or had been out of education for a long time and found the level 2 very challenging, saw little benefit from undertaking and achieving a level 2 qualification, feeling that there would be little chance for them to make use of it. This was especially true for older learners in certain care and construction roles who felt a greater pressure to undertake a qualification at level 2 because of the targets set for qualification within these sectors. This group perceived that qualifications were not relevant for them and were therefore less engaged with learning at level 2.

Fit with learning needs

The extent to which learners and employers wanted and perceived learning to take place further impacted upon the level of engagement with a qualification and the types of impacts experienced from level 2 learning. Expectations for learning very much depended on whether the level 2 was seen as a training and development programme or as a measure of competence. Where, for example, learners perceived a learning need and this was not fulfilled, they saw this negatively which could have implications for their perceptions of returns. Conversely, learners who had been in the same job role for some time and saw the NVQ level 2 as an exercise to prove they were competent in their role, found it difficult to identify positive returns from either undertaking or achieving it since they could identify no change to their level or range of skills and experienced no impacts on their work circumstances such as pay and progression.

Andrew, a 43 year old construction worker, has worked in the industry for 20 years. He was encouraged to undertake the NVQ level 2 in construction by his employer and admitted to having limited understanding of its purpose or potential outcomes. He perceived no benefits, currently or in the future, from the NVQ, though he could identify potential advantages for younger employees with less work experience.

5.3.2 The role of the employer and training provider

The factors related to the employer and training provider comprised the nature and quality of learner induction, the support available for learning within the workplace, including the time available for learning, and the nature, also perhaps the quality of the relationship between the learner and assessor.

- *Learner induction*

The level and detail of information provided to learners at the outset of undertaking a level 2 qualification, by both their employer and any training provider, was instrumental in determining their expectations for a qualification and therefore how they perceived its impact on them. Where learners had too little or no information about a qualification they could feel intimidated and resistant to undertaking learning, fearing the requirements for generating evidence and assessment. This, in turn, affected their engagement with the qualification, a further factor in determining returns. Learners also reported feeling misinformed about the relative benefits of achieving a level 2 qualification in relation to their prospects for pay and progression. There was disappointment at finding themselves in the same job role, at the same level or on the same rate of pay some time after qualification. This 'misinformation' appeared to be the result of whispers between colleagues rather than any deliberate action by employers.

- *Employer support*

The extent to which learners felt supported by their employer varied greatly across the sample, as explored in section 3.4. Individuals felt employers demonstrated this support in a number of ways. Some described employers taking an active role in their learning, either by providing internal assessors themselves, through their line managers taking an interest, giving time off for study or more informally, demonstrated by casual conversation and inquiry. Employers were also praised for organising award ceremonies for staff who had achieved their level 2. Where employers paid for learning, this was also seen as an important source of support. Good experiences of support from an employer heightened feelings of achievement and value among employees and could encourage a new intake of learners to undertake level 2 and further learning at level 3 among previous learners.

- *Time available for learning*

A further dimension of the support provided by an employer is the time made available for learning in the workplace. This had a significant impact for the way an

individual perceived the qualification overall. Where an employer allowed time within the working day for gathering evidence and completing assessments, the impact on the learner's personal life was less and therefore they perceived the qualification more favourably. This was also linked to perceptions of employer investment and the resulting feelings of being valued from having time allotted within the working week to undertake learning.

For people whose employers were unable to offer time to work towards a qualification at work or where the level 2 was being pursued through college, impacts on the personal life were greater. Where learners found this difficult to manage and perceived negative impacts for their home-life, their overall evaluations of the learning experience suffered.

Janet, a 44-year-old mother of two teenage children, undertook an NVQ2 in food preparation and cooking through her local college. The nature of her work meant her employer was unable to allow her any time off to attend college or undertake study. She felt that both her personal life and the quality of her work suffered because of the added pressure of undertaking a qualification in her own time.

- *Learner-assessor relationship*

The relationship between a learner and their assessor was often cited as key to the level 2 learning experience overall as it comprised much of the learner's day-to-day activity (see Section 3.3.3). Where this relationship was deemed unsatisfactory, there were implications for the quality of a learner's work and their overall confidence in their ability to undertake learning, at level 2 and beyond. For example, where appointments were routinely cancelled, rearranged or cut short, learners felt undervalued and disappointed and were likely to perceive the overall experience more negatively, though they understood the pressures for external assessors with many candidates. Learners also described instances where they were assigned several different assessors over the course of their level 2 experience, as many as four in one case, and the difficulties this posed in terms of building rapport with an assessor and learning how to work together. Such inconsistency was seen as detrimental to the entire learning experience.

5.3.3 Qualification design and execution

The final set of factors affecting the impact of level 2 learning concerned the procedures for generating evidence and the nature of the work-based learning environment.

- *Procedures for generating evidence*

Where learners felt that the procedures for gathering evidence had not been well explained and did not understand what was required of them, this could undermine their confidence in their abilities and subsequently have implications for their likelihood to undertake further learning. The extent to which the requirements for

generating and presenting evidence fitted a learner's individual skills and experience further influenced their feelings about the level 2 learning experience overall. For example, individuals who felt they lacked ability in writing were allowed to tape record conversations with assessors for evidence and perceived their experience more favourably than others who had not had this opportunity.

Across the sample, learners described a range of procedures for generating and presenting evidence however appropriate tools were not always available to every individual. This is an area identified for development in Chapter 6.

- *The work-based learning environment*

The factors outlined above were evident in the accounts of learners' experiences of level 2 learning. Employers and SSC representatives identified a further factor, that NVQs can be undertaken in the workplace, which they felt was instrumental to the value derived from level 2 vocational learning and certification.

The primary benefit identified for the learner is that undertaking learning in their familiar work environment is a less intimidating and alien experience compared with having to attend college and one which lends itself to the gathering of evidence. The employer feels some assurance that the qualification content will be relevant to the employee's day-to-day work by virtue of its basis in the workplace.

The experiences of learners who attended college would seem to support the notion that the work-based environment can enhance the NVQ experience. This group identified similar areas for development as did other learners however the key disadvantage they perceived was the segregation of the qualification and the 'real' working environment. This, they felt, left people without work-experience in the sector at a disadvantage for completing the NVQ and in future employment.

There is, therefore, a wide range of returns over and above those associated with labour market prospects from undertaking learning at level 2. Learners, employers and SSCs hold very similar views of what this range comprises and when such impacts are experienced. The factors determining the benefits derived give an important indication of the optimum circumstances for the delivery of level 2 vocational qualifications.

6 CONCLUSION

This chapter aims to summarise the main findings of this study and draw out the key implications for policy that seeks to encourage, enable and support adults to undertake vocational learning at level 2, or that aims to maximise the returns from learning for individuals, employers and the wider business sector.

6.1 The value of level 2 learning

This research has sought to explore the process of learning by examining learners' accounts of NVQ level 2 qualifications, within the context of the views of employers and sector representatives about the benefits of level 2 learning more generally. The accounts of all three respondent groups contribute to a broadly positive interpretation of the value of level 2 learning. Learners outlined a broad range of motivations for engaging in level 2 learning – to improve their current work situation, to develop skills and to enhance future employment options. The evidence presented here suggests that these motivations are realistic and, for the most part, that the existing processes of learning at level 2 can and do produce these sorts of outcomes. Level 2 vocational learning creates a range of direct and perceivable impacts on those who engage in it – by enhancing their level of skill to do their current job, and by producing a range of personal impacts, such as improved self-esteem and self-confidence, that not only enhances work lives but also has benefits for personal lives and family relationships. These core changes brought about by learning contribute to a range of other effects such as improved opportunities for career progression and enhanced feelings of employability. Attainment of level 2 qualifications has also given some a greater appetite for learning and development and learners do appear to progress to learning at higher levels as a direct result of their level 2 learning experience. Attainment of level 2 has a less obvious effect on wages. This presents a significant challenge to the marketing of these qualifications because learners cite financial gain as one of the range of motivating factors for setting out on the learning path.

