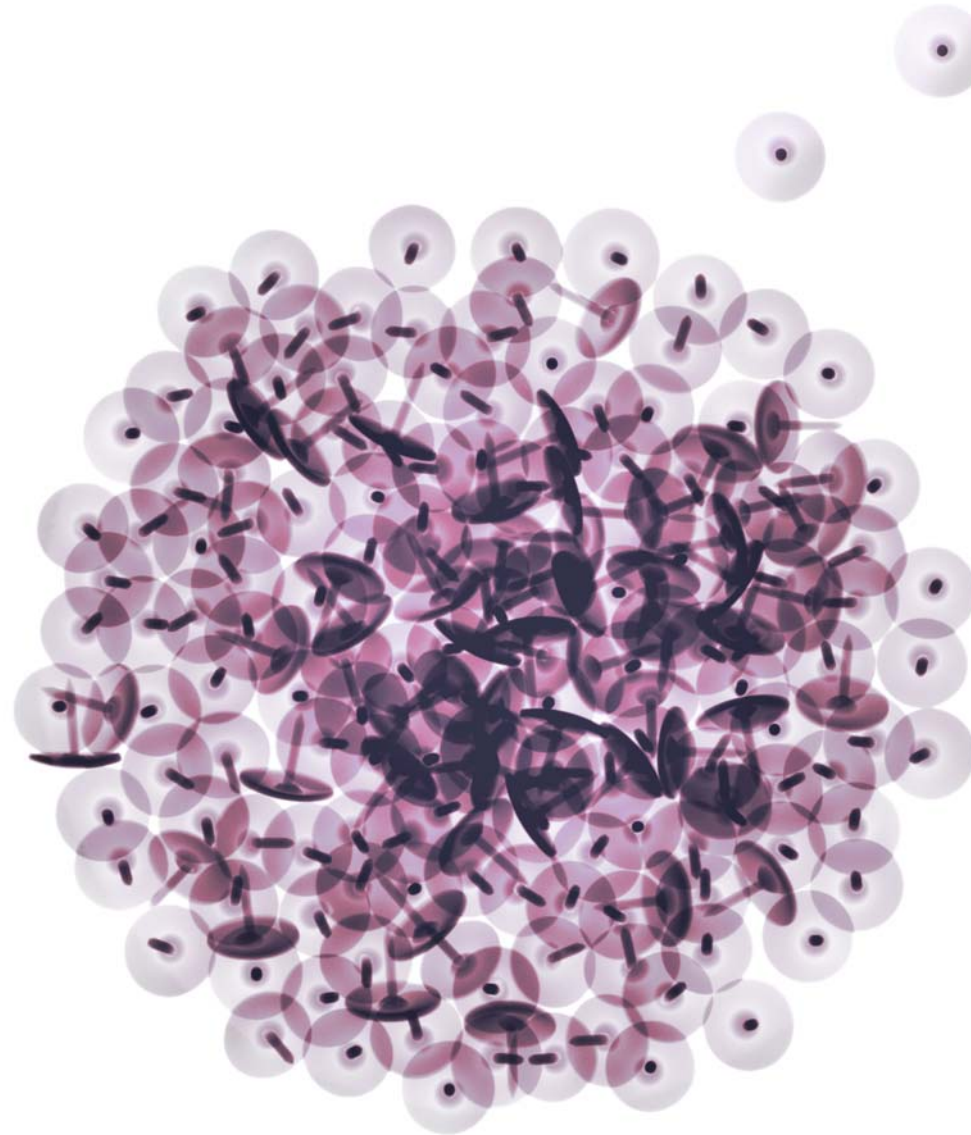




CITY & GUILDS
CENTRE FOR SKILLS
DEVELOPMENT



PRACTITIONERS' VOICES:
UNDERSTANDING THEIR ROLE
WITHIN A DEMAND-LED SYSTEM

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At the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD), we believe that practitioners – the people who manage and deliver vocational education in colleges and training establishments – have a vital contribution to make to the development of a demand-led further education system.

