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**National Vocational Qualifications in the
United Kingdom:
Their origins and legacy**

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Skills and
Employability
Department

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Foreword

According to an ILO survey, some 70 countries are in the process of developing or implementing some kind of a qualifications framework. A framework is intended to improve understanding of qualifications (degrees, certificates, or recognition of experiential-based learning) in terms of the information they convey to an employer about prospective workers' competencies. Frameworks are also intended to explain how qualifications relate to each other and thus can be combined to build pathways within and across occupations and education and training sectors. Many countries are trying to improve the relevance, quality and flexibility of their education and training systems, and many of them are looking to qualification frameworks as a tool for bringing about this reform. Development of national qualification frameworks (NQFs) are also motivated by the emergence of regional frameworks, such as in Europe or in the Caribbean, which aim to help employers and institutions of higher education recognize the equivalency of qualifications earned in different countries. With these goals in mind, the development of NQFs has been widely supported by multilateral and bilateral agencies.

However, very little has been documented about the effectiveness of NQFs in bringing about change in skills development systems or about their actual use by employers, workers, and training providers. In 2009, the ILO's Skills and Employability Department launched its Qualifications Framework Research Project to study the impact and implementation of NQFs in developing countries to help fill this knowledge gap and to be able to provide more evidence-based advice to member States.

The research programme, comprising some 16 country case studies and a review of academic literature on the NQFs, provides an international comparison of the design and purpose of NQFs in developing countries and an empirical analysis of their use and impact based on the experience of those involved in their design and use. The study aims to understand to what extent establishing an NQF is the best strategy for achieving a country's desired policy objectives, what approaches to qualifications frameworks and their implementation are most appropriate in which contexts and for which purposes, what level of resources (human and other) and what complimentary policies might be required to achieve the policy objectives associated with them, and what might be a realistic assessment of the likely outcomes.

This paper is one of five case studies conducted as part of the research and appears as a chapter in Employment Working Paper No. 45 done in 2009, *Learning from the first qualifications frameworks*, which consisted of: Chapter 1 on the National Vocational Qualifications in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, written by Professor Michael Young (Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London); Chapter 2 on the NQF in Scotland, written by David Raffae (Professor of Sociology of Education, University of Edinburgh); Chapter 3 on the NQF in New Zealand, written by Dr. Rob Strathdee (Head of School of Education Policy and Implementation at the University of Wellington); Chapter 4, written by Leesa Wheelahan (Senior Lecturer in Adult and Vocational Education, Griffith University); and Chapter 5, written by Stephanie Allais (now postdoctoral fellow at the University of Edinburgh). A companion Working Paper (No. 44) (Allais et al. 2009), *Researching NQFs: Some conceptual issues*, addresses some of the fundamental conceptual issues involved in research on NQFs in order to broaden the debate about their role in skills systems. A full analysis of the new case studies and the policy lessons derived from them was published in 2010 as *The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*, which, along with other background reports and publications, can be found on the Skills and Employability Department website's theme of ILO research programme on implementation and impact of NQFs at: http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/projects/lang-en/WCMS_126588/index.htm.

As a Research Associate in the Skills and Employability Department in 2009, Dr. Stephanie Allais has led the development of the research and overseen the country studies. Professor Michael Young has served as senior research advisor, and Professor David Raffe gave advice and support to the project. The research programme has been carried out in cooperation with the European Training Foundation. I would also like to thank Jo-Ann Bakker for preparing the manuscript for publication.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AAT	Association of Accounting Technicians
APEL	accreditation of experiential learning
CATERBASE	Hospitality and Catering Employers Training Organization
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CGLI	City and Guilds of London Institute
DfID	Department for International Development
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
HRD	human resources development
NCVQ	the National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NHS	National Health Service
NQFs	national qualifications frameworks
QCF	English Qualification and Credit Framework
RVQ	Review of Vocational Qualifications
SKOPE	Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance Project (University of Cardiff)
YT	Youth Training
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

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National Vocational Qualifications in the United Kingdom: Their origins and legacy

1. Introduction

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were launched in the United Kingdom (excluding Scotland)¹ in 1987 as a framework for rationalizing what was described at the time as the ‘jungle’ of existing vocational qualifications. They were never intended to be the basis for a comprehensive NQF for all qualifications;² however, successive governments were committed to using them to replace all other *vocational* qualifications, especially those which involved government funding.

NVQs are still used in the United Kingdom, although the original NVQ model has been changed many times. Those countries which have drawn on the example of NVQs would no doubt claim that they had learned lessons from mistakes made by the United Kingdom and the exaggerated claims made for the original model.

Why then, in a project concerned with NQFs in 2009, is it worth looking back over 20 years at the origins of NVQs? This paper begins by suggesting some reasons why countries currently involved in introducing an NQF might find it useful to consider the origins and legacy of NVQs.

1. NVQs were the first national attempt to base vocational qualifications on the idea of competence.³

¹ A slightly different version of NVQs, Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) was launched in Scotland at a similar time. This paper is restricted to a consideration of NVQs.

² Gilbert Jessup, Deputy Chief Executive of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (the body responsible for NVQs) had more ambitious aims than the NVQ model could be a basis for all qualifications (Jessup 1991). However, this proposal never gained widespread support.

³ NVQs were, of course, also the first NQFs in which qualifications were defined solely in terms of learning outcomes. Some clarification is needed about the relationship between the two terms ‘competence’ and ‘outcomes’. Whereas “competence” implies a reference to what someone can ‘do’ rather than what they know, and hence tends to be limited to vocational and professional qualifications, “outcomes” is a broader and more general term that includes the idea of competence; it emerged to overcome the tendency of traditional qualifications to overemphasize inputs such as syllabuses and necessary learning time.

It follows that whereas the idea of competence is associated with the requirements of workplaces, the idea of outcomes is used to refer to ‘what someone knows’ and to express the broader goals of general education.

There are, however, two reasons why the two terms have become almost synonymous in recent policy documents. Firstly, they are both expressions of the increasingly instrumental approach to education on the part of governments. Such approaches emphasize that learning is less and less ‘an end in itself’ but a means to another ‘end’, such as employability. This ‘instrumentalism’ is symbolized in the much quoted claim by the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, that “education is the best economic policy that we have”. Secondly, and relatedly, the two ideas are

2. NVQs remain, over 20 years later, the most widely known, widely-copied and most heavily-criticized model for a vocational qualifications framework in the world.

A qualifications framework, like any other instrument of educational policy, is always introduced in order to overcome or alleviate particular problems that have arisen in a particular historical and political context. However, when a similar model is adopted elsewhere, these contextual features are easily forgotten. A consideration of the origins of the first outcomes-based model for NVQs may therefore shed light on issues which are under-emphasized or even obscured in current policies and make explain the problems facing those involved in implementation.