The range of impacts uncovered by this research challenges the prevailing view within the literature regarding the benefits of level 2 qualifications that level 2 qualifications, particularly NVQ level 2s, have little or no benefit for those who undertake them. However, it does support the view that certification at level 2 does not have a direct economic return for many individual candidates. Moreover, the findings on the impacts of learning lend support to any Government policy that aims to increase take-up of level 2 learning or that aims to support business in the provision of level 2 vocational learning, such as the Adult Learning Grant, and the recently announced National Employer Training Programme. Indeed, more generally they underscore the importance of continued investment in skill development.

The impact of level 2 learning is not confined to learners. The impact on the individual translates into important returns for employers and for business more generally by contributing to a more developed and competent workforce, to increased performance and to greater productivity. There are mixed views, however, about whether the provision of vocational qualifications can aid or complicate staff retention. Wider benefits for business include the creation of a more positive image and greater refinement and monitoring of industry standards.

6.2 The process of learning

These returns are, of course, not guaranteed but dictated by a range of issues related to the process of learning. This research, while not attempting to evaluate any individual qualification, has uncovered a range of issues identified by learners and employers as being crucial to the successful operation of level 2 learning and, ultimately, the experience of benefit. This information will undoubtedly be useful to those involved in the design and provision of qualifications, including SSCs, awarding bodies, and assessment centres.

The effective engagement of the learner is a key contribution to the success of learning experience. This research has highlighted the varied motivations of learners for pursuing qualifications and this information will be useful for the design of future marketing and information campaigns to increase the take-up of level 2 vocational qualifications. While it is clear that individuals will be guided by their own motivations for learning, this research also highlights the advantages of having a diverse range of sources of information and advice about vocational learning and the important role of the employer in encouraging people to develop skills. However, it also highlights the effect that undue influence on learners' decision to learn, choice of qualification and even choice of qualification units can have for learner engagement in the learning process.

The structure and content of qualifications is also important in enhancing the quality of learning experiences. Of key importance here is the mode of learning. Clear preferences exist amongst learners about whether it is better to learn in a college or in the workplace, although neither mode could be said, from the evidence collected, to be more beneficial. Rather, achieving the right match of learning mode with an individual's work situation and to their personal circumstances is more important. The success of other aspects of level 2 qualifications is apparently guided by similar considerations. No single recipe for the 'right' kind of learning experience emerged and learners across all sectors had varying perspectives on issues such as learning style and the pace of learning. This underscores the importance of continued diversity in the provision of NVQ level 2s. As other examinations of NVQs (such as the 'Review of the Top 100 NVQs and SVQs') have found in the past, a critical factor influencing the learning process is the clarity of course qualification instruction and guidance. There is evidence to suggest from this study that this has improved, however, some criticisms of the accessibility of the language and the use of jargon still remain.

This research suggests that the current range of methods available for gathering and presenting evidence, and flexibility therein, are valued by learners. However, there is also some indication that the guidelines about evidence gathering are not universally understood by learners. This inhibits the flexibility that could exist in delivery. There were some employers who felt that inconsistent practice could detract from the development and maintenance of high standards. The assessors are depicted by learners as playing a variety of different roles within the current system, ranging from pure measurement of competence to roles that offer greater levels of support for learning. While more didactic roles were valued by learners, this sort of approach to 'assessment' is not what is intended in the design of vocational qualifications. Moreover, the different roles occur variously, and do not always match what learners require.

The final aspect of the learning process that merits attention here is the level of support available for learning. There are many different sources of support available to learners within and outside the workplace. This is important at the outset of learning in helping individuals to make informed choices about career direction. The extent of learners' prior experience of learning and work, and their personal characteristics such as self-esteem and confidence also determine their need for support and guidance throughout the learning process. This endorses the plans for support of adult learners outlined in the recent white paper (DfES, 2005b).

6.3 The challenge of meeting diverse needs

A key conclusion of this study is how the sectors consulted differ in a whole range of ways, not least in terms of the perceived need for level 2 learning, the recognition shown to level 2 qualifications, and the ways in which level 2 learning is resourced and accessed. There are also significant differences between business sectors in the range of level 2 qualifications available and the demographics of the workforce who undertake them. This diversity poses two important challenges for the design and delivery of policy that aims to enhance the take up of vocational qualifications at level 2 and indeed at other levels.

The first concerns how level 2 qualifications are accessed and delivered. There is a concern that where the current funding strategies do not match the skill needs of individual sectors, that this can limit opportunities for learning. For example, employers and SSC representatives in certain sectors bemoaned the channelling of funding towards learners who undertake a level 2 qualification as part of an apprenticeship for two reasons. First, an apprenticeship does not suit the needs of all employers. Similarly, resources are not always accessible for level 2 learning amongst employees who are over the age of 25 or for qualifications above and below level 2⁸. These restrictions do not reflect the diverse needs for training across

⁸ Since this research was completed, the Government has begun trials of Apprenticeships for adults in three sectors - health and social care, construction, and engineering. The trials will initially focus on apprenticeships at level 3 and may have an effect on the availability of funding discussed here.

sectors and can affect employer willingness to provide vocational qualifications at level 2 which, in turn, will limit opportunity to learn at level 2. Indeed, whilst this study consulted only those people who *have* undertaken a level 2 qualification, the evidence suggests that a lack of funding, or a need to self-fund, could potentially be a significant barrier to vocational learning, particularly at level 3.

The second issue relates to the ongoing need for vocational qualifications, including those at level 2, to be as flexible as possible. Vocational qualifications are, by their very nature, designed to be flexible to maximise their benefit to employers, their suitability for learners, and so increase take-up. The message from employers and sector representatives underlines the need for qualifications to continue to evolve in this regard, creating more flexibility and choice for employers and learners. SSCs reported that they have already or soon plan to review the range of qualifications offered in their sectors so that they remain useful for the sector. Moreover, further development of vocational qualifications towards a system of accreditation that is credit - or unit-based has been suggested by several SSCs as a potential way to increase the flexibility of the current qualifications framework. This would mean that individuals could undertake relevant NVQ units across a range of qualifications rather than being compelled to complete full qualifications when only part is relevant to their or their employer's needs. Some sectors have already embraced this approach – the new ITQ offered within the e-skills sector is an example of how vocational qualifications can be tailor-made to suit the needs of a particular employer or learner.

Of course, there are limits to the extent of flexibility that could feasibly be sustained without creating confusion amongst learners and employers. Nevertheless, both SSC representatives and employers are clear that it has advantages, not least in that it would increase the likelihood that *'qualifications fit people rather than people having to fit qualifications'*.