To this end and building on earlier research, CSD invited practitioners from three sectors (catering, construction and health and social care) to discuss the theme of supply and demand in vocational education and training in depth. These discussions provided evidence for the following recommendations:

- **Practitioners should be involved in developing policy at a local, regional and national level.**
- **Practitioners are a gateway to better understand demand from both learners and local employers. An effective feedback mechanism from practitioners to those setting national policy needs to be established.**
- **A more flexible approach which allows for discretionary time to enrich the learners' experiences and tailor the programme directly to their needs would have beneficial impact, both for them and for those who employ them.**
- **Involving practitioners in the bottom-up development of qualifications helps ensure that they are fit for purpose and well received by employers and learners.**

- **More attention is needed on the practical implications of changes to qualifications and their delivery mechanisms before they are introduced.**
- **Traditional vocational qualifications still have a place for some 16–18 year olds as well as for adults.**
- **In other spheres of government, the principle has been established that intervention (audit or inspection) should be in inverse proportion to success. The same principle should apply to further education.**

Further to these recommendations, CSD undertakes to explore some of the cases identified by the practitioners in the focus groups and build upon its engagement strategy to find out whether the themes raised here have resonance with other practitioners, in other sectors and other countries. CSD would therefore welcome feedback on this report from all stakeholders, whether policy-makers, researchers, employers, learners or practitioners, either directly or via its online discussion forum at www.skillsdevelopment.org

The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) was launched in March 2008 to act as a catalyst to influence policy and improve practice in vocational education and training internationally. Central to CSD's philosophy is a belief that beneficial change in skills development can only come about through the active engagement of all stakeholders in the system: policy-makers, researchers, funders, employers, learners and practitioners.

Practitioners, as the trainers, teachers, lecturers, mentors and coaches in vocational education and training, have a vital role to play. They are seen as the suppliers of provision and thus their role is often, unfairly, marginalised in a 'demand-led' system. Yet they are a direct link to those who make the demands on provision – employers as well as learners.

The Events

To test the concept that practitioners, despite being 'only the suppliers', have a useful contribution to make to policy discussions in skills development, CSD set up three focus groups in October 2008 with a range of practitioners from across England, and in one case Wales.

Each discussion was based on one of three vocational sectors – **catering, construction and health and social care**. These sectors were chosen to represent a range of types of vocational learning, of workplaces, and of employment patterns which could be compared and contrasted. As heads of department for their sector, the practitioners who participated brought with them immense practical experience of delivering vocational education and training in classrooms and workshops. They are also engaged at a high enough level to know what policy changes are coming their way and, with their experience of working with local learners and employers (who are unlikely to take part in national policy debate directly themselves), will see the impact such policy changes have first hand.

To allow for an open and full discussion, the agenda for each event was kept to a minimum. As this report demonstrates, the events confirmed the value that practitioners add to the policy debate. They also identified a number of themes which CSD now intends to take forward with policy-makers and through further research.

The main conclusions

Diversity of demand from employers

Practitioners understand the diversity of business needs and could help policy-makers make more informed decisions within a demand-led system.

All practitioners noted challenges in the amount of time they spend constructing what can be a poorly articulated training need into a formulation which fits the currently available, and sometimes inflexible, funding and qualification regime. The diversity of demand means that policy must be flexible enough to cater for variations between sectors, learners and location. Sector Skills Councils have assisted in achieving sectoral differentiation but they are still often dominated by larger employers. Practitioners' ability to meet the needs of small enterprises was highlighted, especially within sectors where small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are prevalent, such as construction and catering. These factors highlighted the lack of effective feedback channels to policy-makers from practitioners who are responsible for managing the needs of employers every day at a local level, including the notoriously hard to reach SMEs.

Meeting the needs of learners

Like employers, learners are not a single, homogenous group – the best way to recognise this is through flexible learning programmes that allow for that individuality.

Policy changes and statutory funding channels are not always successful at taking into account the variations in learners' needs. For example, practitioners reported that for those who feel disengaged with school-based learning, the Government's decision to standardise all Maths and English language skills provision under the new 'functional skills' programme has seen pass rates drop dramatically amongst those who had previously, often for the first time, found success within vocational learning pathways. A more flexible approach to resourcing, which would allow for discretionary time to enrich the learners' experience and not just prepare them for qualifications, is how practitioners would like to resolve this issue.

