

Report on the removal of the National Vocational Qualification levy

An investigation of the impact
on awarding organisations' fees

August 2009

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Executive summary

This report has been prepared by Ofqual and the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) of the Welsh Assembly Government, the regulators of external qualifications for England and Wales, respectively. Ofqual and DCELLS work in partnership with the regulator in Northern Ireland, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)¹.

This is a report of an investigation into the removal of the NVQ levy with a particular focus on the impact on awarding organisations' fees. Publication of this report is intended to provide information to relevant stakeholders on the removal of the levy and to improve understanding of the fees charged by awarding organisations for NVQs.

The NVQ levy was a £10 charge to awarding organisations for each candidate certificate issued and was collected by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Funds were primarily used to develop national occupational standards (NOS).

Our interpretation of responses from awarding organisations is that they say that the vast bulk – more than 90 per cent – of the cost of the levy was passed on in fees to centres and will be returned in lower fees now that it has been removed. Economic theory would also suggest that, if the demand for qualifications is comparatively unresponsive to fees, the bulk of the levy would be passed on and returned. However, a study of fees by the consultants Grant Thornton, which included a small sample of NVQs, concluded that these fees have not yet fallen by as much as one would expect on the basis of the interpretation of the awarding organisations' responses. We shall therefore keep future fee levels under review.

A survey of centres undertaken by Grant Thornton found that they had significant lack of awareness of the existence of the levy and its removal. On average, respondents to the survey were only able to identify actions taken by awarding organisations in response to the removal of the levy in 10 per cent of cases. The majority of centres were either unaware of the levy or stated that they were not aware of any communication about it from their awarding organisations.

Centres place value and importance on the transparency of qualification fees. We will be undertaking further work to assess how the transparency of fees can be improved, including consideration of the provision of price comparisons. Centres are also encouraged to talk to their awarding organisations to establish how fees have been affected by the removal of the levy.

¹ CCEA were not involved in this investigation as responsibility for regulation for NVQs lies with Ofqual for England and Northern Ireland, and with DCELLS for Wales.

1. Introduction

Purpose of this report

This report has been prepared by Ofqual and DCELLS. References to 'regulators' in this report refer to Ofqual and DCELLS.

Our current statutory duty requires us to monitor qualifications. As part of this, we pay attention to the fees charged. We aim to ensure that fees charged for the qualifications we accredit are fair, proportionate, transparent and published in a timely manner.

This is a report of an investigation into the removal of the NVQ levy, with a particular focus on awarding organisations' fees. The removal of the levy led to an expectation for some that there would be a reduction in the costs, and therefore the fees for each completed NVQ, by £10. However, economic theory would suggest that the extent to which awarding organisations would have passed on levy costs to centres would depend on the price elasticity of demand for the NVQ qualifications in question. Furthermore, the complexity of different pricing strategies and cost recovery models for the 41 awarding organisations that offer NVQs and the 2,000 qualifications involved meant that, in practice, the impact on fees would vary.

Publication of this report is intended to provide information to relevant stakeholders on the levy's removal and to promote the transparency of NVQ fees charged by awarding organisations. The report relies on evidence from awarding organisations' communications with their centres, their reported actions on the removal of the levy and a previous study that investigated some NVQ fees and conducted a survey of centres.

This report does not examine the effects of the removal of the accreditation charge for Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQs), nor does the report examine the impact of changes in funding the development of NOS. NOS are statements of the skills, knowledge and understanding needed in employment, are developed by representatives of employment sectors on a UK-wide basis and inform vocational qualifications. Further information about NOS can be found at www.ukstandards.org.

History of NVQs

In April 1986, a report by the Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales Working Group, commonly known as the de Ville report, recommended the introduction of NVQs to address weaknesses in the system of vocational qualifications. It was following the publication of the white paper *Working together*:

*Education and training*² that NVQs were developed and introduced. NVQs are qualifications delivered in the workplace or other settings that replicate the working environment. They are outcome-based with no prescribed learning programme, allowing for flexible delivery and tailored to meet the individual learner's needs.

History of the NVQ levy

The NVQ levy was a £10 charge applied to each NVQ certificate issued. This levy was payable by awarding organisations and collected by QCA as part of its duties under the Education Act 1997, and has been primarily used to fund the development of NOS. The levy directly supported the development and improvement of standards in relation to vocational qualifications.

The government's response to the *Leitch Review of Skills*³, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch review of skills in England*⁴, published in July 2007, contained a recommendation to replace the statutory levy on NVQs with a grant to sector skills councils (SSCs). It was agreed that this grant would be funded by the UK Government and the devolved administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, enabling SSCs to have a reliable source of income for their work on qualifications and development of NOS. In a circuitous way much of the funds used to pay for NOS development, and to pay for the levy, came via government. This came about as government funded centres paid NVQ fees to awarding organisations, which paid the levy to QCA. By changing this method of funding it simplifies the bureaucratic system in which a number of different organisations each incurred an administrative cost for collecting and distributing levy monies.

In April 2008, the Education (QCA Levy) (Revocation) Regulations 2008 (SI 2008/923) removed the imposition of a levy on an awarding organisation contained in section 36 of the Education (QCA Levy) Regulations 2002 (SI 2002/435). This statutory instrument came into effect from 30 September 2008 and applied to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

² Department of Employment. *Working together: Education and training*. London: Stationery Office Books, 1986.

³ Leitch, Sandy. *Leitch Review of Skills*. London: HM Treasury, 2005. A copy of the review can be found at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/prebud_05_leitch.

⁴ Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*. London: HM Government: 2007. A copy of the response can be found at www.dcsf.gov.uk/educationandskills.

2. Methodology

A working group involving the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB), the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and QCA was set up to inform our work for this study.