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8 APPENDICES

Appendix A – National Qualifications Framework

Source - QCA

Framework level	Level indicators	Examples of qualifications
Entry	Entry level qualifications recognise basic knowledge and skills and the ability to apply learning in everyday situations under direct guidance or supervision. Learning at this level involves building basic knowledge and skills and is not geared towards specific occupations.	Qualifications are offered at Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3, in a range of subjects
Level 1	Level 1 qualifications recognise basic knowledge and skills and the ability to apply learning with guidance or supervision. Learning at this level is about activities which mostly relate to everyday situations and may be linked to job competence.	NVQ 1; Certificate in Plastering; GCSEs Grades D – G; Certificate in Motor Vehicle Studies
Level 2	Level 2 qualifications recognise the ability to gain a good knowledge and understanding of a subject area of work or study, and to perform varied tasks with some guidance or supervision. Learning at this level involves building knowledge and/or skills in relation to an area of work or a subject area and is appropriate for many job roles.	NVQ 2; GCSEs Grades A* - C; Certificate in Coaching Football; Diploma for Beauty Specialists
Level 3	Level 3 qualifications recognise the ability to gain, and where relevant apply a range of knowledge, skills and understanding. Learning at this level involves obtaining detailed knowledge and skills. It is appropriate for people wishing to go to university, people working independently, or in some areas supervising and training others in their field of work.	Certificate for Teaching Assistants; NVQ 3; A levels; Advanced Extension Awards; Certificate in Small Animal Care
Level 4	Level 4 qualifications recognise specialist learning and involve detailed analysis of a high level of information and knowledge in an area of work or study. Learning at this level is appropriate for people working in technical and professional jobs, and/or managing and developing others. Level 4 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Certificates of Higher Education.	Diploma in Sport & Recreation; Certificate in Site Management; Certificate in Early Years Practice

<p>Level 5</p>	<p>Level 5 qualifications recognise the ability to increase the depth of knowledge and understanding of an area of work or study to enable the formulation of solutions and responses to complex problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the demonstration of high levels of knowledge, a high level of work expertise in job roles and competence in managing and training others. Qualifications at this level are appropriate for people working as higher grade technicians, professionals or managers. Level 5 qualifications are at a level equivalent to intermediate Higher Education qualifications such as Diplomas of Higher Education, Foundation and other degrees that do not typically provide access to postgraduate programmes.</p>	<p>Diploma in Construction; Certificate in Performing Arts</p>
<p>Level 6</p>	<p>Level 6 qualifications recognise a specialist high level knowledge of an area of work or study to enable the use of an individual's own ideas and research in response to complex problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the achievement of a high level of professional knowledge and is appropriate for people working as knowledge-based professionals or in professional management positions. Level 6 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Bachelors degrees with honours, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas.</p>	<p>Certificate or Diploma in Management</p>
<p>Level 7</p>	<p>Level 7 qualifications recognise highly developed and complex levels of knowledge which enable the development of in-depth and original responses to complicated and unpredictable problems and situations. Learning at this level involves the demonstration of high level specialist professional knowledge and is appropriate for senior professionals and managers. Level 7 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Masters degrees, postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas.</p>	<p>Diploma in Translation; Fellowship in Music Literacy</p>
<p>Level 8</p>	<p>Level 8 qualifications recognise leading experts or practitioners in a particular field. Learning at this level involves the development of new and creative approaches that extend or redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.</p>	<p>Specialist awards</p>

Appendix B – Letters to respondents

OPT-OUT LETTER TO LEARNERS

(sent by Assessment Centres)

Dear **[learner's name]**,

Experiences of studying for a Level 2 vocational qualification

We would like to ask for your help with an important study to understand people's experiences of studying for a Level 2 vocational qualification. The study is being undertaken by an independent research organisation, the National Centre for Social Research, on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills who have asked us to distribute this letter on their behalf.

The researchers would like to talk to people like you who are currently studying for a Level 2 vocational qualification to find out why you decided to do your course and to hear about your experiences of the course so far.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Researchers will be talking to learners in groups of up to 10 people and everyone who takes part in a group will be given £20 as a thank you for giving up their time. Everything discussed will be treated in the strictest confidence and it will not be possible to identify any individual or institution in the research report.

We hope that you will decide to take part in this study. If, however, you do not want a researcher to contact you, please either write to **[contact name]** at **[address of assessment centre]** or telephone **[him / her]** on **[contact number]** leaving your name before **[date]**. If we have not heard from you by then, we will provide the research organisation with your contact details and one of their research team may contact you to discuss your participation. Unfortunately, the research team will not be able to talk to everyone – if you are not contacted, we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your interest.

If you have any queries or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact **[contact name]** on **[contact number]**.

Yours sincerely,

[contact name at assessment centre]

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO LEARNERS

Dear [learner's name],

Experiences of studying for a Level 2 vocational qualification

You may remember receiving a letter recently asking for your help with an important study to understand experiences of studying for NAME OF QUALIFICATION. Your contact details have been passed to us by NAME OF ASSESSMENT CENTRE and one of our researchers may try to contact you in the next week or so to see if you would like to take part and arrange a convenient time to come and talk to you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, however, we do hope that you will decide to take part if invited to by one of our researchers. During the interviews, we would like to hear about why you decided to do NAME OF QUALIFICATION and your experiences so far. The interview will last about one and a half hours and will take place in your home (or somewhere else if you prefer). Everyone who takes part will be given **£20** as a small token of thanks for their help. Unfortunately, it will not be possible for us to contact everybody to take part in this study. If we do not contact you, we would like to thank you for your interest in this research so far.

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) is an independent research organisation and everything you say will be treated confidentially. We are carrying out this research on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills.

If you have any questions, please call me at NatCen on [telephone number]. Alternatively, you may prefer to email me at [email address]. Also, please let us know if there is anything that we can do to make it easier for you to take part.

Yours sincerely,

Qualitative Research Unit
National Centre for Social Research

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO EMPLOYERS

Dear **[employer's name]**,

I am writing to ask for your help with a study NatCen is carrying out for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) into employer perceptions of Level 2 vocational qualifications. DfES has commissioned this research as part of a wider study investigating the benefits of undertaking a level 2 vocational qualification.

We would very much like to interview you or another member of staff who has responsibility for Human Resources or employee training and development. The interview would involve talking to one of our researchers for about an hour to an hour and a half at a time and location convenient to you. The types of issues we would talk about would be how your organisation views the current range of level 2 vocational qualifications and the extent to which they meet your needs.

We hope to conduct the interviews in January and early February. I will follow up this letter with a phone call to discuss everything further. I will also, of course, be happy to answer any questions you might have about the research at that point or at any point in the future.

Please note that any information provided to NatCen will be used for the purposes of this study alone. Furthermore the identity of participating individuals and companies will be kept confidential to NatCen and will not be disclosed to DfES.

If you have any queries about the research please contact me on [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or my colleague [CONTACT NAME] on [TELEPHONE NUMBER].

We would very much value your contribution to this important study and hope you will be able to take part.

Yours sincerely,

Qualitative Research Unit
National Centre for Social Research

Appendix C – Topic Guides

Exploring the benefits of Level 2 vocational qualifications for adult learners

Depth interviews with SSC representatives

Research Objectives

The central objective of this interview is to explore SSC representatives' perceptions of the value of Level 2 vocational qualifications. Specifically;

- Understand how Level 2 vocational qualifications are seen to benefit employers, employees and the sector as a whole
- Explore the extent to which Level 2 vocational qualifications currently meet the needs of the sector and its employers

Interviews across sectors will enable an analysis of how level 2 vocational qualifications are valued within and across different skills sectors.

These depth interviews will be supported by three further stages of research exploring different aspects of undertaking a Level 2 qualification, including learners and employers.

Notes to interviewer:

- Interviewers should prepare by familiarising self with details of the individual SSC using SSC and SSSDA websites, relevant sections from the “Working Futures” document and individual sector skills agreements.
- Level 2 vocational qualifications is abbreviated to ‘L2VQs’ for brevity within the topic guide only and should not be used in discussions with respondents.

1. Introduction

Aim: to introduce the research and ensure the respondent is comfortable with the research environment

- Introduce self, NatGen
- Introduce research: *for DfES to understand how you perceive the value of Level 2 vocational qualifications within your sector, including how they currently benefit your sector and how they might be improved. This is part of a wider programme of research which also includes discussions with both learners and employers.*
- Reassure re: confidentiality, tape recording, length of discussion (up to 1 ½ hours)
- Any questions?