Qualifications fit for purpose

Qualification changes that are not properly explained or validated with practitioners, employers or learners are often not fit for purpose amongst the relevant stakeholders.

It was clearly stated that the value of a qualification lies not in its approval by government, nor in the way it fits tidily into a national framework, but in its recognition by employers and other users. It was striking how often participants noted employers' reference to older versions of qualifications as being preferable to the current offering. The weakness of a funding system based on targets, focused on the number of people gaining qualifications, was also key to practitioners' critique, in that it gave rise to performance indicators based solely on the achievement of full qualifications. Furthermore, policy-based decisions on qualifications had allowed qualifications to be accredited that have proved unworkable in practice. This could be avoided simply by engaging more effectively the practitioners who actually deliver the qualifications.

Quality and funding arrangements in context

Practitioners understand the need to be totally accountable for taxpayers' money but there are better ways to inform the public and deliver on quality than creating more bureaucracy.

Despite "red tape" being the subject of several government investigations and reports, far too much of practitioners' time is still being spent on form filling and understanding the latest policy changes, in an attempt to meet the needs of all learners within the Government's funding formulae. When compared with the treatment of higher education, that benefits from an empowering system of accountability, further education seems to suffer from a lack of trust. Experts in further education, who know how to meet the needs of learners, are prevented from using their discretion due to strict auditing and continually reduced contact time with learners. This has contributed to a learning environment increasingly without enrichment for learners and to what some referred to as 'tick-box' qualifications.

Agreed actions and next steps

Despite the diversity of the sectors consulted, practitioners reported parallel experiences which CSD will use to inform its future position on supply and demand and practitioner engagement:

- **Practitioners should be involved in developing policy at a local, regional and national level.**

While the national mechanism for involving employers' representatives at a national level is now seen as impressive, this contrasted sharply with what practitioners reported about consultation and feedback at the local level. Practitioners and their representatives should be involved in development work as a matter of course, and the mechanisms for feeding back local views on implementation need to be made faster and smarter.

- **Practitioners are a gateway to better understand demand from both learners and local employers.** Particularly in relation to small employers, practitioners may well be the people in closest contact with them and the best interpreter of what they need. Therefore an effective feedback mechanism from practitioners to those setting national policy needs to be established.

- **A more flexible approach to resourcing which allows for discretionary time to enrich the learners' experiences** and tailor the programme directly to their needs would have beneficial impact on the motivation and achievement of learners, which in turn would help to meet employer demands.

- **Involving practitioners in the bottom-up development of qualifications** helps ensure that they are fit for purpose and well received by employers and learners. A change to a qualification programme does not, on its own, enhance demand.

- **More attention is needed on the practical implications of changes to qualifications and their delivery mechanisms before they are introduced.**

Sometimes changes dictated by the latest policy decision seem almost arbitrary to both practitioners and local employers who, under a demand-led system, should be in control.

- **Traditional, purely vocational full-time qualifications still have a place for some 16–18 year olds as well as for adults.**

The broadly based 14–19 Diplomas need time to bed in, but we need to bear in mind the views of these practitioners to the effect that some learners in this age group, just as much as any other learner, often need to gain motivation and confidence from achievement on a narrower front before venturing further.

- **In other spheres of government, the principle has been established that intervention (audit or inspection) should be in inverse proportion to success.** The same principle should apply to further education. Bureaucracy should not be the 'norm' for a quality assurance process in any public service.

In order to explore the themes raised by these discussions more fully and to position the practitioner voice more effectively, CSD also undertakes to do the following:

- **CSD will share the findings from this report to understand whether the themes have resonance with other practitioners** in any sector and with those based in other countries.

- **CSD will research the case studies and issues generated by the focus groups**, e.g. the learning of functional skills and problems with the reporting of skills gaps and shortages, and use the detail to inform an engagement strategy with policy-makers.

- **CSD will work with partners to investigate how other public services in the UK and internationally seek to measure performance and assure quality**

to see whether any good practice could be applied to further education. Findings from this research will then be used to influence policy appropriately.