Awarding organisations with accredited NVQs were invited to submit to us their communications to centres about the removal of the NVQ levy. Of the 41 awarding organisations contacted, 22 formally responded and supplied information on their communications. The organisations that responded were mainly large- and medium-sized awarding organisations that award approximately 97 per cent of all NVQs.⁵

The information received varied with some awarding organisations providing brief statements and others merely reporting a commitment. Many also sent their planned actions in response to the removal of the NVQ levy, with some giving more detailed descriptions of, and justifications for, the planned actions. The responses were collated, analysed and categorised by us to provide an overview and summary of the whole NVQ market. The analysis and categorisation must be treated with a degree of caution, as the disparate nature of the information received meant that it was difficult to aggregate to an overview of the whole NVQ market.

Five informal and confidential one-to-one meetings with awarding organisations took place between June 2008 and August 2008. These meetings provided a valuable qualitative base to help understand the issues faced by awarding organisations.

During 2008/9, Ofqual, DCELLS and CCEA undertook an investigation into the fees for 'other widely used qualifications'⁶ with assistance from consultants Grant Thornton. As part of this work, Grant Thornton investigated the fees of some NVQs at the time of levy removal. The results of their analysis are presented in this report.

Grant Thornton also undertook a web survey of centres between 10 December 2008 and 23 January 2009. The primary purpose of the survey was to gain centres' views on qualification fees for a range of widely used qualifications, but part of it focused on

⁵ For the purposes of this report, awarding organisations are categorised as 'large, medium and small' on the basis of the number of NVQ completions each awarding organisation had in 2007/8. Large awarding organisations are those with more than 10,000 completions; medium are those with completions of between 10,000 and 1,000 inclusive, and small are those with fewer than 1,000. The source of the NVQ completions is the Ofqual Statistic Database, which collects certification data from awarding organisations on a quarterly basis.

⁶ *The Reasonableness of Fees for Other Widely Used Qualifications*. London: Grant Thornton, 2009. A copy of a report can be found at www.ofqual.gov.uk/2373.aspx.

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NVQ fees and the removal of the levy. The survey helped us gain an understanding of centres' knowledge of the levy and the information they were aware of receiving from awarding organisations. In total, the survey elicited 220 responses, of which 138 stated that their centre offered NVQs.

We also conducted an investigation into the information awarding organisations provided on the publicly accessible parts of their websites, both in terms of presentation of information on the removal of the levy and of information on NVQ fees.

3. Awarding organisations' actions

Awarding organisations informed us of the actions they would undertake following the removal of the levy. The information provided focused mainly on their communications to centres and their actions concerning NVQ fees. We collated and analysed the information submitted by awarding organisations. The information was scrutinised to identify how awarding organisations said they paid for the levy and what actions, if any, were taken following the removal of the levy. This information is presented in an aggregated format to protect commercially sensitive data that were submitted. A degree of judgement was necessary in interpreting the awarding organisations' evidence.

Communications

The timings and methods of awarding organisations' communications to centres varied. Awarding organisations used their websites, e-newsletters and direct contact to communicate with centres. Only eight organisations placed information on parts of their website openly accessible to the public, although for many awarding organisations there would have been further information on privately accessible areas. Some awarding organisations informed centres of their planned actions in anticipation, while others waited until after the levy removal had been officially confirmed.

Economic theory of the impact on fees

Economic theory suggests that, when a levy is imposed or removed, the impact on prices is likely to be inversely related to the elasticity of demand. If demand is highly elastic, that is, if the quantity purchased is very responsive to the price charged, there will be a comparatively small impact on price and a larger effect on the quantity sold. If demand is highly inelastic (or invariant to price) on the other hand, most of the impact of the levy will be passed to prices. In the extreme, if demand is completely inelastic, all the levy is passed through.

We do not have precise evidence on the elasticity of demand for qualifications to the fees charged, but general opinion appears to be that there is little demand response (it is inelastic). This is probably even the case when the levy is imposed on one form of qualification (NVQs) and there is a possibility of switching to other qualifications. Therefore, the bulk of the levy could be expected to be passed on in fees and returned in lower fees when it was removed.

Awarding organisations responses

The responses received revealed that while many awarding organisations say they passed on all or some of the levy directly to centres through NVQ fees, not all awarding organisations did so. Some paid for the levy through alternative income

sources, including non-qualification income, such as publications and professional membership.

For example, one awarding organisation in its communication to centres stated that it '... has never incorporated the £10 levy into its fees for these qualifications ... The levy has simply been subsumed along with all of our other operational costs and overheads'. It is not clear whether or how these general operational costs and overheads affected fees.

Those who say they did not pass on the levy through NVQ fees tended to be some of the small- and medium-sized awarding organisations. Figure 1 shows that these small- and medium-sized awarding organisations offer a small number of NVQs compared to larger awarding organisations that offer a large number of NVQs.