3. Some later versions of outcomes-based NQFs have taken on the criticisms of the NVQ approach. An example is the decision to base the NQF on outcomes, not competence in South Africa (Kraak 2001). However, the idea that qualifications could be expressed as 'written outcomes' expressed independently of the learning processes leading to them that was central to NVQs, has been a feature of all NQFs, albeit with varying degrees of emphasis. Understanding exactly what this emphasis on outcomes means and finding out how and in what way "written outcomes" are used in different countries is part of what this Project is about. In many cases, especially in developing countries, 'written outcomes' appear to be used in ways that are almost indistinguishable from that originally proposed for NVQs.
4. It is not insignificant that NVQs originated in the United Kingdom, one of the ten richest countries in the world, with an education system that has been seen, for better or worse, as a model for others to copy, especially in the former British colonies. Furthermore, this exemplar role of NVQs has been given greater significance by the energetic way that the model has been publicized and marketed by the British Council, DfID (Department for International Development) and various UK-based Awarding Bodies, such as the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI).
5. The NVQ outcomes model fits neatly into the English tradition of Awarding and Examining Bodies which are relatively autonomous from both the State and from colleges, schools and other providers of learning programmes. NVQs were designed by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and a government agency in association with employer-led sectoral bodies. However, they were 'owned' by Awarding Bodies who appointed internal and external verifiers to oversee assessment, thus providing a readymade model for assessing learning outcomes independently of learning processes.
6. Despite the many criticisms (Hyland 1994; Smithers 1999; West 2004; Wolf 1995), NVQs have not been without their 'successes' in particular sectors. Two examples of these will be discussed later in this paper. I shall argue that these 'successes' do not answer the criticisms of the NVQ model. However, they do suggest an alternative approach to the role of qualifications (and qualification frameworks) in the reform of vocational education and in supporting skill development - issues that are at the heart of this Project.

My argument for examining NVQs, therefore, is not that all countries implementing an NQF have followed the NVQ competence-based approach; although many have. Nor does it imply that the increasing prevalence of a 'written outcomes' approach to qualifications means that the NVQ approach to 'outcomes' is being followed.⁴ It is rather that in providing a concrete example of what is involved in expressing qualifications as 'written outcomes', NVQs began a trend that has become an almost unquestioned element of all qualification reforms since.

becoming blurred as more emphasis is placed on the economic benefits of general, as well as vocational, education.

⁴ Although many, especially the poorer countries, have done so and seem likely to continue to do so.

Two preliminary comments about qualifications and outcomes are worth making at this point. First, *all* qualifications necessarily involve outcomes - in the sense that they represent a statement about what the holder knows and can do and always the *outcome* of some learning. Furthermore, in most societies, qualifications are used by students, trainees, employees, employers and admissions tutors (and, of course, education and training providers) both as a proxy for what someone knows and can do and as a 'currency' in the labour market; the more learning is expressed in qualifications, the more it can be 'bought' and 'sold'.

What made the NVQ model distinctive, at least in its time, was that it enabled the outcomes of qualifications to be detached from how they had been achieved; in other words it took the process of "commodification" of learning a step further. In looking back to the beginnings of this process and the links it may have had to other expressions of commodification, we may be able to learn something of the educational gains and losses involved.

Structure of the paper

The rest of this paper is structured as follows.

Section 2 poses the question "Why NVQs?" in more detail. Section 3 examines aspects of the political, social and economic origins of NVQs in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s. It considers some of the justifications that were given for trying to replace the existing system of vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). In particular, it focuses on the Government's *Review of vocational qualifications* (RVQ) that led to NVQs.

Section 4 examines the pilot project undertaken in the Hotel and Catering Industry that became the basis for the initial design of NVQs. Section 5 explores in more detail the NVQ legacy of outcomes as 'written statements'. Section 6 discusses "functional analysis" - the methodology adopted for the design of NVQs - its assumptions, claims and limitations. Section 7 describes two examples of NVQ 'success stories'⁵ - NVQs for Accounting Technicians and for Health and Care Workers in the National Health Service (NHS).⁶ It examines the extent to which these 'successes' answer the criticisms of NVQs, and considers whether NVQs can be regarded, not as the basis for a national framework but, as some have claimed, as 'niche qualifications'. My analysis of the two cases suggests that the two examples are best seen as pointing to an alternative approach to the role of qualifications in educational reform. Section 8 concludes the paper by returning to the question of the legacy of NVQs. It considers implications of the lessons that can be learned from NVQs for countries considering the introduction of outcomes-based qualification frameworks as a basis for educational reform - especially those with limited institutional provision for vocational education and training (VET).

⁵ My definition of success here is that in these two sectors, NVQs had widespread support among employees and employers and managers and that there is some evidence that they were associated with improvements in the quality of work and progression possibilities for those gaining them.

⁶ Unwin and her colleagues (2004) site another interesting example of the 'success' of the NVQ competence approach in the automotive industry.

2. Why NVQs?

NVQs were the first attempt to develop a national vocational qualification system that was independent of any specific set of learning programmes or institutions that provided them. It is that ‘independence’ from the complexity of national education systems with their different providers, public and private, that makes an outcomes-based framework attractive to policy-makers, especially those working in international organizations. Secondly, and perhaps of even greater significance, is that the NVQ model with its levels and occupational standards expressed in terms of outcomes that are not tied to any specific learning programmes, has the same basic design structure that is found in all later NQFs. It is interesting to contrast the neutral way that the recent CEDEFOP⁷ report, *The shift to outcomes* (CEDEFOP 2008) points out the impracticality of a qualifications framework based on inputs with the arguments for outcomes that were put forward in the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Raggatt and Williams 1999). As Raggatt and Williams point out, governments of the United Kingdom at the time were quite explicit that vocational qualifications defined in terms of ‘outcomes’ could be the basis for overcoming what they saw as the ‘producer capture’ of existing qualifications.⁸

It is also worth mentioning that the NVQ outcomes-based qualification model, even if not in the precise form it took in NVQs, was attractive to many governments which were seeking more control over public institutions. Why might this be so? A number of claims have been made on behalf of outcomes models. Four have a continuing importance and are worth mentioning:

1. they provide a basis for international comparability, transferability and ranking;
2. they offer a simple instrument, that can be expressed numerically, for governments to make the programmes and institutions which they have funded more accountable;
3. in showing that in principle it is possible to separate learning outcomes from the learning processes that lead to them, they became the basis for breaking the producer monopoly over qualifications and opened the way for qualifications to be branded by employers as other products ‘on the market’; and
4. they provide the basis, at least in principle, for an approach to skills development that emphasizes the accreditation of existing skills rather than making any demands for the expansion of educational institutions.

NVQs were initially envisaged as qualifications that could be used to accredit and certify the skills acquired by young people on work experience programmes; the review on which they were based did not envisage them as leading to new college-based programmes. New programmes offered by both public and private colleges and funded by government

⁷ European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training.