- **CSD will continue to engage practitioners in all its future research** to understand their perspective on the debate, and their intelligence about the perspectives of learners and small employers.

Context

The City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) is an independent, not-for-profit research and development organisation that works to improve the policy and practice of vocational education and training worldwide. It is part of the City & Guilds Group. It believes that skills are key to achieving economic and social prosperity for people, communities, organisations and nations. CSD also believes that beneficial change in skills development can only come about through the active engagement of all stakeholders in the system: policy-makers, researchers, funders, employers, learners and practitioners.

In a 2007 survey of skills development in nine countries, CSD established not only the benefits of comprehensive stakeholder engagement but also that the matching of supply and demand was a common problem for many respondents.¹ Nearly 60% of the practitioners interviewed by CSD in this survey felt that there were too few people trained in their sector to meet the needs of employers. Amongst employers, less than 40% felt the supply of training met industry's demand. CSD therefore wanted to explore the issue further through a series of round-table discussions in a number of countries, beginning with the UK.

It was striking to see, during the process of gathering data for the skills development survey, the wealth of information and knowledge practitioners brought to the table and how much they relished the opportunity to share their understanding and awareness during the debate. It was clear that in the UK in particular, practitioners feel they rarely have the opportunity to contribute to such discussions.

Exploring the supply and demand equation

In any national vocational training system, both supply and demand are complex concepts. What learners think they need may differ from what they actually require to become effective workers. For example, some learners may not recognise how a lack of basic literacy or the need for a range of social skills could inhibit employment opportunities. Individual employers' interests in the specific requirements of the present job may be in tension with the longer term interests of the employment sector as a whole and of the career needs of their employees, who may aspire to a higher skilled job in another company, or even a change of career. Furthermore, they may not understand how the training system can help them achieve the outcomes they are seeking. Employers' views may differ from each other according to their position in the marketplace, their geographical location, and their size. There will be different approaches in different sectors of employment. Further expectations will come at the national level from Government, employers'

representatives and trades unions who may take a longer term view of the needs of the economy. The policy of a well-functioning democratic government will also reflect the attitudes of the electorate towards vocational learning as well as the state of the public finances.

At the same time colleges and other training providers have to reconcile these demands with the practical constraints they face: how to deliver the curriculum given the facilities available and timetable considerations, the funding arrangements, the available qualifications and the associated assessment requirements.

¹ City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (2007), Skills Development: Attitudes and Perceptions

Policy engagement in supply and demand

In the UK over the past decade, the Government has recognised the national imperative to raise the skills of the workforce in order that the country remain competitive in a global marketplace. Its plans for skills development now derive principally from the Leitch Report², which set out ambitions through to 2020. Although this is not a new idea – the same principle applied to the new National Vocational Qualifications in the 1980s – great stress has been laid on strengthening the employer voice in the design and delivery of vocational education. The creation of the Sector Skills Councils with an expanding remit has reinforced this aspect of the demand side. In particular they are responsible for developing qualification strategies which specify which qualifications have economic value and are therefore eligible for state funding.

On the supply side, increasing stress has been laid on a market-based response in which funding follows the learner and is based on measurable outcomes, including the achievement of qualifications and placement in jobs. Further education colleges have also come under ever tighter funding and inspection regimes.

The role of further education

Supply and demand meet in practice where teaching and learning take place – at the training provider. Learners and employers make their demands there and the trainers and lecturers seek to meet them. Practitioners, as the trainers, teachers, lecturers, mentors and coaches in vocational education and training, have a vital role to play as the conduit between policy and those creating the demand. Although providers may have their own vested interests as suppliers, it is important to understand the reality of this experience through discussions with practitioners. These discussions aimed to be a first step towards recognising and addressing the gap in national stakeholder engagement strategies and understanding how practitioners view and would tackle issues between supply and demand.

Three sectors were considered in this first set of focus groups in October 2008 (**catering, construction and health and social care**). It is envisaged that if the themes resonated with practitioners in each of these sectors, they are likely to chime with a wide range of practitioners.