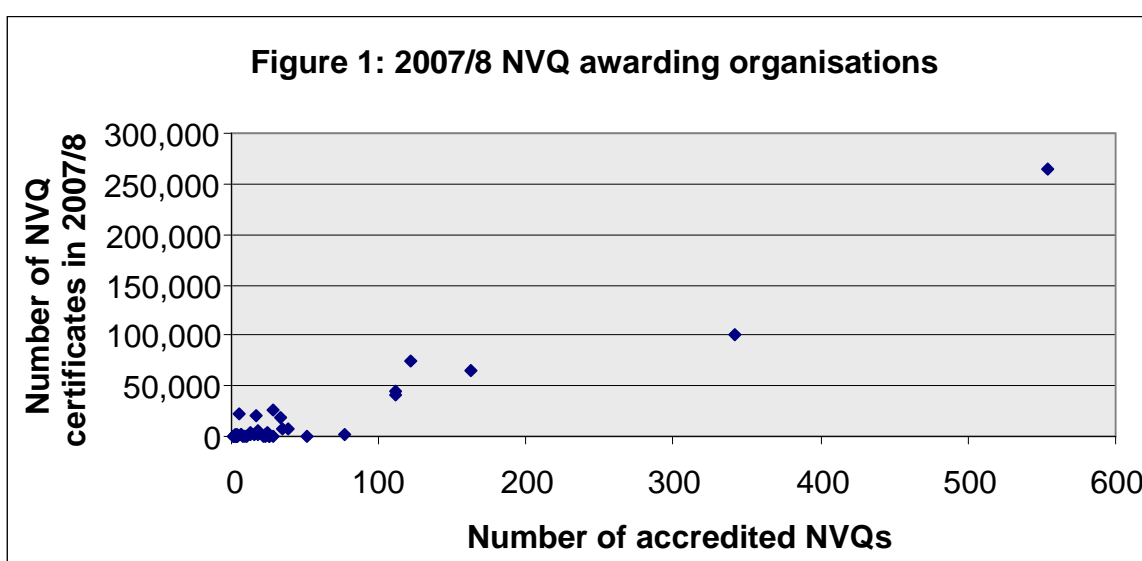
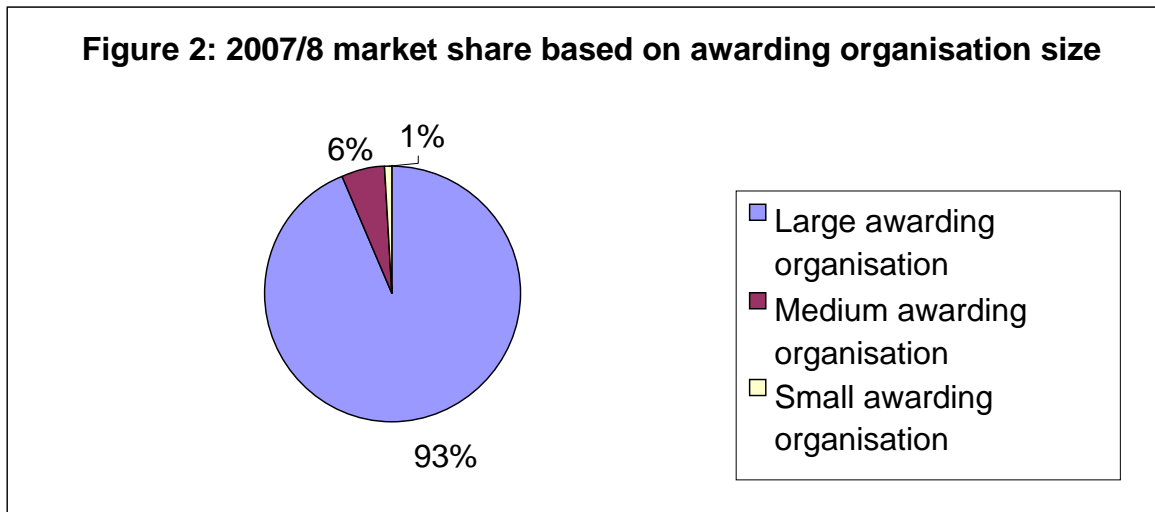


Figure 2 shows that, for 2007/8, these small- and medium-sized awarding organisations accounted for 7 per cent of all NVQ candidate certificates awarded. The large awarding organisations accounted for 93 per cent of all candidates.



Using evidence gathered from awarding organisations' submissions and applying it to the number of NVQ certificates awarded in 2007/8, we estimated what proportion of levy costs was said to be passed on to centres through NVQ fees in 2007/8. Given the disparate submissions from awarding organisations, a degree of judgement and estimation has taken place in considering the level of levy costs passed on through NVQ fees. The findings are shown in figure 3.

