

Informing Ofqual's strategy: a learner perspective on qualifications and assessments

On 5 June 2009, the National Learner Panel (NLP) met with Ofqual. Ofqual sought NLP members' experiences and views as to whether the qualifications and assessment system is working for them, to inform its strategy. The NLP's views and recommendations are outlined in sections 2 and 3.

1. Background and context

Ofqual is the new regulator of qualifications, exams and tests in England. Ofqual is responsible for maintaining standards and increasing public confidence that tests, assessments and examinations are trustworthy and valuable. As the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) – a new system for recognising and accrediting qualifications – is introduced, Ofqual aims to ensure learners get the results their work deserves and that standards are maintained. At the moment, Ofqual is a part of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), but legislation is currently being passed to make it a completely separate, independent regulator. One of Ofqual's major projects at the moment is the two year study on the reliability of results of examinations, tests and assessments. Ofqual sought the views of the NLP on their qualifications, in part to inform this feasibility study but also its broader strategy with regard to qualifications. **The NLP's views and recommendations are outlined below.**

2. Challenges posed by the qualifications and assessment system: what could be improved

Whilst we find much that is positive about the qualifications and assessments that we undertake, we focused in our meeting with Ofqual on the challenges the qualifications system presents, and how we would address those challenges. We broke into four groups, broadly according to our type of learning, to discuss these challenges:

- 1) General qualifications (GCSEs and A levels)
- 2) Access to HE and National Diploma courses
- 3) NVQs and Apprenticeships
- 4) Qualifications undertaken in an adult and community learning setting

2.1 General qualifications: our recommendations

Employer perceptions

In our experience of taking A levels and GCSEs, we tend to find employers value more traditional subjects over newer subjects, even when they have relatively little knowledge about the skills base or syllabus for these subjects.

"Sociology is not nearly as valued as science courses are by employers; it is seen as fluffy. But I don't think that many employers really know what it's about."

We are frustrated by the perceptions of employers and society more widely that 'fluffy' general qualifications, such as sociology or media studies, are marked more generously. We believe it is the nature of these subject disciplines that the answers are more subjective.

We would like to see **clear information** and an awareness **campaign** targeted at **employers** to highlight:

- the **value, content** and level of **challenge** of **less traditional** A level and GCSE subjects
- the **transferable skills** for the workplace that the range of general qualifications provide to learners

Teaching to the exam versus a wider subject grounding

We support a system which **balances 'teaching to the exam'** in GCSE and A level courses with more of a focus on **developing knowledge and skills** throughout the course.

"We want to learn material that's transferable, not just stuff that will help us pass an exam."

Assessment methods

We would like to see less focus on exam-based assessment in some general qualifications, because of the level of stress exams can induce for many learners, leading us to underperform. We would advocate **more options** for learners about how they prefer to be assessed, for example, a choice between a written exam, a coursework paper, a viva or continuous assessment.

"Rather than exams, I'd like to make video or audio recordings to present what I have learned. I would like to see more continuous assessment."

Feedback from assessments

We would all like to receive **personalised feedback** following formal assessments, including exams, rather than purely receiving a grade.

"It would be good to get detailed feedback on how we did in the real exam setting, so that we can learn for the next time."

2.2 Access to HE and Diploma qualifications: our recommendations

Variations in the syllabus leading to variations in standards

Those of us taking the Diploma find that different units within the same qualification vary significantly in their level of difficulty. Because our **tutors choose** which units to teach, this can lead to some learners taking a less challenging qualification than others.

"There doesn't seem to be consistency between the units. Learners in different years at the same provider can have two completely different experiences!"

Variations in marking standards

Where Diploma modules or units are marked and assessed **internally**, we are concerned about variations in marking standards compared with other learning providers.

"When I was taking one of my modules within my National Diploma, external moderators came in and said the standard wasn't high enough, so we had to repeat the course, which was frustrating!"

We would like to see more **training for assessors** and increased use of **external moderation**, to maintain consistency in marking and the standards of Diploma qualifications.

Employer and university understanding

We believe that the **status** and perceived value of Access to HE qualifications such as the Higher Education Foundation Course (HEFC) is variable, and that these qualifications lack **national profile** that would support entry to HE. In our experience, employer understanding of both Diploma courses and Access courses is generally low.

"In my experience, few employers seem to know about Access to HE as an alternative to A levels, and they don't really know what the qualification consists of."

We would like Access to HE and Diploma qualifications to feed into a **national framework** that is **accessible** to and understood by employers and universities. We welcome the introduction of the **QCF** to fulfill this purpose.

2.3 Apprenticeships & NVQs: our recommendations

Transferability of qualifications

For those of us who are work-based learners undertaking an NVQ, we would like to develop skills that are as **sustainable** as possible in their value and usefulness; skills that are not too specific to a single context and that can meet, where possible, the rapid **developments in technology** that impact on skills needs *“If you’re doing an NVQ to learn a skill in an industry e.g. coalmining, how transferable is it really? I think the components to the qualification that are transferable need to be highlighted to learners and employers.”*

We would like to see **consultations** with learners and employers currently based in the workplace on the sustained usefulness and transferability of recent vocational qualifications they have undertaken.