Heads of department from colleges and directors in work-based training providers were invited to participate in the focus groups - rather than the college leaders or administrators who are more often involved in national discussions. The invited practitioners are a crucial link in the chain responsible for vocational learning. They are close to the learners, understanding their needs and, importantly, what motivates them. They have links in their locality with the current and future employers of their trainees. They have to reconcile the demands of learners and employers with the constraints placed on them by the funding system, the assessment regime and the qualifications available. They also have to create a learning experience which delivers the skills in a way that motivates the learner.

CSD believes that the voice of practitioners – and through them the voice of the local employer and the learner – is often neglected in the formulation of national policy and practice. This report aims to prompt debate by highlighting this voice, their understanding of the system and the changes practitioners believe are required in order to develop a truly demand-led approach to vocational education and training.

² Lord Leitch (2006) UK Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills

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3.1 Diversity of demand from employers

One standard model in response to the variety of learning needs does not make sense. There are differences between employment types and sectors, between employees requiring training, and between different parts of the country. An effective national system needs to be flexible enough to reflect these variations. The discussions suggested that this is not yet the case in England.

Vocational training for different sectors should take account of their distinctive characteristics. The formation of separate Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) may help to achieve sectoral differentiation, but there remain a range of standard features imposed by government on the vocational training framework regardless of sector: for example, the belief that a national body can represent the interests of all employers, the structure of apprenticeships, and the structural requirements of 14-19 Diplomas and National Vocational Qualifications. Furthermore, those available to join national bodies will tend to be from larger organisations and to have a human resource facility.

Case Study

Diversity of employment sectors

Health and social care, with dominant state employers and a national plan for the workforce that is seen to have real teeth, contrasted with the other two sectors with their range of independent small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

SMES in catering

The distinction between small and large employers is an important one. In both catering and construction, where the small firm or self-employed are commonplace, practitioners questioned whether SSCs, often dominated by large employers, are best placed to speak for the small enterprises which form a large part of local economies. Whereas large employers will be able to give their staff specialised roles, small employers are usually looking for people who can take on a range of roles, and want qualifications which reflect this. The division of responsibilities in this way means that one newly established qualification in the catering sector does not include 'food service' along with regular kitchen duties. For small businesses, the two are inextricably linked and employers will want prospective employees to have an understanding and knowledge of both aspects of catering. Consultation with mainly

large employers meant the front of house aspect, food service, was not made part of the national occupational standards or, therefore, the qualification. Practitioners, if they are empowered to represent the interests of smaller employers, would be well placed to identify and address this error.

Large employers in health and social care

Different approaches are needed according to how the sector is organised. In health and social care, the National Health Service (NHS) and local authorities are the dominant employers, and employment in those sectors is highly regulated with an active inspection regime which reaches the private sector too. In these circumstances, where national qualification requirements can be enforced, the SSCs' reach was reported as strong and convincing, though they may not share the practitioners' understanding of the ability of small private care homes to deliver a new training requirement.

Geography too is a significant factor. In a small market town, it is easier to generate the bonds of loyalty and trust which lead employers to feel a civic duty to train the next generation. In the anonymity of a large metropolitan area, particularly London, where staff might be recruited from a considerable distance, it can be harder for practitioners to find the right employers to work with and to generate the commitment to training that is needed.

A striking feature of the focus groups was the extent to which **the practitioners who attended know the local firms which they serve**. Whether small restaurant owners, large hospital trusts, or self-employed scaffolders, they know these people, their attitudes to training and their requirements of the training provider. Practitioners are actively engaged in placing learners with these employers and diagnosing the skill requirements of their staff. They are often in the business of translating a poorly articulated training need into a formulation which fitted the current funding and qualification regime.

In some cases, doubts were expressed as to whether independent training advisers were capable of performing a useful intermediary role because they often do not have the expertise in business or training delivery needed to know what would best support an employer.

CSD's recommendations and further actions

- While the national mechanism for involving employers' representatives is now seen as impressive, this contrasted sharply with what practitioners reported about consultation and feedback at the local level. Proposals for new qualification structures and training can reach an advanced stage before practitioners and employers have a chance to comment on their practicality. Practitioners and their representatives should be involved as a matter of course, and the mechanisms for feeding back local views on implementation need to be made faster and smarter. The local level view is increasingly important as policy changes occur, including recent proposals for local authorities to be more involved in funding arrangements.