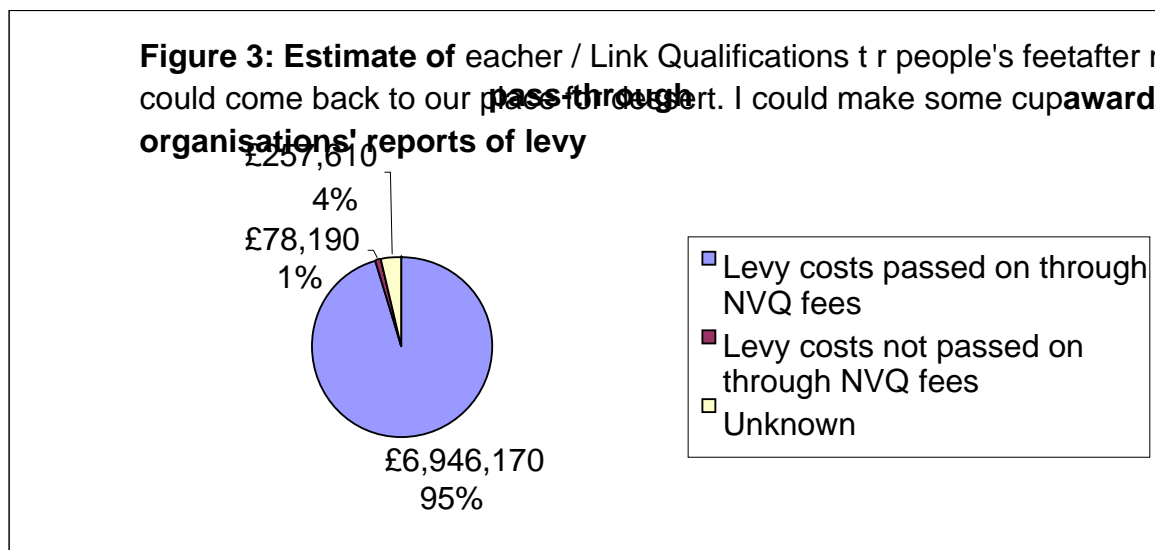
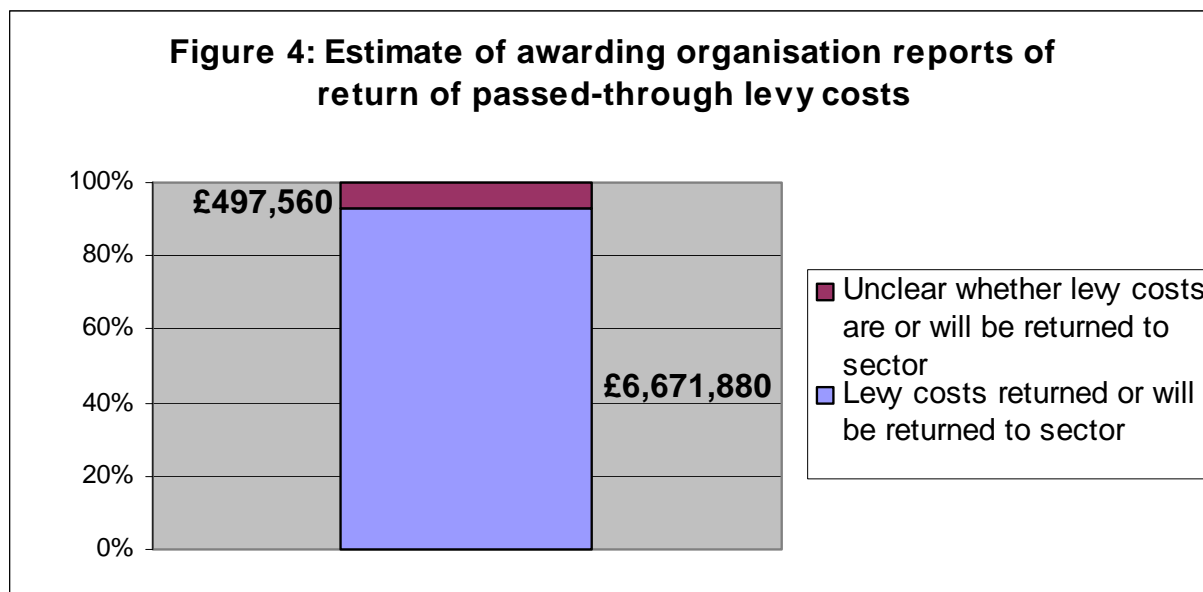


Figure 3 shows that we understand awarding organisations to say that an estimated 95 per cent (£6.95m) of levy costs were passed on to centres in the form of NVQ fees; 1 per cent (£0.08m) was not, and for 4 per cent (£0.25m) of the costs, it was not clear whether the levy costs were passed on to centres.

Excluding the levy costs not reported to be passed on through levy fees and using the information received from awarding organisations, scaled by certificate data from

2007/8, we are able to analyse and estimate what savings were said to be returned to the sector. Figure 4 illustrates this.



Of the NVQ fees that were reported to have a proportion of the levy costs incorporated in them, we understand awarding organisations to say that 93 per cent (£6.67m) worth of levy fees will be returned to the sector, and for 7 per cent (£0.50m) it is unclear whether levy costs will be returned. Awarding organisations, in the main, said they reduced their 2008/9 fees. For some awarding organisations, the removal of the levy came too late to amend their 2008/9 fees, and centres are said to receive savings in 2009/10.

For those awarding organisations that said they did not pass the £10 levy on to centres through NVQ fees but spread this cost over all of their provision, there was not a similar reduction in their NVQ fees claimed. Some who did not pass on the levy directly through fees did, however, readdress their NVQ fee structure and said they passed on a cost saving to centres. In these cases, the awarding organisations have been classified under the heading 'Levy costs returned or will be returned to sector'.

The majority of awarding organisations said they passed on levy savings through reduced fees, such as a reduced registration fee or a lower candidate certificate charge. The timing of fee changes varied, with some awarding organisations changing their fees at their usual time and absorbing any additional costs they would incur, while others waited for when the removal took effect to amend their fees. One small awarding organisation said it did not reduce fees but used cost savings to provide centres with additional support.

Where savings have been made through fees, awarding organisations have taken a variety of approaches. Some say they passed the majority of the savings through the certificate charge, while others through registration fees. The fee changes that centres will see will depend on the awarding organisations they use.

Survey of NVQ fees

Grant Thornton's report into *The Reasonableness of Fees for Other Widely Used Qualifications* investigated the impact of the removal of the fees for a small set of NVQs⁷ that formed part of the study. Grant Thornton found that their fees had fallen by 3.3 per cent (or 7.6 per cent in real terms) in 2008/9, compared to the previous year. However they say that '...it appears that the removal of the levy has not been passed on in the form of lower fees. If the removal of [the] NVQ levy is passed on in full, then NVQ fees should fall in real terms by around 11 per cent.'

Grant Thornton suggested three possible reasons why the impact has not been passed on in full.

1. The impact of the abolition of the NVQ levy may take several years to fully feed through.
2. Awarding organisations may have chosen not to directly pass on the NVQ levy to customers in the first place, choosing to absorb the costs in other parts of their business, and so any abolition will not have an impact on fees.
3. Some awarding organisations may have taken the opportunity to increase margins on NVQ products by not passing on the full cut.

It is also possible that there may have been offsetting changes in other awarding organisations' costs. Indeed, if the levy had any impact on the volume of NVQs awarded, that is, if demand was at all elastic, one might expect an impact on unit costs.

Some awarding organisations' submissions tend to lend credence to these possible reasons. Awarding organisations provided a variety of dates for when actions would take place. Some awarding organisations stated that the levy was not passed on directly through NVQ fees.

While no awarding organisation stated that they would 'take the opportunity to increase margins', this investigation cannot establish whether awarding organisations have increased margins with the removal of the levy.

LSC impact assessment

The LSC commissioned a limited impact assessment on the removal of the NVQ levy. This found a high likelihood that there will be no negative impact on learners,

⁷ These were 11 NVQs offered by AAT, Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE), City & Guilds, Edexcel, Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) and Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT). Further information can be found in Grant Thornton's report.