⁸ ‘Producer capture’ refers to the idea that public (and of course private, in a different way) institutions, like colleges, tend to focus more on the interests of their staff (and what they can teach) than on their role as providers of a public service that is responsive to employer and learner needs. The assumption by the Government of the United Kingdom when launching NVQs was that colleges should be giving more attention to employer needs - something they hoped would be achieved by qualifications such as NVQs in which the outcomes were defined by employer-led bodies. In practice, employers were not as interested in defining qualification outcomes as the Government had hoped, and qualifications became ‘captured’ as much by ‘assessors’ and consultants as by employers.

did emerge because of the reluctance of many employers to provide work placements even when these were funded by the Government. Although governments of the time saw NVQs as a tool for employers to undertake skill-audits, it was only later that the potential of outcomes-based qualifications for accrediting the informal or prior experiential learning (APEL) of existing employees was recognized.⁹

Another significant factor in England was that the NVQ outcomes model, because it could certify any type of learning or skills at any level, was supported by some progressive educationalists (especially those involved in adult education and programmes for those with learning difficulties). The educational case for NVQs was that at least in theory the model was non-discriminatory and did not require access to institutions such as colleges and universities which had traditionally excluded those without qualifications based on formal education.

3. The origins of NVQs: From review to implementation

The original proposal for an NVQ framework was made by the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* (RVQ) which reported in 1986. The review was a response to two problems facing the Government at the time; one specific and one general. The specific problem was that a few years earlier the Government had launched the Youth Training Scheme (YTS, later extended as Youth Training - YT) - originally a one-year programme for unemployed school leavers facing a labour market in which apprenticeships were declining and jobs for those without qualifications fast disappearing. Both YTS and YT recruited many who left school without qualifications and who would previously have obtained unskilled work. However, it also recruited those who had gained school leaving qualifications and who in the past would have taken up craft or technician apprenticeships. The review was particularly concerned with how the learning acquired by the former group might be accredited.

The second and related factor which led to the review, was an awareness of the limitations of the existing system of vocational qualifications which had developed at a time when many jobs required few, if any, skills or knowledge. Not surprisingly, many occupational sectors had no qualifications, few existing qualifications had any links with each other and many vocational qualifications were only available at higher levels. This awareness was triggered off by several influential reports during the 1980s which contrasted the small proportion of the labour force in the United Kingdom who were qualified relative to the proportions in continental European countries such as France and Germany.

The RVQ was critical of the existing system. However, it was more balanced than the NVQ framework that it led to. It recognized that the existing system had strengths as well as the weaknesses. For example, it pointed to:

⁹ This potential was recognized early on by the designers of NVQs such as Graham Debling (see Raggatt and Unwin 1990), but their focus at the time was on skill audits rather than access. What was never recognized by those later endorsing APEL was that if work-based or other experiential learning was to be accredited on a significant scale, considerable investment to create an assessment infrastructure would be involved which might have been used with greater long-term benefits to expand the formal VET programmes on offer. I explore some of the contradictions involved in the claims made for APEL elsewhere (Young 2007, Ch. 13).

- the credibility and considerable expertise of the established Awarding Bodies such as the City and Guilds¹⁰ which all the colleges offering programmes of vocational education used and many employers relied on; and
- the well-developed partnerships, at a local and regional level, between colleges and employers which often involved local government.¹¹

These strengths of the existing system, especially the role of partnerships in underpinning the trust that employers placed in qualifications, have turned out to be more important than was realized at the time, at least by the Government and the designers of NVQs. However, the NVQ model that was introduced by the Government in 1987 did not take them into account - either in maintaining the continuity of the existing college-employer partnerships or in drawing on the existing experience of the Awarding Bodies in designing the new qualifications.

The almost evangelical enthusiasm for the new outcomes-based approach on the part of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), together with the pressures of a Government agenda which was more concerned with reducing the powers of trade unions than improving the skills of the workforce, meant that a balanced approach to reform was unlikely. Unwin et al (2004) summarized the Government's core priorities up to 2004 as:

- *promoting inclusion* - by encouraging more unqualified young people to enter training schemes which led to qualifications;
- *making colleges more accountable* - on the basis of a version of 'payment by results' which linked the funding of colleges and Awarding Bodies to numbers of NVQs awarded. This policy later had to be abandoned; and
- *putting an emphasis on basic skills* - which gave priority to the assessment of routine and low-level tasks and encouraged Awarding Bodies to focus on qualifications at the lowest levels.

My point here is not to criticize these priorities, which all address real problems. It is rather to indicate how, when associated with the outcomes model on which NVQs were based, they perpetuated a view of vocational qualifications as unlikely to be a basis for progression and as inherently inferior to those obtained at school or university. Furthermore, linking qualifications to low-level skills without providing those who obtain them with the resources to progress is likely to create another set of barriers and lead to new inequalities.

The case of NVQs is an important reminder that it is never only the design of qualifications that counts, important though that is. It is the priorities of governments (and other significant stakeholders such as employers) that shape both the design of qualifications and how they are used. Reforms are always led by broader policy priorities even when the language used assumes that qualifications are the driver.

¹⁰ Either out of conviction or for more instrumental reasons that went against all its traditions, City and Guilds slavishly followed the outcomes/competence model on which NVQs were based in the 1980s and 1990s and became typecast as the leading 'low level' provider. The issue of course is not that low-level vocational qualifications should not be available to those who have achieved little at school, but the nature of those qualifications and whether they offer a genuine basis for progression.

¹¹ These partnerships were not so different to the 'networks' that Strathdee (2005) in New Zealand suggests should be the basis of future innovation-led systems of vocational education and training (VET).

In the 1980s, the priorities of governments of the United Kingdom were: (a) to achieve greater control over public expenditure by colleges and Awarding Bodies; and (b) to shift power over the provision of vocational education and training (VET) towards employers. NVQs, with their distinctive design feature of separating outcomes and assessment from learning programmes, appeared to be the ideal instrument to achieve these ends.

The proposals in the mid-1980s for a reformed work-based VET route¹² were based on what the Government at the time referred to as ‘standards of a new kind’. Later these standards became known as ‘occupational standards’ and were similar to the New Zealand and South African examples of ‘unit standards’. It was assumed that these ‘new standards’ - expressed as ‘written outcomes’ - would address what were seen to be the main weaknesses of traditional vocational qualifications. These were the time-serving basis of traditional apprenticeships and their dependence on the ‘subjective’ judgements of a master craftsman and technicians. It was also assumed that these ‘new standards’ would provide a rigorous and more employment-relevant alternative to the ‘knowledge-based’ approach to standards associated with written examinations.