- Particularly in relation to small employers who cannot afford a personnel department, haven't the time to attend meetings and therefore are infrequently engaged by SSCs or other agencies, practitioners may well be the best interpreter of what local employers need. Yet there seems to be no effective feedback mechanism from them to those at the centre of policy who hold overall responsibility for standards and qualifications. These communication channels should be put in place to help SMEs and practitioners engage more effectively.



3.2 Meeting the needs of learners

Learners' needs vary considerably, and statutory funding programmes fail to take account of this diversity. Too little account is taken of the extra time needed to equip some of them with the generic skills such as confidence and motivation to be an effective team member in the workplace.

Case Study

Functional skills for construction learners

Functional skills in maths and English have recently been introduced to replace their predecessors, key skills. Key skills had been designed for delivery in context – a construction worker would learn, for example, how to use measurement and estimation in the course of his studies. This made sense and was motivational for the vocational learner. By contrast, functional

skills are much closer to classroom maths and English, and have been disconnected from their practical usage. This is intended to ensure comparability across a range of subjects and qualification types but misses the fundamental point: people who have not been engaged by traditional school learning sometimes need a different approach in order to excel. It is further proof that one approach can rarely work for all – and, if we want to have a broad skills base in this country, nor should it.

Two groups singled out in this part of the discussions were women returning to work and school leavers with little to show for their time in school. For both of these, who often face issues of motivation and confidence, the standard training offerings are unlikely to work.

Participants recognised the pressure on the Government and statutory funders to produce an equitable system which treated people fairly and could be defended publicly. However, for all learners, the current emphasis of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) on quantified outputs can detract from the less measurable aspects of provision, including the wider enrichment activities traditionally included in programmes for young people. As a result of this instrumental approach, the learners can emerge with fewer of the softer social skills, including self-confidence and communication, which are often vital in the workplace. For young people, the time spent in learning can be intrinsic to their development; a regime which requires rapid through put may produce a quantity of outputs at the expense of quality.

The good practitioners look for a more flexible approach, and ask to be trusted with more discretionary time which could be used in the learners' best interests. Practitioners are particularly critical of the way their options have been limited for young people whose experience of the school classroom is largely negative. Some of these learners were not yet ready for the rigour of apprenticeships and needed to be offered opportunities for practical learning which would motivate them to persevere and progress. They were pleased to have escaped to a place where they could learn some practical vocational skills away from the classroom, but they soon discovered that the options now authorised by the LSC tended to include a heavily theoretical component and an insistence on maths and English. While practitioners support the intention of giving some theoretical underpinning to vocational learning, they are looking for an approach which is not so heavy-handed and does not frighten off the new recruits at the outset. Policy must weigh the specific needs of this kind of learner against the admirable ambition to increase the proportion of the population with higher level qualifications.

CSD's recommendations and further actions

- Practitioners need space and trust in order to meet the needs of their learners. A more flexible approach which allows for discretionary time to enrich the learners' experiences and tailor the programme directly for their needs would have a greater, more beneficial impact on learners and improve the quality of training supplied, which will also help to meet employer demands.
- The Centre for Skills Development intends to investigate the long history of policy on the variously named core skills, key skills, basic skills and functional skills in order to analyse the decisions behind the changes and the impact this has had on delivering practically-applicable vocational learning.

3.3 Qualifications fit for purpose

The Government's ambitions to raise the skills of the workforce have been translated into challenging targets for the number of people gaining qualifications at various levels. These targets drive the Learning & Skills Council's funding regime and consequently the activities of publicly funded providers. The participants in the discussions were quick to draw attention to the weaknesses in this approach.

Certification

On the one hand, much activity may go into certificating skills which the individual has already gained by experience, and this does nothing to raise skills. On the other hand, some employers – in a building trade, for example – may be more interested in who trained an apprentice than in what piece of paper they have earned. Some trades may actually prefer to try someone out on the job than to trust the latest certificate they have earned.