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employers or participation, and that, where awarding organisations have passed on savings, providers may pass these on to learners in 2009/10.

4. Survey of centres

Analysis of the results of the survey conducted by Grant Thornton clearly demonstrates that centres lack knowledge about the levy, its removal and the implication of the removal for them.

Figure 5 outlines the responses when centres were asked the question 'Are you aware of the removal of the £10 NVQ levy?'

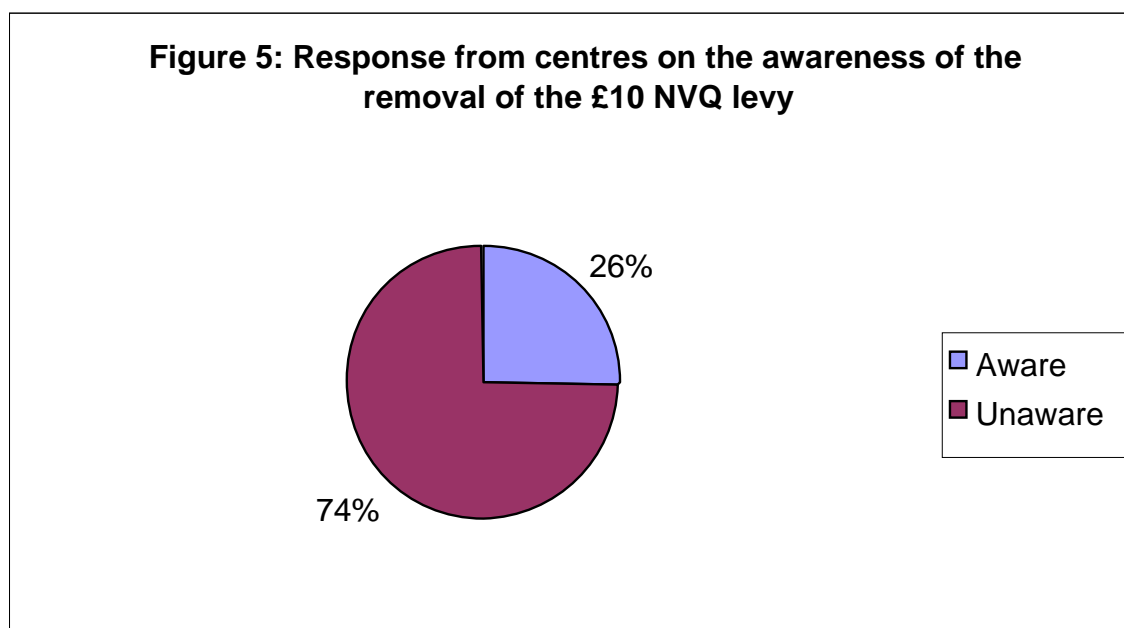


Figure 5 shows that only 26 per cent of respondents said that they were aware of the removal of the levy, and 74 per cent were unaware of the removal of the levy. Centres in general were unaware that awarding organisations had to pay a levy to QCA.

Figure 6 shows centres' awareness of what actions awarding organisations have taken regarding the removal of the levy. Respondents were asked, for each NVQ awarding organisation that they used, what information that organisation provided. The percentages provide an indication of the information that respondents had knowledge of.