Progression routes into HE

We recommend that all apprenticeships and NVQs be accorded **UCAS points**. This recommendation was advanced by last year’s NLP, but currently few apprenticeships are recognised on the UCAS tariff. *“Apprenticeships are not very good for progression to HE- only three apprenticeships are recognised on the UCAS tariff. Key skills are recognised by UCAS, but technical certificates and NVQs are not.”*

Assessment methods

Some of us find that assessment to complete an NVQ involves completion of too many different units and too many separate assessment strands. We would like NVQs to be broken down into **fewer components** and assessments, to be more uniform and simplified.

In our experience, the quality of work-based assessment is very inconsistent if we are employed by a company and the employer acts as assessor.

“Some employers assess their staff, some use an external body, and this can sometimes pave the way for unfairness.”

We would like to see increased **training** and more **external moderation** of internal assessment, to maintain consistency in marking and the standard of NVQs and apprenticeships.

Non-specific NVQ modules

Currently, if we decide to move from one NVQ to another, we have to redo non-specific modules within different NVQ programmes. We would like these modules (such as customer service) to be **transferable** across different NVQ programmes, so we don’t repeat material.

At present within sector specific NVQ qualifications, only one non-specific module is currently allowed. Some of us find this is not conducive to the increased **transferability** of qualifications. We would like to see the option to take **more than one non-specific module**.

We strongly support the fact that the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) enables learners to **consolidate units from different learning experiences**, as each unit is accredited in its own right, avoiding repetition of the same units needed for diverse qualifications.

2.4 Qualifications undertaken in an adult and community learning setting: our recommendations

Employer perceptions

Several of us have taken a range of qualifications in an adult and community learning setting, from the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) to Move on Maths, from a City and Guilds Bookkeeping course to a CELTA certificate in teaching English as a foreign language.

The major challenge we all face is a lack of **recognition** for and **understanding** of this range of qualifications; what these qualifications consist of, the time commitment they command and their level of difficulty.

"In an interview recently, a chartered accountant asked me what modules F1, 2 and 3 from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants meant!"

"There are so many small esoteric courses that aren't recognised by employers. Employers need to be able to equate the qualifications on these courses to more familiar qualifications in terms of their level and the effort they take – to say 'oh, that's the same as an NVQ. Etc.'"

We welcome the introduction of the QCF for the simplification of qualification types it will provide and the increased employer understanding and trust of qualifications that it will generate.

International recognition of qualifications

We would like the qualifications we undertake to be **internationally recognised**, at least within the EU – not just nationally. In our experience, it is common for individuals taking part in adult and community learning to have followed unusual pathways and lived abroad. We support the EU-wide recognition of the new QCF.

Accessibility of examinations and assessments

In our experience, online exams and assessments are not fully accessible to LLDD learners, sometimes leaving them with no option but to leave out questions and consequently lower their grade.

"I recently took the ECDL and some parts of the assessment only work with a computer mouse. If you can't use a mouse because, like me, you are visually impaired, you have to miss the question out."

Many of us believe investment is required to **improve the accessibility** of exam and assessment software and equipment across all the qualifications we are taking.

3. A summary of our recommendations: our vision for the qualifications and assessment system

Our recommendations above give an indication of the kind of qualifications and assessment system we learners would like to see. We have drawn out some themes that apply across our recommendations to Ofqual regarding the qualifications system.

- Increased choice over assessment methods
- Increased flexibility and accessibility of those assessment methods
- Transferability of any skills taught
- Clear scope for progression
- Personalised feedback following formal assessments and exams
- increased training for in-house assessors and increased use of external moderation

Recommendations that we anticipate the incoming QCF will address

- Increased awareness of employers and HE institutions on the transferable skills (soft and hard skills), content and value of the full range of diverse qualifications
- Introduction of modules that are transferable across different qualifications

Learner Involvement within Ofqual's strategy

We support the creation of an independent regulator of qualifications Ofqual's plans to develop a learner involvement strategy. We made the following recommendations for Ofqual's future learner involvement activity:

- Consult a wide range of **learner networks** and **panels** on a regular basis. The NLP is one mechanism amongst many for listening to learners and hearing about their personal experiences
- Arrange opportunities for Ofqual staff to **shadow** learners at different stages of their qualification and assessment journey
- Conduct **small scale surveys** with a wide range of learners on a regular basis and employ a **range of methods** in addition for learners to feed in their views to Ofqual e.g. focus groups, text messaging
- Involve learners on a regular basis who have been **elected** by other learners, for example Student Union officers and NUS representatives
- **Review the learner involvement strategy** on an annual basis and involve learners in the review process