What then are the benefits of certification? In many regulated occupations they do constitute a licence to practise and are necessary for that reason. Practitioners were also quick to observe the motivational effect a qualification can offer many learners, who are sometimes keen to go on to the full qualification even though this is not strictly necessary for their employment. 'Motivation' also proved to be of relevance when practitioners discussed the merits and pitfalls of grading qualifications.

Design of qualifications

Practitioners are concerned, though, at the inflexibility of qualifications, which they thought would benefit from much more practitioner involvement in their design. An example where this had been achieved successfully was the new vocationally related qualification in hospitality. They also question the funders' insistence on the achievement of full qualifications. For some occupations it is an important achievement to get into work, even if this means only partial completion of the qualification. They are keen on the unitisation of qualifications, with funding for units, but cautious about a complete free-for-all where any combination of units is acceptable.

Types of qualifications

The National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) evoked mixed feelings among participants. While recognising their value in accrediting work-based skills, practitioners thought in some sectors they were, sometimes unfairly, perceived as a tick-box exercise, with no real learning involved and little understanding of the context. They therefore welcome in principle the introduction of technical certificates, though in some cases they believe the content is too theoretical and out of context for the typical young learner.

Case Study

An inclusive model for qualification development

Vocationally related qualifications did not, for the most part, generate such intense disagreement. The reason for this was made particularly clear during the catering focus group – the latest catering qualification had been well received by both learners and employers. The development model for this qualification was one whereby the relevant practitioners, SSCs, awarding bodies and regulators had all been involved from the outset. This meant there were also fewer delays in the policy hurdles of gaining accreditation – the lack of just one of these stakeholders would have been detrimental to the qualification development process.

By contrast, a fully-formed construction qualification was presented to practitioners at a late design stage after the SSC and qualification authorities had signed it off. The audience had known instantly that one of the suggested assessment methods was not practicable. Early engagement of practitioners, who combine local industry knowledge with an understanding of qualification policy and delivery, is invaluable to prevent such costly mistakes.

Progression to higher level qualifications

A particular problem arose with progression from the higher level NVQs into higher education, as demonstrated by the experience in health and social care. Though these qualifications were at an equivalent level to A levels or above, they do not equip students with the study skills and theoretical underpinning needed for most higher education courses. Some sort of transition course is desirable in this sector. This would be preferable to distorting the NVQs in order to include higher education preparation.

In construction, practitioners lamented that some of the more advanced level qualifications put more emphasis on “pseudo-management” learning than on advanced technical skills. Some students would want to progress into management but other learners, and their employers, simply wanted to develop their craft techniques and skills.

Qualification branding

In the discussion of qualifications it was striking how often participants referred back to the qualifications of past years and decades. For many of them, and for their employers, these qualifications had far more resonance than the latest government-inspired brands – and were often identified simply by their qualification code, for example ‘7061’. For some occupations, the actual content of the training had changed little over a long period, yet the labels and structure of the qualifications had changed frequently in response to national initiatives. While this endless re-branding may serve a political purpose, it clearly has a cost in terms of brand recognition and employer commitment. In some cases it simply confuses: participants remarked on the many different uses of the term “diploma”, which used to refer simply to the well known BTEC brands.

Little time was spent discussing the latest 14–19 Diplomas, recognising that these are still in an introductory phase. Those practitioners who had been involved in the design of the new qualifications welcomed this opportunity to participate, although their experiences of working in consortia varied greatly. There were concerns about the wide scope of some of the Diplomas, and a plea that for some young people neither the Diploma, which may not be practical enough, nor a full apprenticeship would fit their needs. An alternative vocational qualification still needs to be available.

CSD's recommendations and further actions

- The discussions provide evidence that qualifications which are fit for purpose and well received by employers and learners are those where all stakeholders are engaged. Practitioners were well aware of their need to work in partnership with Sector Skills Councils, awarding bodies, the qualification regulators and all types of practitioners. This inclusive model for qualification development may seem obvious but it was striking how often costly mistakes had been made by the failure to include a vital partner.
- Some clarity is needed on what policy changes to qualifications and their delivery mechanisms mean in practice. Sometimes changes dictated by the latest policy decision seem almost arbitrary to both practitioners and those who, under a demand-led system, should be in control.
- 14–19 Diplomas need time to bed in but we need to bear in mind the pleas from these practitioners – learners in this age group, just as much as any other learner, will still need a purely vocational qualification option.