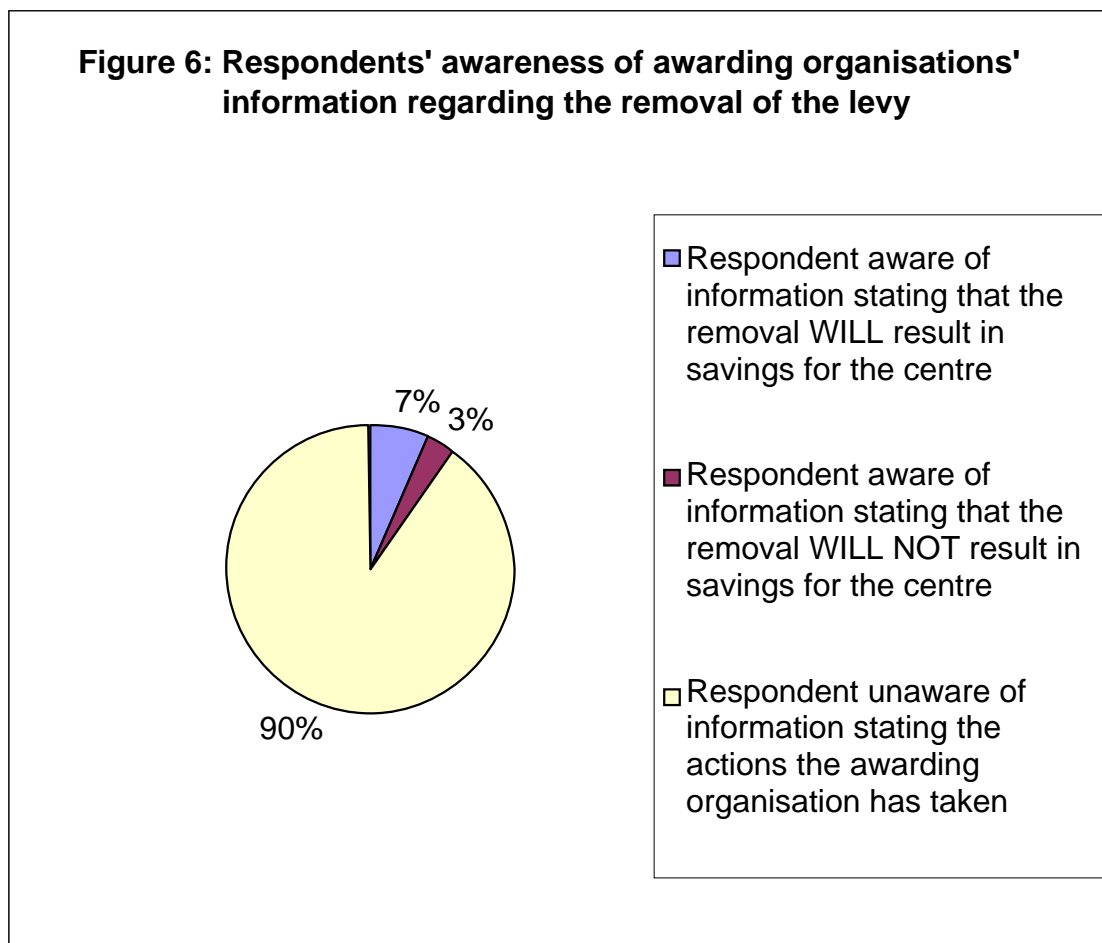


Figure 6 shows that respondents stated that only 7 per cent of awarding organisations confirmed the removal of the levy would result in savings, and 3 per cent that it would not result in savings through reduced fees. This clearly shows a lack of information with (on average) individual respondents unaware of actions taken by 90 per cent of centres' awarding organisations. It may be that there is a tendency to overlook communications about subjects with which the receiver is not familiar.

When asked whether they had 'any other comments ... about the removal of the £10 NVQ levy', some respondents raised the issue of transparency of fees, and more generally about the lack of information. One respondent said, 'There needs to be transparency around the levy and any other removal of fees, as this inevitably affects forecasting and in-year budget management', while another said, 'The impact and implication of this should have been made available to all examination officers / managers. All costings should be transparent.'

5. Conclusions

Our interpretation of responses from awarding organisations is that they say that the vast bulk – more than 90 per cent – of the cost of the levy was passed on in fees to centres and will be returned in lower fees now that it has been removed. Economic theory would also suggest that, if the demand for qualifications is comparatively unresponsive to fees, the bulk of the levy would be passed on and returned. However, a study of the fees of a small sample of NVQs by the consultants Grant Thornton concluded that their fees have not yet fallen by quite as much as one would expect on the basis of the interpretation of the awarding organisations responses. We shall therefore keep future fee levels under review.

There is also a difference in reports of information provided about the levy removal. Awarding organisations reported a number of means used to communicate the information to centres, but survey results report only 7 per cent of survey respondents as saying that they had knowledge that the removal would result in savings. This may be related to the finding that the majority of centres said they were either unaware of the levy or not aware of any communication about it from their awarding organisations. It may be that there is a tendency to overlook communications about subjects with which the receiver is not familiar.

There are other benefits associated with the removal of the levy that are not assessed by this report. For instance one could expect a reduced administration burden for awarding organisations and a simpler, more transparent method of NOS development funding. An impact assessment commissioned by the LSC on the removal of the NVQ levy found a high likelihood that there will be no negative impact on learners, employers or participation, and that, where awarding organisations have passed on savings, providers may pass these on to learners in 2009/10.

Centres place value and importance on the transparency of qualification fees. We will be undertaking further work to assess how the transparency of fees can be improved, including consideration of the provision of price comparisons. Centres are also encouraged to talk to their awarding organisations to establish how fees have been affected by the removal of the levy.

If there is a substantial cause for concern regarding the fees charged for qualifications, we will undertake a more detailed investigation, and in certain circumstances, we have the power to place a limit on fees charged by awarding organisations.

Appendix 1: Fees lists for NVQ awarding organisations

Below is a list of all NVQ awarding organisations and a link to their websites where you can find the latest fees list for NVQs if they are publicly available. Many awarding organisations have fees available to existing centres through their private accessible parts of their website and through requests via their customer service teams. For more detailed information about NVQ fees, centres should contact their awarding organisations directly.

- AAT
www.aat.org.uk
- ABBE Quality Accredited
www.abbeqa.co.uk
- ABC Awards
www.abcawards.co.uk
- Active IQ
www.activeiq.co.uk
- BCS
www.bcs.org
- British Horseracing Education and Standards Trust
www.bhest.co.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- CABWI Awarding Body
www.cabwi.co.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Central YMCA Qualifications (CYQ)
www.cyq.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)
www.cipd.co.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Chartered Management Institute
www.managers.org.uk

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- City & Guilds
www.cityandguilds.com (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)
www.cache.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Edexcel
www.edexcel.com
- EDI
www.ediplc.com (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- EMTA Awards Limited (EAL)
www.eal.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB)
www.ecitb.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- ETC Awards Ltd
www.etcni.org.uk/ETC-Awards.aspx (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Equestrian Qualifications GB Limited
www.bhs.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Food & Drink Qualifications
www.nccnet.net/fdq (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Glass Qualifications Authority Limited (GQA)
www.glassqualificationsauthority.com
- The Hospitality Awarding Body (HAB)
www.hab.org.uk
- IMI Awards Limited
www.imiawards.org.uk
- Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM)
www.i-l-m.com (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)