However the development of these ‘standards of a new kind’ relied on two questionable assumptions. The first was that employers would have the time, commitment and expertise to assess trainees. The second was that ‘standard tasks’ could be used as a reliable basis for judging workplace performance. Government policy-makers hoped that because employers now ‘owned’ these new standards (because they had been developed by employer-led bodies), it would be in their interests to take responsibility for using them for assessing their employees. However, many employers resisted taking on these responsibilities as too time-consuming and bureaucratic¹³. As a consequence, these assessment tasks were again taken over by Awarding Bodies who, funded by government, developed a complex hierarchy of assessors, and internal and external verifiers in an attempt to guarantee quality.

This strategy was the logical outcome of basing assessment on standardized tasks. However, although these ‘tasks’ were designed to replace the trust on which the old qualifications were based and that was assumed to be defective, they did not create a basis of trust in the new qualifications. The standardized tasks replaced judgements with procedures (has the candidate undertaken the task in the specified way?). This shift is not unique to NVQs but part of a broader trend in approaches to quality and standards that can be described as ‘generic’. Instead of confidence being placed in the judgements of specialists- for example, master craftspersons or professionals - it is placed in those who are experts in procedures for interpreting outcomes that apply to all occupations and sectors. Doubts about such a ‘generic’ model of quality may account for why some employers and professional bodies (as in the example of Accountancy discussed in Section 7 of this paper), continue to insist on written examinations or still use traditional types of qualifications.

¹² Youth Training (YT), the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and later, a national apprenticeship structure.

¹³ Assessment had previously been the responsibility of partnerships between employers, colleges and Awarding Bodies.

4. CATERBASE: The pilot project on which NVQs were based¹⁴

Even such a radical innovation as NVQs was not developed in a vacuum. As Susan James reports (James 2006), the key features of NVQs can be traced back to a pilot project funded by the government in the mid 1980s and launched by CATERBASE, the Hospitality and Catering Employers Training Organization. The Project was initially designed to develop a framework for assessing workplace learning in the Hotel and Catering sector which would replace the combination of ‘master craftsman judgement’ and ‘time serving’ associated with traditional apprenticeships. The new scheme was based on agreed standards of skill (the ‘standards of a new kind’ referred to earlier) related to the jobs available in the sector.¹⁵

The CATERBASE scheme of assessment was based on a functional analysis¹⁶ of work tasks which led to occupational activities being broken up into tasks of increasing levels of detail¹⁷. This approach was in stark contrast to the traditional assessment of work-based learning in apprenticeships which was based on the idea that learning is *a process* in which knowledge and skills and the broader set of attitudes and values associated with becoming a member of an occupation are acquired and developed by trainees and apprentices *over time*. It followed that the final assessment of an apprentice was not just an assessment of outcomes but the culmination of a process of learning and continuous assessment during the period of apprenticeship. Process and outcome in traditional apprenticeships were interdependent.

Responses from employers taking part in the initial evaluation of the CATERBASE Project were mixed, according to James. Many liked its emphasis on workplace skills but complained that trainees acquired too little ‘theory’. Some compared the scheme unfavourably with the previous college-based programme. They stressed the importance of knowing which employers the trainees had been placed with as a basis for judging their competence. In other words, for these employers, assessment of outcomes *on their own* was not enough.

Nevertheless the programme was seen by the Government as a ‘success’ and was extended to other sectors including:

- clothing manufacture,
- retail distribution,
- business administration,
- pensions management, and

¹⁴ This section draws substantially on Susan James’s 2006 paper.

¹⁵ James notes a point that has recurred in successive attempts to reform vocational qualifications in England in sectors with no significant tradition of employer involvement in qualification design and where in many cases vocational qualifications had not been developed. While the majority of jobs in a sector like Hotel and Catering were with small employers, this type of employment was hardly represented on the CATERBASE Project or in the groups involved in developing the standards; these groups were led, understandably, by large employers such as the hotel chains.

¹⁶ See later section for a discussion of this methodology.

¹⁷ A feature of NVQs was sharply criticized later by Alison Wolf (1995).

- marine engineering.

Despite the reservations expressed by the employers, the lists of standard tasks or outcomes developed by the CATERBASE Project was the model adopted for NVQs.

Susan James (2006) goes on to point to the wider lessons from the Project that were largely neglected in the design of NVQs. As she says:

... the emphasis on outcomes, and the underlying notion of competence collide with the training practices and needs of employers. The identification of a worker as either competent or not (yet) competent (the basis on which an NVQ is awarded or withheld), does not do justice to the depth and breadth of knowledge and skill that is constructed in the workplace. Qualifications are not skills themselves but a proxy for skill¹⁸ and it is debatable as to the skills that are being qualified in an NVQ.

This obvious, but easily forgotten, point about the proxy character of qualifications is often missed in the unqualified support given to what CEDEFOP refer to as the 'shift to outcomes'. Judgement of and trust in a qualification always depends on factors that are not expressed in the written outcomes and cannot be 'written down'. Similar problems are avoided rather than faced when governments use qualification outcomes to drive the reform of vocational education and training and forget that they are relying on 'proxies' for a far more complex institutional process.

5. NVQs and the legacy of outcomes as 'written statements'

It was suggested in the introductory section of this paper that NVQs were certainly the first and probably the most influential example of an attempt to introduce, on a national basis, an outcomes-based model for the reform of vocational education and training (VET). NVQs provided the first example of the potential of 'written outcomes' as a way of describing qualifications that has been picked up in many recent proposals for NQFs, including the recently-introduced English Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) and the European Union's European Qualifications Framework (EQF). As we are told by the recent CEDEFOP Report (CEDEFOP 2008), this 'shift to outcomes' that was initiated with NVQs, is now an almost unchallenged global development in how qualifications are thought about, written about and designed.¹⁹ In relation to the legacy of NVQs and the lessons that might be learned from the problems that the NVQ outcomes-model gave rise to, the question is the significance of the shift referred to by CEDEFOP.

Let me begin with a statement from Gilbert Jessup (Deputy Chief Executive of NCVQ) quoted by Susan James (2006):

... the shift to an outcomes-led system of Education and Training *thus means a qualification-led or assessment-led system*... As candidates do not have to undergo any particular programme of learning, the *award of an NVQ is based solely on the outcome of assessment*. (Jessup 1991)

Jessup is very clear that the NVQ outcomes framework was an 'assessment-led system' that did not rely on the learner undergoing "any particular programme of learning".

¹⁸ My underlining/bold.

¹⁹ This 'evolutionary' view of the spread of outcomes-based approaches portrayed by CEDEFOP can certainly be challenged (Young and Allais 2009). Furthermore, what outcomes mean and how they are (or are not) related to the processes that lead to them remain highly-contentious issues (Brockman, Clark and Winch 2008).

This might be seen as an extreme view which has been modified since in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, although evidence from some of the Project's case studies suggests this is not so. A less extreme version of the NVQ model might be referred to as outcomes-based rather than outcomes-led, and it is this that appears to be the legacy of NVQs that is suggested by the recent CEDEFOP report (CEDEFOP 2008).