2. SSC and sector background

Aim: to introduce the respondent and set the context for the rest of the discussion

- Respondent introduction
 - Position / title
 - Length of time in role
 - Role and responsibilities
 - Explore any specific responsibilities for qualifications within sector (especially L2)

- SSC introduction
 - Length of time SSC established
 - Role and remit of SSC within sector
 - SSC aim / what trying to achieve
 - Probe specifically in relation to learning

- Sector context / relationships with other sector organisations
 - Who are sector stakeholders
 - Role of SSC in managing / overseeing relationships

- SSC activities in relation to;
 - Skills development
 - Learning
 - Developing occupational standards
 - Qualifications
 - Developing strategies for learning
 - Specific activities in relation to L2VQs

3. Overview of current Level 2 qualifications within sector

Aim: to understand respondents' views about L2VQs and their role /place within the sector.

- Briefly explore L2VQs within sector at present
 - Relevant L2VQs available (if necessary, prompt using interviewer preparation)
 - Prevalence of L2VQs vs. other relevant qualifications

Explain that will be focusing on NVQ2s within interview but would be interested if respondents have differing views for other sorts of L2VQs within their sector

- Explore context of L2VQs within sector
 - Who aimed at
 - Content and level of difficulty
 - How promoted
 - How people learn and are certified
- Explore role of L2VQs within sector
 - Level of need for L2VQs (e.g. vs. L1 or L3)
 - Skills needs they fulfil
 - Probe needs of employers and employees
 - Fit with other sector qualifications
 - Uniqueness
 - Specific aspects of L2VQs that meet needs of sector
 - Areas where L2VQs don't meet the needs of the sector
 - Extent of recognition within sector (especially employers)
- Explore role of SSCs in supporting L2VQs within sector (including provision of information)

4. Current benefits and drawbacks of L2VQs

Aim: to understand respondents' views of the value of relevant L2VQs to sector stakeholders and the sector as a whole

- Explore benefits and drawbacks (value and returns) of L2VQs to;
 - Individual (e.g. job retention and prospects, career progression / opportunities, further training, wages increase, personal / self development)
 - Employer (e.g. staff skill level, staff retention / recruitment, time / financial investment)
 - other relevant sector stakeholders (as identified earlier)
 - sector as a whole
- Explore differences between types of L2VQs in terms of benefits and drawbacks for individual / employers / stakeholders / sector. Probe separately by;
 - qualification type
 - learning route (e.g. individual or employer, work or college based)

Follow up mentions of differences by awarding body only if mentioned spontaneously by respondent

- What aspects of a L2VQ make it more likely to be of benefit? Explore specific aspects benefiting;
 - individual
 - employer
 - other stakeholders
 - sector as a whole
- Explore impact of employee certification at level 2;
 - Skill level within sector
 - Recruitment and retention within sector
 - General impact on employer / workplace e.g. time needed, balance of investment vs. return, opportunity costs
 - Employer willingness to provide training
 - Other impacts on sector
- Explore perceived views of specific sector stakeholders about L2VQs
 - Employers
 - Probe relevance of L2 training to workplace
 - Trade Unions
 - Other stakeholders
 - Probe recognition of L2VQs by various sector stakeholders (including employers, Trade Unions, etc.)
- Compare value of L2VQ vs. other qualifications to sector
- Assess value of L2VQ in own right vs. as precursor to higher level learning

5. Suggestions for improvements

Aim: explore future for L2VQs within the sector, including suggestions for improvements

- Explore how well sector is currently served by L2VQs
 - Where working well
 - Where not working well
 - Where are gaps in provision
 - Current and future implications for sector
- What improvements are needed
 - Skills learnt (the skills people need to learn, skills gaps that exist)
 - Level of skills (the extent of skills development)

- Method of learning (the way that people learn)
- Role of assessment (how skills development or learning is assessed and ultimately certified)
- Any other improvements
- Probe views on 'unitisation' (being able to do different units towards a qualification over time)
- Value of these improvements to;
 - individuals
 - employers
 - other stakeholders
 - sector as a whole
- How to achieve these improvements – role of;
 - SSC
 - Other stakeholders within sector
 - Other stakeholders outside sector e.g. QCA, qualifications authorities, DfES, etc.
- Briefly explore current / future plans of SSC in relation to sector qualifications
 - Support needed – probe role for DfES
- Anything else want to mention

Thank respondent and close

Exploring the benefits of Level 2 vocational qualifications for adult learners

Depth interviews with Current and Past Learners

Research Objectives

The central objective of this research is to explore the range of benefits offered by Level 2 vocational qualifications to current and past adult learners. Specifically;

- Explore *the experience* of undertaking a Level 2 vocational qualification, particularly those aspects which have worked well and those which have not;
- *Map and understand the range of returns* from undertaking a level 2 qualification;
- *Explore the impact* of gaining a level 2 qualification on all aspects of respondents' lives.

These in-depth interviews will be supported by further stages of research exploring different aspects of undertaking a Level 2 vocational qualification.

Findings will be used to improve the design, delivery and use of these qualifications.

1. Introduction

Aim: to introduce the research and interview situation.

- Introduce self, NatCen
- Introduce research: *for DfES to understand what it's like to pursue the vocational qualifications you're currently doing / have completed, including what your experience of the qualification has been like, your circumstances before beginning it, your reasons for doing it, the sorts of benefits that you have derived from it, and the impact it has had on your life*
- Explain: confidentiality, tape recording, length of discussion (between one and one-and-a-half hours), reporting
- Any questions?

2. Respondent introduction

Aim: to introduce the respondent and set the context for the proceeding discussion.

- Age
- Who else in household – probe for children and any other caring responsibilities
- Whether working or not

- If working;
 - What it involves
 - Brief description of main activities / responsibilities
 - Hours
 - How long worked there
 - How long worked in that sector
 - What done prior to current / most recent employment - probe for in same or other sector(s)
- If not working:
 - What does most days
 - When last worked
 - What doing

3. **Overview of learning**

Aim: to explore the nature of current/recent learning experiences to a) identify appropriate level 2 qualifications and b) explore the nature of level 2 qualifications

- Explore all current and recently completed learning
 - qualification names and descriptions
 - when started
 - when think will finish (if not already)
 - how far through
 - hours – f/t vs. p/t

Note the language used to refer to level 2 qualification/learning and use this throughout the remainder of the interview

For level 2 qualification only

- What does / did learning *involve*
- *Structure* of qualification – core elements vs. optional elements
- *How learning happens / happened* – in work time, in own time
- *Method/mode*
 - Extent of college / other institution-based learning, workplace-based learning, distance learning (and combination)
- *Assessment* (including methods and frequency)
- Nature of *support* for learning in workplace and/or college / learning institution
 - Role of mentoring
 - Whether any financial compensation from employer for learning
- Source of *funding* for learning

- Explore *how this qualification differs from others* they know about in this subject area (i.e. different types and levels of qualifications)

NOTE For **PAST** learners, sections 4-7 will be very affected by recall. For qualifications that were completed some time ago, it may be difficult for the respondent to recollect precisely. Attempt to cover these sections as much as possible, but it is likely that responses will be less precise than with current learners.

4. Circumstances prior to Level 2 learning

Aim: to understand the circumstances people were in immediately prior to embarking on a level 2 qualification.

- Ask respondent to think back to before they started the level 2 qualification
- Explore what things were like for them in the following areas:
 - *Education and training*
 - Highest level of attainment
 - Previous NVQ learning
 - Level
 - In which sector(s)
 - Other work based training
 - *Work*
 - Overall views about work / job at that time
 - Views about kind of work involved in / the sector
 - How felt about working conditions in their job at that time
 - Adequacy of wages
 - What felt were their work prospects
 - Whether had plans for future (career / job, education)
 - What interest they had in further learning
- *Anything else* important around that time (where appropriate, probe personal circumstances – such as relationships, children, etc)

5. Awareness of Level 2 learning options – CURRENT LEARNERS ONLY

Aim: to explore the range of sources of information about level 2 learning accessed and their relative usefulness.