3.4 Quality & funding arrangements in context

Despite being the subject of several government investigations and reports, far too much of practitioners' time is still being spent on form filling and understanding the latest policy developments in an attempt to meet the needs of all learners within the Government's funding formulae. The Centre for Skills Development will be examining how proper public accountability can be achieved in a way which enables greater local discretion.

Discussion of the funding regime brought out the extent to which the practitioners, whose strength and expertise are in their understanding of teaching and the needs of businesses and individuals, are forced to spend much of their time attending to the bureaucratic requirements of the funders. The picture was of a complex set of rules which are challenging to understand and distort provision. The good training provider has learned how to make the rules work to the advantage of the learner and support their staff. This unfortunately does not mean to say that many staff do not feel the burden of regulation, auditing and inspection. They find it particularly difficult when those responsible for policing their performance are more interested in ticking the right boxes than in understanding the nature of their work.

While an audit trail is a necessary requirement of public funding, the sheer complexity of the rules now operating is detracting from the attention which practitioners should be giving to the needs of the learner. An inspection and audit regime that relies on quantitative measures and ratios ignores the aspects of learning which are less easily measured and yet may be key to the development of an effective worker and citizen.

In discussing these issues, participants were struck by the contrast with higher education where a looser regime prevails. The implication that universities are trusted whereas further education is not was difficult to avoid. Of course, learners in higher education also benefit from a generous grant and loan regime. The Government's commitment to raising skill levels and to vocational training should therefore be reflected in a similar approach to funding.

At the heart of this discussion lies a question about the desirable balance between autonomy and accountability for individual institutions. Participants in the discussions recognised the importance of ensuring that value was obtained for the taxpayer's money, but the bureaucratic framework now established, with its heavily audited framework of targets and output measures, makes for an inflexible regime in which the experts who know best how to meet the needs of the learners are prevented from using proper discretion.

In other spheres of government, the principle has been established that intervention (audit or inspection) should be in inverse proportion to success. There have been some notable failures in college financial management since further education was set free from local authority control nearly 20 years ago, but the time may have come when policy makers need to recognise the strengths of the training sector, and particularly the practitioners within it, and to give them substantially more discretion over the way they respond to local needs. The Centre for Skills Development intends to pursue this question further.

CSD's recommendations and further actions

- CSD will be investigating with partners how a more equitable system of measuring further education performance can be established. This activity will begin with a discussion with relevant UK stakeholders to understand the current levers acting upon the system and a comparison of further education with other public services in the UK and internationally to see whether there are other approaches to auditing and regulation.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS REPORT & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Over 20 years in the Department for Education, Rob Hull had national responsibility at one time or another for most aspects of education and training policy. In the 1980s he covered the funding and organisation of further education colleges, including the policy to take the colleges out of local authority control. More recently, he dealt with qualifications policy, the education and training of 14–19 year olds, and apprenticeships. He is now an independent consultant and has a portfolio of voluntary appointments, including chairmanship of a training provider in London's East End.

Geoff Stanton

Geoff has taught in schools and colleges, and has been an FE Teacher Trainer. He was Chief Executive of the Further Education Unit from 1987-95. He is now a Visiting Fellow at the University of Greenwich School of Education and Training, and also works as a freelance consultant. His recent research and development projects have focused on qualifications policy and curriculum design especially for vocational education, 16–19 curriculum planning, patterns of provision within travel-to-study areas and how colleges can offer developmental support to small firms. Geoff is currently a Council Member of City & Guilds, on the board of OCR and on the Advisory Group of the Nuffield 14–19 Review. He also chairs the advisory committee of the ESRC Centre for research into Skills Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE).

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PRACTITIONERS' VOICES:
UNDERSTANDING THEIR
ROLE WITHIN A DEMAND-
LED SYSTEM

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