Distinguishing between qualifications *based-on* learning outcomes and qualifications *led-by* learning outcomes raises two rather different issues in light of the NVQ experience. Firstly, if an NQF, like the NVQ framework, is designed to accredit informal or experiential learning, the distinction between a qualification being outcomes-led and outcomes-based does not apply. The accreditation of experiential learning must be *led by* the 'written outcomes'; without any learning programme to draw on, outcomes are all that assessors have to rely on²⁰ in making their judgements about a learner's experience. Learners are expected to use the written outcomes to reflect on and reorganize their experience.

Whether or not the accreditation of experiential learning (APEL) relies on outcomes depends on its purpose. Two purposes for APEL can be distinguished; it can be designed to promote access to formal education and hence qualifications; or it can be designed to replace formal education and provide access directly to qualifications. The former is more like a pedagogic strategy for those who have been denied formal education, rather than a form of assessment. In such a case, outcomes will only be involved in the sense that the goals (outcomes) of APEL are the successful progression of learners to a programme which would normally require formal qualifications for entry. In the case of APEL leading to qualifications, the question remains whether any value is added to the experiential learning in the process of accreditation.²¹

The second and more fundamental issue arises from the assumption, inherited from NVQs, that learning outcomes '... can be stated in written form'. The CEDEFOP report (2008) defines learning outcomes as:

... statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do after completion of learning.

Although it is not explicitly in the CEDEFOP definition, an outcome that can be stated must also be able to be written; writing an outcome down is only another form of statement. The claim that qualifications can be adequately described by the 'written explicitness' of the learning outcomes was the distinguishing feature of NVQs and is also a feature of other outcomes-based qualifications and qualification frameworks.

However, it was disagreements over 'written explicitness', and it might be argued, its inherent impossibility, that gave rise to the difficulties over jargon and conflicts over 'correct wording' in the standard setting process for NVQs in the United Kingdom and for unit standards in New Zealand and South Africa. Precise wording, such as use of active verbs, was the only resource that officials working for SAQA in South Africa and NCVQ (and later QCA) in England had to call on in the standard setting process.

²⁰ Learners cannot (or should not need to) study for such a qualification; they already have the 'experience'. It is, of course, possible for programmes to be established to help learners use outcomes to reflect on their experience.

²¹ Irena Grugulis (2003) points out in her research on management NVQs that the activity managers have to engage in to 'reorganize' their experience for it to be accredited bears little relationship to the skills and knowledge required for management.

In the case of NVQs in the United Kingdom, and in response to the many complaints by employers and others about jargon, the Government set up a Review of NVQs (the Beaumont Review), and as a result, the criteria for defining outcomes were substantially relaxed. One consequence was an inevitable (and one might say, realistic) degree of arbitrariness in how outcomes were interpreted and an implicit recognition that there was no escaping professional or other specialist judgement.

6. A new methodology? Functional analysis and its critics

Claims for the rigour and quality of the qualifications that NVQs were designed to replace were made on the basis of specialist knowledge associated with different sectors and occupations. NVQs replaced this ‘occupational specialization’ approach by a generic method that was applied to all occupations and sectors known as “functional analysis”. This section examines this approach in more detail.

Functional analysis²² and the closely-associated ideas of outcomes, competence and ‘standards of a new kind’ originated in occupational psychology in the USA in the 1960s and the earlier ideas of scientific management (Callaghan 1964). However, in the late 1980s, it represented, at least for the United Kingdom, a quite new approach to the design of vocational qualifications.²³ It made and was intended to make a clean break with the two main elements of qualification design prior to the 1980s. These were:

- the importance of specifying the amount of time that an apprentice would need (sometimes as long as seven years) to become qualified; governments in the 1980s saw this ‘time serving’ approach as leaving too much control to the trade unions; and
- the *syllabus as the basis* for teaching programmes and the assessment of off-the-job learning; governments opposed this as leaving too much control to the teachers, the colleges and the Awarding Bodies.

Both these features of traditional qualification design were seen by proponents²⁴ of functional analysis as out of date and backward looking. One way of looking at functional analysis is as an example of what might be described as ‘conservative modernization’. It was ‘modernizing’ in its claims to being based on an objective, neutral and ‘scientific’ theory of job performance; it was ‘conservative’ in being the basis for transferring power over qualifications from teachers, colleges and trade unions to employers.

Functional analysis begins with the assumption that a statement of competent workplace performance can be identified by researchers in ways which are recognized by appropriate employers. It derives from such statements a set of individual *elements of competence* and their associated performance criteria. These *elements of competence* (they later became known as occupational standards) are then grouped together into *units of competence* which are assumed to make sense to, and be valued by, employers and hence warrant separate accreditation. Each NVQ was made up of a number of related ‘units of competence’.

²² The most elaborate account of functional analysis is given by Mansfield and Mitchell (1995).

²³ For some, the approach was seen as applicable to all qualifications, vocational and general (or academic) (Jessup 1991).

²⁴ The proponents were largely located in the Manpower Services Commission and the Standards and Methodology Branch of the Employment Department (and later in NCVQ and a range of private consultancies such as PRIME) which controlled government expenditure on vocational education and training.

However, ‘performances’ are often not easily observed, or clearly distinguishable from the context in which they take place. It follows that there may be situations in which assessment which concentrates on knowledge and understanding provides better grounds for inferring competence than a number of observed performances (see the example of Accounting Technicians later in this paper). Furthermore, and contrary to the claims made for NVQs by Jessup (1991), and referred to earlier, that particular learning processes are not relevant to the assessment of competence, it can be argued that in relation to many types of workplace performance, knowledge of the learning process which leads to an outcome is an essential element in making the inference necessary if competence is to be attributed to an observed performance. An example might be the negotiating skills involved in human resources development or personnel management, where knowledge of the learning processes in which candidates have been involved may be crucial to interpreting their performance. It seems likely that the explicit separation of learning processes from learning outcomes in NVQs may account for their substantially higher take-up at lower levels where work tasks involve less judgement and less ambiguity.

Functional analysis is a technique that involves:

- identifying or defining the key purpose (or functions) of an occupation;
- subdividing the key purpose of an occupation in order to establish the outcomes which must be met for the key purpose to be achieved; and
- re-aggregating or clustering different groups of outcomes to form vocational qualifications.

Assessment of workplace performance, therefore, is the key to competence and gaining an NVQ. Functional analysis is a technique which sets out to be an objective, and systematic method for analyzing the tasks which are required for competent performance.