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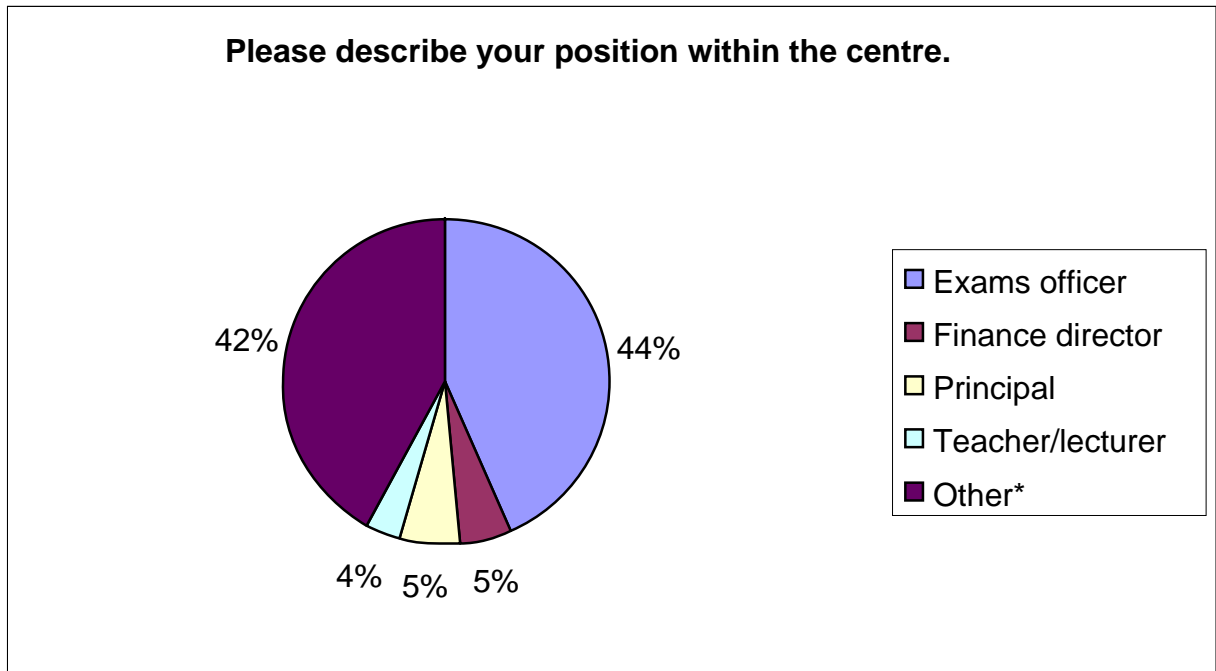
- Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV)
www.irrv.net
- Lantra Awards
www.lantra-awards.co.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Mineral Products Qualifications Council (MPQC) (formerly EMP Awarding Body Limited and EPIC Training & Consulting Services Limited)
www.epicLtd.com (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- NCFE
www.ncfe.org.uk
- NPTC
www.nptc.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Open University Awarding Body (OUAB)
www.open.ac.uk/ouab (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
www.ocr.org.uk
- PAA\Q-SET
www.paa-uk.org (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- The Pensions Management Institute (PMI)
www.pensions-pmi.org.uk
- PIABC
www.piabc.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)
www.rcvs.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
www.sqa.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Signature (formerly CACDP)
www.signature.org.uk

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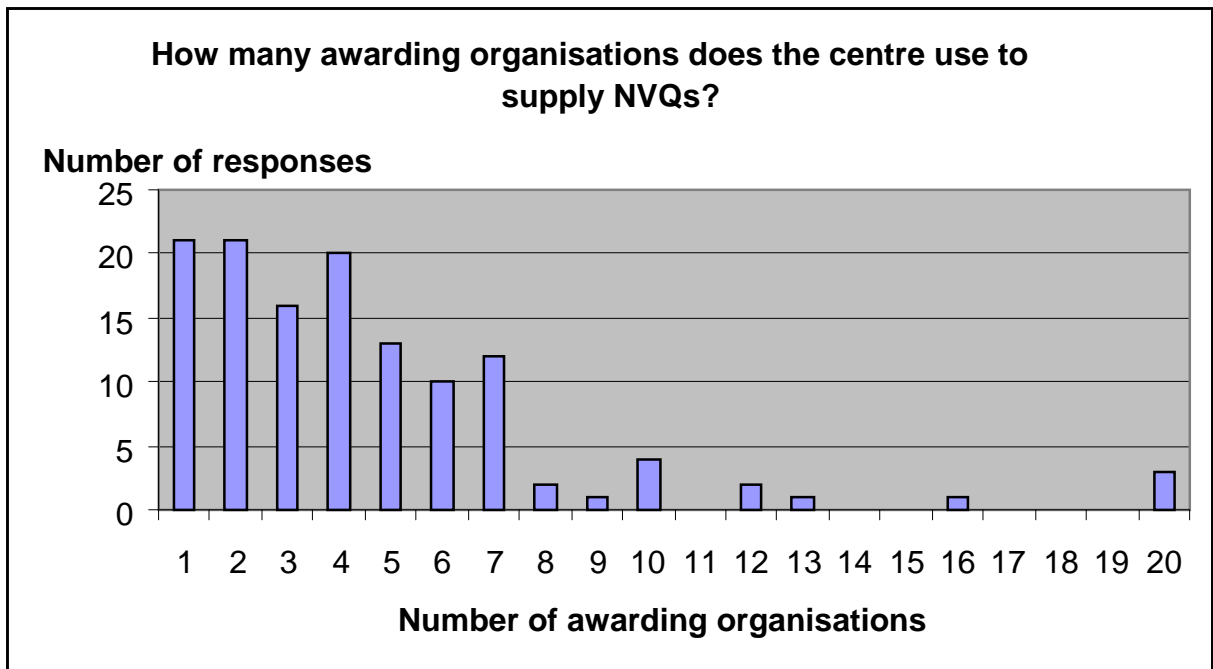
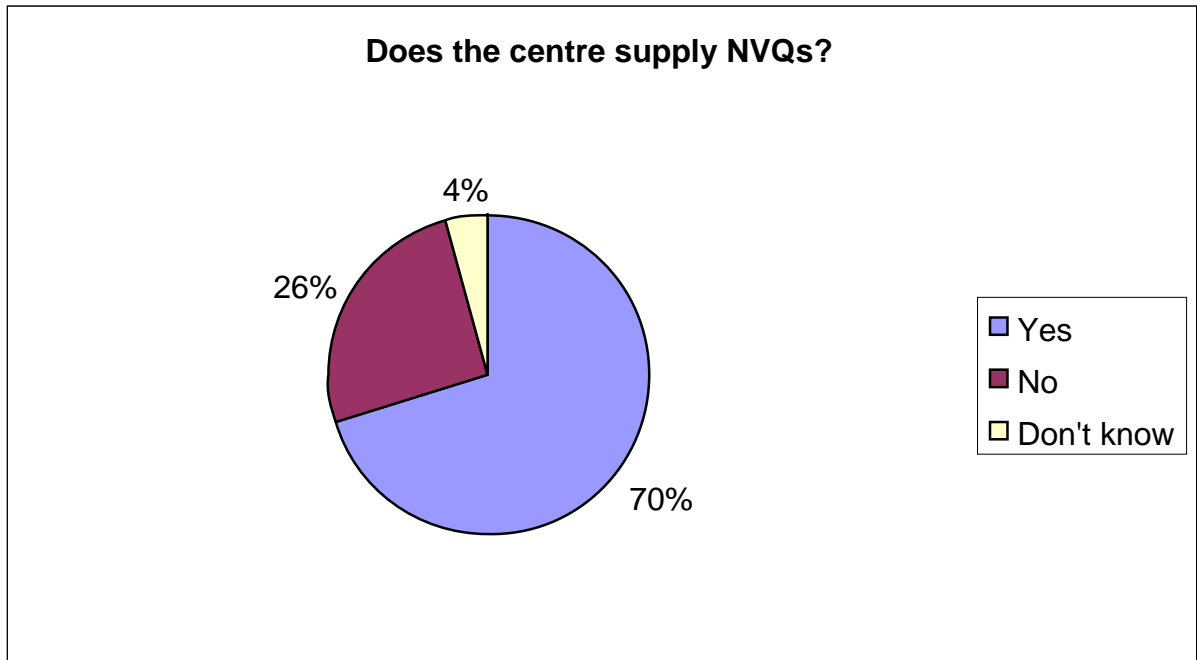
- Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT)
www.vtct.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)
- Waste Management Industry Training & Advisory Board (WAMITAB)
www.wamitab.org.uk (Note that NVQ fees are not available on the public portion of their website.)