- What type of information they had access to about level 2 learning (oral, printed etc)
 - Sources of information e.g. employer, colleagues, family, friends
- Usefulness of sources and types of information
- How found out about current qualification in particular
 - Who / what instrumental

6. Motivations for level 2 learning

Aim: to understand why people embark on Level 2 vocational learning

- Explore primary motivations for Level 2 learning
 - *Work circumstances*
 - change of role / responsibilities
 - actual or potential redundancy
 - employer initiative / direction / requirement
 - colleagues undertaking same or similar qualification/s
 - colleagues achieved same or similar qualifications
 - *Career plans*
 - Wish to progress (immediate and longer term)
 - Wanted to change (explore reasons for, esp. higher earnings vs. more interesting)
 - *Personal development / fulfilment*
 - *Learning aspirations*
 - Wanted to learn more/or be better trained
 - What was the intention and eventual aims
 - *Income / financial gain*
 - Any other motivating factors
- Explore how thought a level 2 qualification would help to achieve these aims.
 - Why felt a level 2 would do this – as opposed to other levels like level 1 or level 3
 - Whether level 2 was seen as a stepping stone to higher qualifications.

- Gauge extent to which motivation to undertake level 2 qualification was respondent's own or down to external factors
 - Explore (if haven't already nature of external factors)
- Identify (if possible) the most important motivating factor in decision to learn

7. Decision-making around level 2 qualification

Aim: to understand how people make decisions about what qualification to pursue, including how they will learn.

- Explore decision-making process for choosing specific Level 2 qualification. What factors considered / weighed up. Probe:
 - *Subject*
 - Qualification content and coverage
 - *Level or type* qualification (why level 2 rather than level 1 or 3)
 - *Method for learning* e.g. classroom vs. work-based, full-time vs. part-time, distance learning
 - *Duration* of qualification
 - *Cost*
 - *Location*
 - *Plans for career / job*
 - *Employer wishes / requirements*
 - *Personal commitments* e.g. partner, dependants, work
 - *Other factors*
- Most important factor in decision to undertake specific qualification embarked upon

8. Barriers to level 2 learning

Aim: to explore the range and significance of barriers to level 2 learning experienced.

- Explore:
 - whether anything made it difficult to undertake qualification
 - whether anything made it look less likely they would undertake it
- PROBE:
- previous *education* (including belief about personal skill level)

- *work* experience
- availability of *information* about the qualification and what was involved
- *availability / choice* of qualifications available
- *cost* of qualification
- *location* (inc whether had transport needs)
- *time* available
- *family* and other *commitments* (e.g. childcare responsibilities)
- compensation for learning (e.g. additional wages for extra time at work)

9. Expectations of Level 2 learning

Aim: explore what they expected level 2 learning to be like

- Ask what thought learning would be like (expectations). Probe:
 - *Content* (level, coverage, relevance to current work / work plans)
 - *Structure* (order of coverage)
 - *Workload*
 - *Level* (how difficult / easy)
 - *Mode* of learning (e.g. classroom, workplace, both)
 - *Teaching* styles – tutors, class size (if appropriate)
 - *How they would learn* - individual vs. group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience (if relevant), exams
 - *Assessment*
 - *Support* available (inside and outside the workplace)
 - *Time* involved
 - *Duration* of course
 - What *other learners* would be like

10. Level 2 learning experience

Aim: to understand the experience of undertaking a Level 2 vocational qualification, particularly those aspects which work well and those that would benefit from improvement.

- Ask respondent to describe what Level 2 learning *is like in practice* and how feel about specific aspects (relate back to expectations). Allow spontaneous comments then probe:
 - *Content* (level, coverage, relevance to current work / work plans)
 - *Structure* (order of coverage)

- *Workload*
- *Level* (how difficult / easy)
- *Mode* of learning (e.g. classroom, workplace)
 - Experience of *work-based learning*
 - Extent / relevance of *work experience / placement activity*
- *Teaching styles* – tutors, class size (if appropriate)
- *How they would learn* - individual vs. group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience (if relevant), exams (if taken, probe whether passed or not)
- *Support* available (inside and outside the workplace)
- *Time* involved (difference between those learning full time and part time)
- *Duration* of course
- What *other learners* are like
- Gain overview of
 - What aspects like / what aspects don't like
 - What works well / what doesn't work well
- Explore anything that has interrupted or complicated learning since started
- Completion
 - likelihood to complete current qualification (if still undertaking learning)
 - factors potentially leading to non-completion
 - if have not completed – explore why not

11. Impact of level 2 learning – CURRENT LEARNERS ONLY

Aim: to understand fully the current impact of learning and the expected impact of achieving a Level 2 vocational qualification on all aspects of life. (NOTE: this will be covered in greater depth with past learners)

- Attitudes to learning now – explore any difference from before began L2 learning
- Explore the impact of L2 learning on them so far
 - *How they do their job* (better skills, knowledge, awareness, understanding, practice generally)
 - *Feelings about work*
 - Security in current employment
 - Prospects for future progression in this job and others

- Confidence in abilities at work
- How viewed by colleagues/employers
- Plans for *further learning* / qualifications
- *Personal / self development*
- Income / wages
- *Family or household* circumstances
- Whether expected these impacts
- Whether any other impacts that people foresee in the future (either for the duration of their learning or when it is done)
 - What are these
 - When will they become apparent
 - what will bring them about

11. Impact of level 2 learning and qualification – PAST LEARNERS ONLY

Aim: to understand fully the impact of achieving a Level 2 vocational qualification on all aspects of life.

- Explore what impact attaining a level 2 qualification has had – spontaneous first, then probe:

FOR PERIODS IN WORK:

- *How they do their job* (better skills, knowledge, awareness, understanding, practice generally)
- Confidence in abilities at work
- How viewed by colleagues/employers
- *Feelings about work / role(s)*
- Income/wage level
- Job security
- Prospects for career or role progression

FOR PERIODS OUT OF WORK (if any)

- Type of work sought (sector, role etc)
- Job search strategy
- How qualification affected their employability
 - from their perspective
 - how they feel employers viewed it

FOR ALL (whether in work or not)

- Effect on attitudes to learning
 - explore any difference from before began L2 learning
- *Impact on further learning / qualifications*
 - Type/level of learning - probe specifically:
 - any other level 2 qualifications in this or other areas
 - any level 3 qualifications
 - How accessed / triggers for participation
 - Qualification / accreditation attached
 - Reasons for choice / why began learning (probe: to gain more skills, to achieve a certain level of qualification, re-skill, move into different sector / type of work)
 - Whether current or completed
- Impact on *how feel about self*
 - Confidence, self esteem, etc.
- How others (outside of work) view them
- Whether/how affected *family or household* circumstances
- *Other* positive or negative *impacts*

EXPLORE FOR ALL IMPACTS MENTIONED

- *When* these impacts emerged (i.e. during or after attained qualification)
- Were they *anticipated* (relate back to expectations)
 - Explore any *unmet* expectations
 - Explore if/how expectations have been *exceeded*
- Whether these impacts have been/will be *sustained*
- The degree to which these changes are *due to qualification or other factors*
 - Explore what these other factors are
- Which aspect of life/career has seen the *greatest impact*
- What *aspect of the learning* experience has *been of most benefit*

- How might things be different (better/worse) *if had not undertaken a level 2 qualification*
- Whether any other *impacts* that people foresee *in the future*
 - What are these
 - When will they become apparent
 - What will bring them about

12. Suggested improvements

Aim: to gather suggestions about how L2 qualifications can be improved in the future; to round off discussion, ensuring all relevant topics covered.