To summarize; functional analysis claims to be a way of identifying the purposes of employee or trainee activities and breaking them down until they are described in sufficient detail to be used as ‘standards’. It aims to replace *judgements of competence* with *rules for inferring competence*²⁵ from individual performances.²⁶

Statements of what constitutes desired or required performance which are ‘derived’ from functional analysis, are however, no more than statements of those who claim the right to prescribe performance, and to make appropriate inferences on the basis of observing performance; they are usually employers. Functional analysis is therefore perhaps best seen as an extension of ‘scientific management’ thinking to the design of qualifications. It also draws heavily on industrial approaches to product standards which have played such an important role in every branch of industry. It relies on the assumption that human performance can be measured with the same lack of ambiguity as the diameter of a screw or the resistance of a length of wire.

Like other such methods, functional analysis claims to be ‘scientific’ and ‘neutral’ and to reject and replace the judgements of specialists, whether technical, craft or professional. In practice, it is no more ‘objective’ in any absolute sense than the methods it replaces; the rules of functional analysis are arbitrary; they are not based on any ‘theory, and judgements are still involved in interpreting the rules developed by the analysis. In effect, it replaces

²⁵ Competence in this sense refers to having a reliable basis for predicting that someone will be able to do something again according to specific criteria that they have been observed doing.

²⁶ ‘Performance’ in this sense is what a person does when completing a specific task. A performance is judged ‘competent’ if according to the assessor, it accords with specific criteria of competence.

one set of judgements - those based on the specialist knowledge of different occupational and sectoral communities - by judgements made by trained assessors and verifiers. One way of describing the change would be between two kinds of trust. Trust in the qualifications being replaced by NVQs relied on specialist knowledge of craftsmen, technicians and members of professions. Trust in NVQs is based on the precision of the definitions of outcomes. In practice, outcomes always involve interpretation in particular cases; greater precision and over-specification leads inevitably to trivialization of outcomes. Trust in 'experts' is thus replaced by trust in following the correct procedures. Despite and in part because of its technical and somewhat obscure language, and in part because in reality it is constituted by ad hoc judgements, functional analysis easily becomes a modern and unquestioned 'common sense' that can be invoked to claim that the new qualifications are relevant and useful.

This account of the method adopted for the design and assessment of NVQs does not claim that it is always copied where written outcomes are used in defining qualifications; it may not be. What I have set out to demonstrate in my account of functional analysis is that any claim that 'written outcomes', first expressed in NVQs, are based on a scientific and objective methodology is false; this claim has no basis. Furthermore, it is a methodology which in the United Kingdom, led to qualifications that had to be successively revised, never achieved high take-up and offered few progression opportunities for those achieving them. It seems likely that wherever a similar approach is used it will underemphasize factors such as 'learning time' and 'understanding' that are likely to be crucial if qualifications are to promote genuine skill development and knowledge acquisition. The next section, which discusses two NVQ "success stories", is one way of giving substance to this point.

7. NVQ "success" stories

Approximately 12 per cent of the workforce in the United Kingdom now have NVQs. However, it is difficult to estimate the proportion of NVQs that are obtained via government-funded schemes which make them a requirement. Successive attempts have been made to reform NVQs in response both to the criticisms of researchers and the complaints of employers. Responses to both admit the untenability of the original claims and attempt to achieve a compromise. Responses to employer complaints, discussed briefly in an earlier section, have focused on making NVQs simpler, less jargonized and easier to assess; in effect this involves weakening the claims that their assessment is 'objectively' based and as a consequence, if not explicitly, assessment has to rely on personal judgements, which will sometimes, but not always, be based on reliable occupational (or professional) knowledge.

The dominant critique of researchers has focused on how the outcomes-led approach neglects or plays down the importance of the knowledge that underpins all but the most routine work. Successive attempts have been made to overcome this weakness - most recently by introducing Technical Certificates as an off-the-job complement to NVQs which would require evidence of knowledge assessed independently of workplace performance. However, the requirement that this 'underpinning knowledge and understanding', as it is referred to, must be shown to 'underpin performance' means that it is invariably expressed as lists of topics with no pedagogic or curricular coherence (Young 2007; Barnett 2006). In other words, it tends to be 'knowledge as facts' rather than 'knowledge as understanding' that is emphasized. It is not surprising that employers and trainees continue to prefer other types of qualifications.

However, there have been ‘success stories’ which have led the Government to modify its original aims for NVQs as being the basis for a single NQF and to accept that they may be better seen as ‘useful niche qualifications’ (James 2006).²⁷ This is, of course, an admission of defeat for the original claims that the NVQ outcomes-based framework could include all vocational qualifications.

Instead of analyzing the two examples of ‘successes’ from the point of view of what they say about the NVQ model, I want to consider them from the perspective of the specific sectors or occupations involved. In this way, I consider these NVQ ‘successes’ not primarily as ‘niche qualifications’ but as examples of occupations using and modifying the NVQ framework for their specific needs. Secondly I will argue that the two examples, in rather different but complementary ways, indicate an alternative and, in my view, better way of thinking about the role for qualifications in promoting the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

7.1 *Accounting Technician NVQs*²⁸

Accounting Technicians assist Chartered and other senior Accountants in the United Kingdom and other countries. The leading Awarding Body for Accounting Technician NVQs is the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT). AAT NVQs are distinctive in a number of ways:

- a. they are sponsored by four out of five of the professional associations of Accountants;
- b. they provide a route to becoming a Chartered or other senior Accountant for those who have not followed the traditional graduate route (30 per cent of those taking AAT NVQs go on to study at senior level);
- c. part of the assessment for the NVQ is by formal written examinations; these are insisted on by employers; and
- d. AAT NVQs do not rely solely or even primarily on work-based assessment or work experience.

All these features set NVQs in Accounting apart from most other NVQs. The differences reflect:

- a. the key role played by the professional associations in both the design and assessment of AAT NVQs;
- b. the distinctive nature of the workplaces where Accountancy Technicians are employed and the work roles they undertake;
- c. the recognition by the designers of AAT NVQs that:

²⁷ Whether the Government will be able to claim that the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) will fulfil the original hopes for NVQs as a national framework is difficult to say. The QCF is still at an early stage of development and implementation. It has clearly been influenced by a contemporary belief that accrediting learning, however small the individual ‘bits’ that are accredited, will promote continuous lifelong learning. Launching the QCF no doubt also reflects the pressure on all European Union countries to align their qualifications with the EQF.

²⁸ I am most grateful for Clare Morley’s (Director of Education and Training, Association of Accounting Technicians) help in writing this section. My account draws on a brief email and later conversation with her. However, she is in no way responsible for how I have interpreted what she wrote, or her comments on my initial draft.

- technician-level roles in financial services do not always provide the necessary experience or opportunities for gathering workplace evidence that NVQs normally require, even with the best-willed employers;
- employers are understandably unwilling to allow confidential information on clients to go into ‘portfolios of evidence’, even if anonymized;
- few employers are prepared to provide the necessary off-the-job training that would lead to AAT NVQs. As a result, most training for Accountancy Technicians takes place in classrooms or in simulations; and
- outcomes (or occupational standards) for AAT NVQs are defined as broad guidelines that are not expected to be the basis for deriving curricula or examinations.