Appendix 2: Survey of centres

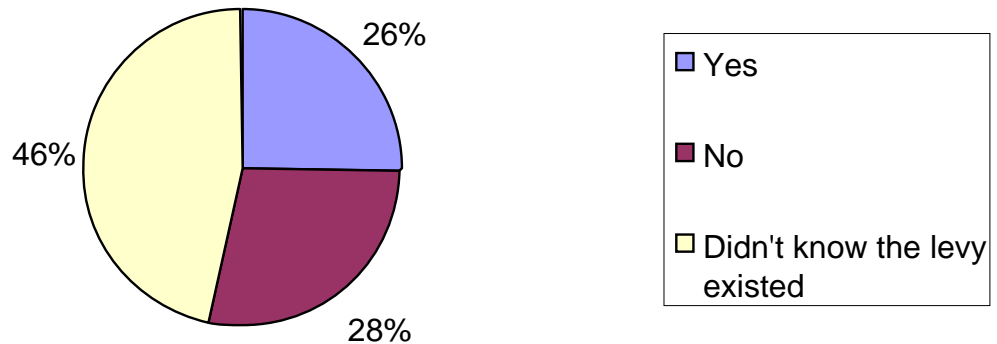
Below are Grant Thornton's survey responses to questions relating to the NVQ levy. Please note that the titles and keys of the charts in the main body of this report (figures 5 and 6) have been amended for clarity.



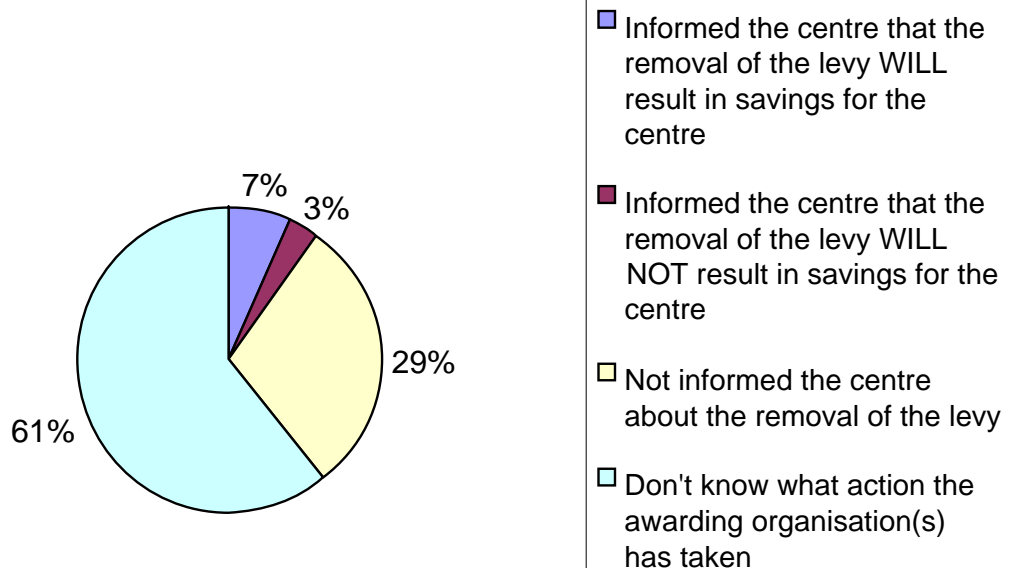
* The 94 respondents who stated 'Other' is largely made up of senior leaders, such as head teachers, vice principals and non-finance directors (44 respondents), and centre managers, such as exams managers or business managers (39 respondents).



Are you aware of the removal of the £10 NVQ levy?



For awarding organisations that the centre uses to supply NVQs, please identify approximately how many have:



The qualifications regulators wish to make their publications widely accessible.
Please contact us if you have any specific accessibility requirements.

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