- Explore suggested improvements (drawing where appropriate on issues already raised)
 - Initial *information* about qualification(s)
 - *Advice* and guidance about
 - how / whether to learn
 - how to access courses
 - *Content* (level, coverage)
 - *Structure* (order of coverage)
 - *Workload*
 - *Level* (how difficult / easy)
 - *Mode* of learning (e.g. classroom, workplace)
 - work-based learning
 - work experience / placement activity
 - *Teaching styles* – tutors, class size (if appropriate)
 - *Learning styles* - individual vs. group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience (if relevant), exams (if taken)
 - *Support* available (inside and outside the workplace)
 - *Hours*
 - *Duration* of course
- Who should be responsible for these improvements
- What difference would improvements make / have made to their learning
- Whether would recommend level2 learning to others or not

- Anything else want to mention

Thank respondents and close
Give incentive payment

Exploring the benefits of Level 2 vocational qualifications for adult learners

Depth interviews with EMPLOYERS

Research Objectives

The central objective of this interview is to explore employer views on level 2 qualifications. Specifically, to understand:

- How level 2 qualifications are viewed by employers;
- Whether the current range of qualifications and skills learnt fit with the needs of employers from a variety of sectors;
- What are the benefits and drawbacks for employers whose employees undertake level 2 qualifications while working, compared to those who do not?

Interviews across sectors will enable an analysis of how level 2 vocational qualifications are valued within and across different sectors and by different size employers. These depth interviews will be supported by three further stages of research exploring different aspects of undertaking a Level 2 qualification, including learners and SSCs.

Notes to interviewer:

- **Level 2 vocational qualifications is abbreviated to ‘L2VQs’ for brevity within the topic guide only and should not be used in discussions with respondents.**
- **Explain that will be focusing on NVQ2s within interview but would be interested if respondents have differing views for other sorts of L2VQs within their sector**

1. Introduction

Aim: to introduce the research and ensure the respondent is comfortable with the research environment

- Introduce self, NatCen
- Introduce research: *for DfES to understand how L2VQs are viewed, including how they currently benefit you as an employer and how they might be improved. This is part of a wider programme of research, which also includes discussions with both learners and Sector Skills Council representatives.*
- Reassure re: confidentiality, tape recording, length of discussion (approx.1 hour)
- Any questions?

2. Employer & company / business background

Aim: to introduce the respondent and set the context for the rest of the discussion

- Respondent introduction
 - Position / title
 - Length of time in role
 - Role and responsibilities
 - Explore any specific responsibilities for training /qualifications within company (especially L2)

- Company / business introduction
 - Length of time company / business established
 - Scope of operation
 - National / international
 - Number of sites
 - Number of employees
 - Nature of work company / business involved in

- Company / business attitudes & activities in relation to;
 - Skills development
 - Learning
 - Qualifications
 - Specific activities in relation to Level 2 quals.

3. The availability of Level 2 qualifications within company / business

Aim: to understand respondents' views about Level 2 quals and their role /place within their organisation

- Briefly explore all VQs undertaken within company at present
 - Overview of which Level 2 quals available for employees to undertake within their workplace
 - Whether any relevant level 2 qualifications not available – reasons for this
 - Whether view certain Level 2 qualifications as better than others
 - Reasons for this
 - Prevalence of Level 2 qualifications vs. other relevant vocational qualifications within company (i.e. qualifications at Level 1 or Level 3)
 - Proportion of workforce at different levels

- Which level is priority

4. The delivery of level 2 qualifications within company

- Explore delivery of Level 2 qualifications within business / company
 - Who aimed at
 - How decisions are made about who learns
 - Whether have personal development plans for individual employees
 - Content and level of difficulty
 - How promoted
 - How courses are provided
 - Whether in-house / via training provider
 - Relationship with training providers
 - How employees learn
 - Learning routes available (college/workplace/mixed)
 - Employer preferences about learning route and why
 - Where learning happens - while working / outside work /both
 - Impact of learning business / productivity
 - Cost involved (time/resources etc – whether seen as worthwhile)
 - Level of flexibility in how/what employees learn
 - Whether sufficient
 - How assessment happens
 - in-house (whether have employees who assess alongside regular work)
 - external (how this operates)
 - relationship between employers and assessors / verifiers
- Explore role of employer in supporting employees engaged with L2VQs within company / business
 - Encouragement
 - Induction
 - Guidance
 - Time to study, compile and order evidence
 - Flexible hours / compensation for learning
 - Ongoing support / monitoring
 - Inviting feedback
- How funded
 - role of government support

5. The role of Level 2 qualifications within company

- Explore role of L2VQs within business / company
 - Level of need for L2VQs (e.g. vs. the need for Level 1 or Level 3)
 - Skills needs they fulfil
 - Role of Level 2 in relation to other levels of qualification
 - Level 1 (does it provide a foundation for Level 2 learning)
 - Level 3 (Is Level 2 a necessary springboard for Level 3 learning?)
 - Does Level 2 fulfil a unique role
 - In what way
- Whether Level 2 certification meets needs of employer / sector
 - What aspects do
 - What aspects do not
 - (If not) why current L2s do not meet need
 - What would better meet employer needs at Level 2
 - E.g. redesign, more flexibility, greater / lesser skill level, greater relevance, other factors
 - Extent to which L2VQs capture changing skills needs
- Extent of recognition for L2VQs within company / sector more broadly
 - Whether sufficient
 - (If not) what would increase recognition

6. Value for company/sector of having a workforce qualified to Level 2

Aim: to understand respondents' views of the specific benefits and drawbacks of level 2 qualification to company / business and the business sector as a whole

- Value for employer of having employees qualified to Level 2 vs. having employees who are not qualified to this level
 - What, if any, are the key differences
 - How does certification affect the value of the employee to the employer
- Explore benefits and drawbacks of certification at level 2 for employers:
 - Skill level
 - Performance
 - Productivity
 - Staff recruitment
 - Staff retention (loyal / engaged / motivated workforce)

- Explore benefits and drawbacks of certification at level 2 for sector:
 - Qualified workforce
 - Flexibility of labour force
 - Development of Industry standards
 - Meeting regulatory requirements
 - Image of employees / employers – sector as whole
 - Other benefits / drawbacks for the sector
- What key factors dictate whether L2 qualifications are seen to benefit employers?
 - Qualification type
 - Learning route
 - Skills learned
 - Relevance of content
 - Flexibility of content
 - Workplace support required
 - Other
- Explore value derived from L2VQs relative to:
 - Qualifications at other levels (e.g. level 1 or level 3)
 - Other types of qualifications (e.g. employer specific)
- Whether value derived from Level 2 qualifications will increase or diminish in future
 - How will this happen
 - What will bring it about

7. Value for employees of being qualified to Level 2

Aim: to understand respondents' views of the specific benefits and drawbacks of level 2 qualification for employees within their business/sector

- Explore benefits and drawbacks for employees of being qualified at Level 2:
 - Ability in role /skills / knowledge/understanding
 - Work place relationships
 - Commitment / loyalty to employer
 - Employability
 - Securing employment
 - Career progression
 - Personal / self development
 - Confidence / self esteem

- Preparation for further training / learning
 - Pay (does Level 2 certification have an impact on this?)
 - Other benefits/drawbacks
-
- Explore whether employees with L2VQ get better returns than those without
 - How do they differ

8. Suggestions for improvements

Aim: explore future for L2VQs within the company / business – business sector as whole, including suggestions for improvements