AAT NVQs are an example of a qualification which was derived from the needs of an occupation as a whole and where the profession itself took a leading role in the design. Instead of ‘fitting in’ to the NVQ framework, the Accountancy profession modified the NVQ framework to fit their needs.

Outcomes, to repeat an earlier point, in the broadest sense, are a feature of any qualification; those deciding to study to be Accounting Technicians want to know that the NVQ will qualify them to be Accounting Technicians. Qualifications provide guides to programme developers and when expressed in terms of levels, link programmes to progression pathways and assist users in comparing different qualifications. The distinctive feature of the AAT case is not that they dispensed with outcomes; that would be like a school dispensing with educational aims or a political party not having political goals. It was that the AAT recognized that they had to make the framework fit their goals; not vice versa. It is a completely different approach to one which begins with the framework and assumes that the necessary skills to be developed and knowledge to be acquired can be derived from it.

Also, by agreeing to their qualifications being part of the NVQ framework, the AAT were able to ensure that programmes for Accounting trainees were eligible for government grants and were linked to the wider framework of vocational qualifications - making it easier for trainees to move to a different occupation. On the other hand, representatives of the Accountancy profession negotiated their own interpretation of NVQ outcomes to ensure that assessment was closely embedded in systematic off-the-job programmes; this for them required assessment to be by written examination. As a consequence, Accounting NVQs are very different from most NVQs which comply closely with the outcomes-based format. Furthermore, they offer a real basis for progression and are widely respected within and beyond the profession in the many different sectors where Accountancy Technicians are employed.

The main lesson to be learned from the example of Accounting Technicians is the crucial role of a Professional Body in the development of lower-level vocational qualifications. Where a profession is in a powerful position in relation to employers and the Qualifications Authority (in this case the QCA) and has both a material and moral interest in the capabilities and progression possibilities of its junior and less-qualified members, it is able to shape the framework to suite its needs rather than having to adapt and be driven by it.

The Accounting NVQs example raises a number of questions. Firstly, why did they take the form they did in the specific case of AAT NVQs? Secondly, what does the AAT example say about the NVQ outcomes model? Thirdly, what does the Accounting Technician example say about NVQs in occupational fields where there is no powerful or dominant profession or no profession that has an interest and feels a responsibility for the prospects and capabilities of lower-level members of the occupation? And fourthly, do the AAT NVQs go against the claims of portability and transferability made for NVQs (and NQFs)?

My comments on these questions are inevitably speculative:

1. As always where career opportunities are at stake, there is a question of power, its legitimacy and how it is used. Chartered and other senior Accountants are a powerful profession in the United Kingdom with high prestige and a key and growing role in both private and public sectors. It seems likely that the QCA, until recently the Regulatory Body responsible for the quality assurance of NVQs, felt they had more to gain by agreeing to modify their assessment rules for the AAT NVQ, given the prestige that a qualification in Accounting would give to the whole NVQ framework.
2. In many ways Accounting is a good example of a demand-led rather than a supply-led approach to qualifications. In this case, the demand came from the profession and their employers; not the QCA. It also represents an input-led rather than an outcomes-led approach to design. The skills and knowledge that are needed both to undertake the job of Accounting Technician and to be the basis for progression to becoming a Chartered Accountant, not the outcomes, were the basis for the decisions about curricula and assessment methods made by the profession. The outcomes of the NVQ framework took their place as guides to those developing the programmes. In that way the profession and the AAT were operating more like universities; they had the power and prestige to force the NCVQ to allow them to modify the framework outcomes to suit their purposes; they were not required to treat the NVQ framework as a set of rules that they had to comply with.
3. The example of the approach of a strong profession-led occupation such as Accounting Technicians suggests that it is the human resources development (HRD) strategies of the profession and their employers which determine the extent to which their less-qualified members are able to progress and develop their skills and knowledge; qualifications themselves can play a more or less supportive role in this process. In the case of sectors in which HRD strategies are limited to higher-level employees, (as often tends to be the case); or sometimes in the case of small employers, they hardly exist; an outcomes-based approach to qualifications of the NVQ type appears to have little to offer. While collaboration with professions is doubtless what NQF designers claim they want, making it a reality is very different. It involves, as in the case of Accounting, a totally different developmental model than that adopted for most NVQs and a totally different role for qualifications. Again, this is a point I return to in the final section.
4. I have argued that in this case, the professional bodies played a crucial role in developing the vocational qualification in Accounting. Without them, there is no reason to suppose that Accounting NVQs would be significantly different from many others. This raises a serious question about the role of an NVQ outcomes-based framework in the absence of such a body. I will return to this point in the concluding section of this paper.
5. On the issues of portability and transferability which are much emphasized in proposals for outcomes-based NQFs, the Accounting NVQ example suggests that these processes depend more on the status and prestige of the occupation and its associated qualifications within the sector and more broadly than on the design of the qualifications itself. It seems likely that the high status of the Accountancy profession will be important in making Accounting Technicians and Accounting NVQs recognized in related occupations in the financial sector and beyond. The broader lesson from the Accounting example is that unless qualifications - and by implication, NQFs, are rooted in the everyday work of the occupation concerned, they are likely to lead only to credential inflation and not to the opportunities for progression that are claimed for them.

From the point of view of lessons for developing countries, it is interesting that the professional associations of Chartered Accountants have played a similarly proactive role in South Africa. Not only is the AAT the Awarding Body for Accounting Technicians in South Africa, but it has supported a successful programme of professional development for

municipal Accountants. A further positive outcome is that there has been a remarkable take up of certificates and diplomas in Accounting awarded, and the Accounting SETA (Sector Educational and Training Authority) is widely recognized as a national leader.²⁹

7.2 *Health Care*³⁰

In her SKOPE Paper (Cox 2007), Anne Cox begins by asking why, despite the many criticisms made of NVQs, there is a wide consensus that they have been a useful qualification for employers and employees in the National Health Service (NHS). She takes up the distinction proposed by Fuller and Unwin (2004) between ‘restricted’ and ‘expansive’ working environments and suggests that, for the low- and lower-level employees who she studied, the NHS represents a number of features of an ‘expansive working environment’; this Unwin and Fuller define in terms of the extent:

- of learning and career opportunities;
- of emotional and practical support for learners;
- to which jobs are appropriately designed; and
- to which individual and organizational objectives are aligned.

Cox argues that the NHS’s approach to HRD appeared to have benefits for both managers and staff and that it is in this context that NVQs have been seen as a useful resource by both groups.

For managers, Cox lists as the main benefits of the policy: reduced skills shortages, easier recruitment, and more functional flexibility of staff. For staff, the same policy offered:

- opportunities for knowledge and skill acquisition that lead to new jobs; and
- enhanced responsibility and access to promotion opportunities linked to appropriate training programmes.