- What improvements would the employer like to see to Level 2 qualifications:
 - Skills learnt (the range of skills people need to learn, skills gaps that exist)
 - Level of skills (the extent of skills development)
 - Method of learning (the way that people learn)
 - Assessment (how skills development or learning is assessed and ultimately certified)
 - Flexibility
 - Probe views on being able to choose different credits that build towards a qualification over time rather than complete qualifications
 - Any other improvements needed
- Value of these improvements to:
 - employer
 - individuals
 - business sector as a whole
- How best to achieve these improvements – role of:
 - Individual employers
 - Employer reps
 - Training providers
 - Awarding bodies
 - SSCs
 - QCA
 - Learning Skills Council
 - Trade unions
- Anything else want to mention

Thank respondent and close

Appendix D – Analysis frameworks

Analysis framework – SSC interviews

Chart 1: SSC representative background

1. Individual's role and responsibilities – position / title, length of time in role
2. How individual involved in qualifications – note any mentions of involvement with level 2 vocational qualifications particularly
3. General information about SSC – length of time established, role and remit, sector context and relationships with other sector organisations
4. Specific aims of SSC – what SSC trying to achieve, specifically in relation to learning
5. Activities of SSC in relation to:
 - Skills
 - Learning
 - Qualifications
 - Developing occupational standards
6. Specific activities of SSC in relation to level 2 learning
7. Other

Chart 2: Overview of level 2 vocational qualifications within sector

1. Overview of level 2 qualifications FROM DOCUMENT SEARCH – column to be completed by RT post-charting
2. Overview of level 2 qualifications FROM INTERVIEW – range of L2VQs available, note any distinction between CORE and peripheral qualifications
3. Role of level 2 qualifications within sector
 - Level of need for them
 - Skills needs they fulfil (both employers' and employees')

- Specific aspects of L2VQs meeting sector needs
 - Where L2VQs don't meet sector needs
4. Fit with other sector qualifications (how unique or complementary they are)
 5. Recognition of L2VQs across sector
 6. Who aimed at
 7. Content and level of difficulty
 8. How promoted - including role of SSC in supporting L2VQs within sector
 9. How people learn and are certificated
 10. Other

Chart 3: Benefits and drawbacks of level 2 vocational qualifications

1. Benefits for individual employee – e.g. job retention and prospects, career progression / opportunities, further training, wages increase, personal /self-development, etc.
2. Drawbacks for individual employee – e.g. staff skill level, staff retention / recruitment, time / financial investment
3. Benefits for employer / workplace
4. Drawbacks for employer / workplace
5. Benefits for sector
6. Drawbacks for sector
7. Benefits and drawbacks for other sector stakeholders / and more widely
8. Factors making L2VQ more / less likely to be of benefit - e.g. qualification type, learning route
9. Value of level 2 vs. other levels of qualification - for employer, individual, sector, other sector stakeholders

10. Value of level 2 in its own right vs. as a precursor / springboard to further learning
- for employer, individual, sector, other sector stakeholders

11. Other

Chart 4: Suggestions for improvements

1. How well sector currently served by L2VQs – where working well / not well
2. Gaps in provision at level 2
 - What are they
 - What are implications (current and future)
 - What action being taken
3. Skills learnt – the skills people need to learn, the extent of skills development, skills gaps that exist
 - improvements needed
 - value of improvements
 - how should be achieved
4. Method or mode of learning – the way that people learn
 - improvements needed
 - value of improvements
 - how should be achieved
5. Assessment – how skills development or learning is assessed and ultimately certificated
 - improvements needed
 - value of improvements
 - how should be achieved
6. Other improvements
7. Views about ‘unitisation’ – being able to do different units towards a qualification over time
8. Future plans for SSC – any other improvements / further plans for development of learning, skills or qualifications within sector
9. Other

Analysis framework – Learner interviews

Chart 1: Background and circumstances prior to Level 2

1. Respondent details
 - Age
 - Household set up
 - Caring responsibilities

2. Work / other activities
 - Whether working or not
 - If working:
 - Role
 - Responsibilities
 - Hours
 - How long worked there / in that sector
 - If not working:
 - Main activities
 - How long out of work

3. Level 2 learning (brief overview description of learning in question – consult screener for clarification / further details)
 - Qualification name
 - Level
 - When started and / or completed
 - Where doing / done

4. Current learning (brief overview of any current learning, if not covered above)
 - Qualification name
 - Level
 - When started
 - Where doing

5. Work history
 - For each position;
 - Role
 - Responsibilities
 - Hours
 - Reasons for changing jobs
 - Length of time in each role

6. Educational background
 - Previous NVQ or other vocational learning (name, level, sector)
 - Highest level of attainment
 - Other work-based training
7. Attitudes to further learning prior to undertaking Level 2
 - Plans for / feelings about further learning, reasons for
8. Immediate work circumstances, including attitudes to work / job, prior to L2
 - Views about work / job
 - Activities
 - Responsibilities
9. Work / career aspirations / plans / prospects
 - Whether had any, what they were, how felt about them
10. Other important circumstances prior to undertaking Level 2
11. Other
12. Interviewer's notes on interview context (consult interviewer cover sheet for details)

Chart 2: Awareness of Level 2 and barriers to undertaking

1. Information available about Level 2 qualifications generally and relative usefulness of each
2. Sources of information about particular Level 2 qualification and relative usefulness of each

Barriers to undertaking a level 2 qualification

3. Previous experiences (in work / in education)
 - Actual work / education experiences / attainment and belief about personal skill level
4. Awareness / information / knowledge about Level 2
5. Availability / choice / location of qualifications

6. Cost / time / compensation
7. Personal issues
 - Including childcare / other caring responsibilities, family and other commitments
8. Any other issues

Chart 3: Motivations and decision-making

Motivations

1. Work / job
 - Change of role / responsibilities
 - Actual / potential redundancy
 - Employer initiative / direction / requirement
 - Colleagues undertaking / achieved same / similar qualifications
2. Career plans / aspirations
 - Wish to progress, in immediate and longer term
3. Personal development / fulfilment
4. Learning aspirations
 - to learn more / be better trained
 - Intention and eventual aims of further learning
5. Income / financial gain
6. Other motivating factors
7. Most important motivating factor
8. How felt Level 2 would help to achieve these things
9. Reasons for undertaking a level 2 qualification (as opposed to Level 1 or Level 3, for example)
10. Reasons for undertaking qualification in this sector / area

Chart 4: Expectations and experiences of level 2 learning

- *For all expectations columns, include nature of expectation and source of expectation (i.e. from information, employer, training provider, etc.)*
 - *For all experience columns, include nature of experience, any explicit discussion by respondent of how this differed from expectations and any impact this difference had on how they feel about their learning*
1. Expectations of content, structure and workload
 - Subject matter covered, relevance to current work / work plans, order of coverage, amount of work, level of work (how easy / difficult)
 2. Experience of content, structure and workload
 - Subject matter covered, relevance to current work / work plans, order of coverage, amount of work, level of work (how easy / difficult)
 3. Expectations of generating and presenting evidence
 - What evidence was needed, different ways it was generated, where and how it was stored
 4. Experience of generating and presenting evidence
 - What evidence was needed, different ways it was generated, where and how it was stored
 5. Expectations of mode of learning and teaching styles
 - Where learning happened (e.g. college, workplace, home etc.), tutors, class size, extent of individual and group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience, exams
 6. Experience of mode of learning and teaching styles
 - Where learning happened (e.g. college, workplace, home etc.), tutors, class size, extent of individual and group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience, exams
 7. Expectations of assessment
 - Where happened, who / what involved, frequency
 8. Experience of assessment
 - Where happened, who / what involved, frequency
 9. Expectations of support

- Sources and usage of support inside and outside the workplace, relative usefulness
10. Experience of support
- Sources and usage of support inside and outside the workplace, relative usefulness
11. Expectations of time taken / duration
- Time involved (at work and home), length of time to complete
12. Experience of time taken / duration
- Time involved (at work and home), length of time to complete
13. Expectations of other learners
- Who else doing qualification, how many, their educational / work backgrounds / aspirations
14. Experience of other learners
- Who else doing qualification, how many, their educational / work backgrounds / aspirations
15. Overview of how far experience met expectations including impact of any mismatches
- Where were expectations NOT met by experience of doing a level 2 qualification, impacts of this (did it make any difference to the quality / experience of learning / outcome of learning?)