Her interviews with management and staff at a number of work sites indicated that both recognized the currency of NVQs as passports to accessing professional training for progression to nursing and midwifery. Furthermore, managers were rigorous in:

- policing the quality of tuition;
- ensuring that programmes leading to NVQs had access to specialist knowledge and new skills; and
- establishing the ‘communities of trust’ between hospitals, colleges and local universities that were needed to build the credibility of the programmes and the qualifications linked to them.

In contrast to the Accounting example, where the key role is played by the professional associations, the NHS case is of a large public sector employer with a senior management who have adopted a strong policy on HRD.

²⁹ It is also worth noting that the presence of a growing body of employees in both public and private sectors with qualifications in Accounting is likely to be an important condition for minimizing public sector corruption.

³⁰ This example is based on the SKOPE (Skills, Knowledge and Organizational Performance Project) (University of Cardiff) Working Paper by Anne Cox (2007).

Government was in a position to insist that the NHS, as a public sector employer reliant on Government funds, adopted NVQs. However, it was the NHS's HRD policy that enabled them to integrate the NVQs into the organization of the work and to use them to provide opportunities for progression for staff. This is not a case, as with the Accounting example, of the employers insisting on modifying the NVQ outcomes model, but of integrating the NVQ into the way the work was organized.

In many ways, as the largest employer in the country, the NHS is unique, and the issues of portability and transferability are internal rather than external. On the other hand, the lesson of occupational pressures for improvement of a working environment driving the use of qualifications is similar to the Accounting case. Once the NHS adopted an HRD policy which emphasized staff progression across traditional occupational divides (such as nursing assistant to midwife), it was the additional learning opportunities such as access to specialist training in nursing and midwifery, and opportunities to acquire new skills such as blood testing, and the use of ECGs, that helped build the credibility of the NVQs; not its specific outcomes.

The issue that the Health Care example raises is similar to that raised by the case of Accounting. In each case, the credibility and 'success' of the NVQs depended on well-resourced workplaces and employers with a relatively long term view of HRD.

In the large number of workplaces where such conditions do not apply or where the vast majority of the jobs make few skill demands, it is difficult to see what the outcomes-based model like NVQs can offer.

8. Some lessons from the NVQ experience

Despite considerable investment and many changes over a period of over 20 years, researchers and commentators such as the SKOPE Team at Cardiff and Oxford Universities do not see the introduction of NVQ's as having led to substantial improvements in skill development or in the work-based training system in the United Kingdom (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, to be more precise). NVQs have not been taken up with any enthusiasm by large numbers of employers for whom it was claimed they were specifically designed. In a society such as England where those taking vocational qualifications are all too easily seen as failures from academic programmes, many employers continue to recruit largely on the basis of academic qualifications. This is partly their prejudice and the long history of social class divisions in English education. However, it also reflects the weak knowledge base of NVQs which was explicitly designed to emphasize performance rather than knowledge or understanding on the largely unspoken assumption that understanding was beyond the capabilities of those likely to take such qualifications.

This brief review of the legacy of NVQs leaves a puzzle. Despite their low take-up in the United Kingdom, the lack of evidence that they have led to significant improvements in skill development, and a wide range of substantial criticisms, NVQs have continued to provide a model across the world for competence-based approaches to training and NQFs based on outcomes. Why might this be so?

We must conclude that the continued popularity of the NVQ model has to be understood in terms of the superficial plausibility of its appeal to governments who are more interested in finding ways of controlling public expenditure than addressing the complex problems concerned with the role of skills and knowledge in economic development. Furthermore, NVQ-type models are likely to be attractive to governments of developing countries because they are often supported by international agencies and other aid donors.

On the other hand, as the two examples of the Accounting Technicians and Health Care occupations in the NHS indicate, NVQs have had their 'successes'. In each case (these are by no means the only ones, but I suspect others would tell a similar story), it was the

HRD policy of the sector and organization involved that underpinned the credibility, for employees and employers, of the particular NVQs. In the case of Accounting Technicians, the leadership role was undertaken by the major professional bodies; in the case of Health Care NVQs, it was taken by the senior management of the NHS as the main public sector employer. These two examples of ‘successes’ raise serious questions about generalizing the outcomes model, of which NVQs were an early if not the first example. This is especially the case in countries with undeveloped institutional provision for VET and an absence of effective professional bodies and established employer-college training partnerships.

The ‘successful’ examples suggest that qualifications, and specifically qualification design involving the specification of outcomes, are unlikely to be the major factors in promoting skill development. The AAT and the NHS used NVQs to suit their needs. In the Accounting case, this involved changing many of the rules of the NVQ framework, and in the case of Health Care, it involved building in additional learning resources which made employees see the whole professional development programme (including the NVQs) as worthwhile and helped the NVQs gain credibility with senior staff, as well as with those who achieved them.

The examples of NVQ ‘successes’ point not primarily to the need to redesign qualifications or to establish an NQF (although a case can be made for both), but to the need for a much broader approach to vocational education reform as part of an overall HRD strategy. This would begin with an innovative approach to stimulating product and service development and an active response to the knowledge and skill needs that this would give rise to. Such an approach will inevitably encourage the development of partnerships between employers, colleges and universities. If these partnerships are to provide progression routes for employees, they will need a qualification framework which provides the ‘proxies’ for the skills and knowledge needed and the maps of the appropriate and possible sequences and pathways through which they can be achieved.

This is not to underemphasize the role of a qualification framework, but to locate it in its specific purposes - *in what it can do, not in what policy-makers want it to do*. Starting with a framework of outcomes and levels and then trying to make them ‘proxies’ for skills is to invert the way that the most successful qualification systems have been developed. The NVQ experience suggests that starting with the framework of written outcomes cannot fulfil the claims made for it, except in exceptional circumstances of the kind that the two ‘successes’ illustrate.

A broader-based approach to skill development and knowledge acquisition for economic growth has to go back to where vocational qualifications started in the nineteenth century and interpret those strategies in twenty-first century terms. The first vocational qualifications which NVQs attempted to replace had three features of continuing relevance today:

1. they were *demand-led by employers* at a time industrialization was beginning to incorporate the new discoveries in the natural sciences;
2. their development was closely linked to *the development of educational institutions* in close *partnership with local employers*; and
3. *leading members of the professions and universities* where the new knowledge was being produced *were closely involved* in the design and assessment of the new vocational qualifications.

None of these conditions apply to NVQs as a framework of ‘written outcomes’ and none of them suggest that an outcomes-led framework has the role often claimed for it. However, the three conditions were involved, albeit in different ways, in two ‘successes’ described. The problem with NVQs was that they tried to break with the past rather than learn from and build on the past. That is the lesson we must learn from their legacy.

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