Chart 5: Other aspects of level 2 learning experience

1. Whether learning took place / extent of learning
 - Respondent's and charter's perception of whether and how much learning actually took place

General overall views of learning process

2. Positive aspects of experience of doing the qualification
 - what liked / enjoyed, what worked well
3. Negative aspects of experience of doing the qualification
 - what didn't like / enjoy, what didn't work well
4. Interruptions / barriers to learning

- Anything that made it difficult to continue / complete qualification once started
- 5. What helped / will help completion of qualification
- 6. Other

Chart 5: Impacts on work

For periods in work

1. How do job
 - Better skills, knowledge, awareness, understanding, practice generally
2. Confidence
3. Workplace relationships
 - How other people (colleagues, employers) at work see them / interact with them
4. Income / wage level
5. General feelings about work
6. Job security / career prospects
7. Other aspects of work / job

For periods out of work (now or in future)

8. Type of work sought
 - Sector, role
9. Job search
 - Focus, confidence, methods employed, success
10. Employability
 - Whether affected employability and how
 - Respondent's own view and what they think employers views would be

Chart 6: Other impacts

1. Attitudes to learning since undertaking Level 2

2. Actual learning undertaken since Level 2
 - Type / level
 - How accessed
 - Qualification / accreditation attached
 - Reasons for choice
3. Feelings about life generally
4. Feelings about self
 - E.g. confidence, self-esteem, etc.
5. Any other impacts
6. Sustainability of impacts
 - For how long have / will any impacts mentioned be felt, what has / will cause any impacts to stop being felt
7. Whether impacts derived from Level 2 or elsewhere
 - If elsewhere, where and how
8. Future impacts
 - What are these and when / how will they become apparent

Chart 7: Suggested improvements

1. General improvements
 - About vocational qualifications generally and level 2 vocational qualifications specifically
 - Include improvements to how level 2 qualifications are designed, executed and delivered
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
2. Content, structure and workload
 - Subject matter covered, relevance to current work / work plans, order of coverage, amount of work, level of work (how easy / difficult)
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
3. Mode of learning and teaching styles

- Where learning happens (e.g. college, workplace, home etc.), tutors, class size, extent of individual and group work, distance learning, coursework, practical work experience, exams
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
4. Assessment
- Where happens, who / what involved, frequency
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
5. Support
- Sources and usage of support inside and outside the workplace
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
6. Time taken / duration
- Time involved (at work and home), length of time to complete
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
7. Other learners
- Who else doing qualification, how many, their educational / work backgrounds / aspirations
 - Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning
8. Other improvements
- Responsibility for improvements
 - Difference any suggested improvements would make / have made to learning

Analysis framework – Employer interviews

Chart 1: Employer background

1. Individual's role
 - Position / title
 - Length of time in role
 - Responsibilities
2. How involved in training, development and qualifications – note any mentions of L2VQs specifically
3. General information about organisation
 - Length of time established
 - Scope of operation (national / international, number of sites)
 - Number of employees
 - Nature of work
4. Attitudes / activities of organisation in relation to:
 - Skills development
 - Learning
 - Qualifications
5. Other
6. Interviewer's notes on content / context from cover sheet

Chart 2: Overview of level 2 vocational qualifications within organisation

1. Overview of L2VQs offered by / available within organisation
 - which available
 - differences between them
 - preferences (are any L2VQs better than others)
 - proportion of workforce at L2
2. Other VQs offered by / available within organisation
 - different types
 - different levels
3. How L2VQs promoted

- who aimed at
- 4. How make decisions about who learns
- 5. How employees learn / are assessed at L2
 - Learning route(s) available (college / work / both) and reason for choice
 - In-house / external assessment
 - Relationship with training provider
- 6. Views on current L2VQ provision
 - Content
 - Level of difficulty
 - Gaps in current provision
 - Flexibility in how / what learn
- 7. Impact of learning on business
 - Costs involved (time, money, resources)
 - Productivity
- 8. Employer support e.g. encouragement, induction, guidance, time to study / compile and order evidence, flexible hours / compensation for learning, ongoing support / monitoring, inviting feedback, other
- 9. Source of funding
 - Existence / role of any government support
 - Role of funding in dictating who learns
 - Any differences in funding available for different staff groups
- 10. Other

Chart 3: Role of level 2 vocational qualifications for employer

1. Skills needs L2VQs fulfil
2. Level of need for L2VQ e.g. compared with L1 or L3
3. Uniqueness of L2VQ i.e. in relation to other levels of qualification, other types of training and qualifications (including in-house / employer-specific)
4. Whether and how meeting employer's needs

5. Where not meeting employer's needs
6. Extent to which meeting changing skills needs in sector
7. Recognition of L2VQs within organisation
 - Whether sufficient
 - How could be increased
8. Recognition of L2VQs within sector
 - Whether sufficient
 - How could be increased
9. Other

Chart 4: Value of level 2 vocational qualifications to employer

1. Overview of value of certification at L2 for employer
 - How affects value of employee
 - Key differences between employee certificated at L2 vs. not

4.2 – 4.7 refer to areas within which employers may report benefits and drawbacks of certification at level 2 for employer – charter should describe both benefits and drawbacks under each heading

2. Skill level
3. Performance
4. Productivity
5. Recruitment
6. Retention
7. Other
8. Benefits for sector e.g. qualified workforce, flexibility of labour force, development of industry standards, meeting regulatory requirements, image of employees / employers / sector as a whole, other

9. Drawbacks for sector e.g. qualified workforce, flexibility of labour force, development of industry standards, meeting regulatory requirements, image of employees / employers / sector as a whole, other
10. Factors making L2VQ more / less likely to be of benefit e.g. qualification type, learning route, skills learned, relevance of content, flexibility of content, workplace support required, other
11. Value of L2VQ in relation to:
 - Other types of qualification
 - Other levels of qualification
12. How will value of L2VQ change over time
 - Increase or decrease
 - Why
13. Other

Chart 5: Value of level 2 vocational qualifications to employees

1. Overview of value of certification at L2 for employees

5.2 – 5.10 refer to areas within which employers may report benefits and drawbacks of certification at level 2 for employees – charter should describe both benefits and drawbacks under each heading

2. Ability in role / skills / knowledge / understanding
3. Workplace relationships
4. Commitment / loyalty to employer
5. Employability
 - Securing employment
 - Career progression
6. Personal / self development
7. Confidence / self esteem
8. Preparation for further training / learning

9. Pay
10. Other
11. Whether returns better for employees with L2VQ
 - How
 - By how much

Chart 6: Suggestions for improvements

6.1 to 6.7 refer to areas within which employers may suggest improvements

1. Skills learnt - the range of skills people needs to learn, skills gaps that exist
 - Improvements needed
 - Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
 - Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions
2. Level of skills - the extent of skills development
 - Improvements needed
 - Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
 - Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions
3. Method or mode of learning - the way that people learn
 - Improvements needed
 - Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
 - Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions
4. Assessment - how skills development or learning is assessed and certificated
 - Improvements needed
 - Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
 - Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions
5. Flexibility
 - Improvements needed
 - Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
 - Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions

6. 'Unitisation'

- General views about unitisation
- Improvements needed
- Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
- Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions

7. Other

- Improvements needed
- Value of improvements (for employer, employee, sector)
- Role of individual employers, employer representatives, training providers, awarding bodies, SSCs, QCA, Learning Skills Council, Trade Unions

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