



Assessment Strategy Research Project: a final report to UKNOS Board

Publication date: April 2008
Publication code: DE4377

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ
Ironmills Road, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 1LE

www.sqa.org.uk

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1 Introduction

Background

In May 2007 The Mackinnon Partnership was commissioned to:

- ◆ research the impact of Assessment Strategies on the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers
- ◆ identify current issues and associated practice in the practical interpretation of Assessment Strategies across the broad spectrum of sectors

The research was sponsored by the NOS Board and commissioned by SQA on behalf of the four UK qualifications regulators.

This research follows a previous review of NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategies¹. That review found that some stakeholders had concerns about the occupational competence requirements for Assessors and Verifiers, as they are expressed in Assessment Strategies:

'...there is a general perception that a gap exists between the theory of occupational competence as laid down in assessment strategies and the practice of recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers on the ground. Some awarding bodies consider the criteria for occupational competence of Assessors and Verifiers are set too high by SSCs and SSBs, resulting in a barrier to recruitment.'

This meant it was important for this research to investigate whether there are any widespread recruitment difficulties. External Assessors and Verifiers are central to NVQ/SVQ assessment. If some sectors are experiencing recruitment difficulties, this could impact on the future feasibility of NVQ/SVQs, and ultimately threaten the NVQ/SVQ brand.

The research also needed to find out whether there is a link between the occupational competence requirements in Assessment Strategies and any difficulties in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers.

What is an Assessment Strategy?

Assessment Strategies vary from sector to sector, and this means that Assessment Strategies are not uniform or easy to define. So, let's reflect at this stage on the general definition of an 'Assessment Strategy'. In other words, what is the purpose of an Assessment Strategy and what should it contain? The Assessment Strategy guidance published in 1999²

¹ Review of NVQ and SVQ Assessment Strategies, Synchronicity Consultants, August 2005.

² Developing an Assessment Strategy for NVQs and SVQs, QCA, 1999.

by the qualifications regulators includes this outline of what an Assessment Strategy must contain:

1. Recommend how external quality control of assessment will be achieved.
2. Define which aspects of the National Occupational Standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace.
3. Define the extent to which simulated working conditions may be used to assess competence.
4. Define the occupational expertise requirements for Assessors and Verifiers in consultation with awarding bodies.

The definition we have arrived at on the basis of the research, discussions and interviews carried out in undertaking this project, is:

An Assessment Strategy provides an assessment framework for awarding bodies and centres. Its purpose is to help protect the integrity of the assessment and delivery of the NVQ/SVQ.

Research objectives

The objectives for this project were:

- ◆ Identify sectors that currently experience difficulties in recruiting External Assessors and Verifiers.
- ◆ Investigate the underlying reasons for these recruitment difficulties.
- ◆ Provide recommendations and solutions for recruitment difficulties.
- ◆ Identify sectors that currently have effective, evidence-based and measurable Assessment Strategies and experience little or no difficulty in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers.
- ◆ Pinpoint up to three examples of such Assessment Strategies that can be used as examples of good practice for other sectors.

During the project it was agreed that some changes should be made to the focus of the project and the project methodology. This included producing three case studies of current practice rather than three models of good practice.

This report:

- ◆ explains the methodology used to identify and investigate any recruitment difficulties
- ◆ presents the results of the research
- ◆ provides three case studies illustrating current practice in relation to Assessment Strategies
- ◆ provides conclusions and recommendations on the design and use of Assessment Strategies

2 Methodology

Awarding bodies have to compete in the wider market for people to work as Assessors and Verifiers. They are competing against recruiters who may be seeking people with similar skills or experience, but for other purposes. We set out to try and understand the reason for any recruitment difficulties.

Recruitment difficulties can be classified into two broad categories:

Skill shortages

This is where there is a lack of Assessors or Verifiers with the required skills, qualifications or work experience applying for jobs. The reasons for this include:

1. An increase in the total number of Assessors and Verifiers employed, for example because of an increase in the number of people taking qualifications that require Assessors and Verifiers.
2. An increase in the number of new Assessors and Verifiers needed to replace those leaving the role, for example because of a high number retiring.
3. An increase in the qualifications, skills or experience required for the role, which may reduce the number of people qualified to apply. This could result from changes in Assessment Strategy requirements or changes in the way an awarding body operates (eg it now requires Assessors to cover more than one sector).

Non skills-related reasons

This is mainly about how attractive the role is to potential applicants compared to alternative employment opportunities. These include:

4. Remuneration — where there are recruitment difficulties in an open market, the rates of pay will tend to rise to make the role more attractive.
5. The working conditions.
6. Geographic location.
7. Job satisfaction.

The research was designed to provide awarding bodies and centres with opportunities to tell us about the nature of any recruitment difficulties (such as the requirements of Assessment Strategies, or the small number of applicants for positions), and to explain the impact of the difficulties (such as losing contracts or delivery issues). It is important that the information from awarding bodies and learning providers is placed in the wider context so that it is balanced with the particular needs of the relevant sector.

The research

The key stages undertaken during this research were:

Stage 1 — inception

This stage involved collating and reviewing background documents and previous research. It also involved interviewing staff from the qualifications regulators to get their views on which Assessment Strategies were working well and which were potentially impacting on the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers.

We identified a number of issues and questions for discussion at the first project steering group meeting. These included:

- ◆ whether it would be more robust to focus in more depth on fewer sectors, therefore undertaking more interviews (and more detailed interviews) with awarding bodies, and particularly with centres
- ◆ how best to approach the awarding bodies and centres
- ◆ how much the awarding bodies know about the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers at their centres
- ◆ what the criteria should be to determine whether an Assessment Strategy is successful
- ◆ the format for the good practice case studies

The discussion around these issues informed the project plan and research design and ensured that the plans met the needs of the steering group members.

Stage 2 — communication

To publicise the project and generate interest, we produced a brief paragraph about the project and tailored it for different audiences. The paragraph invited awarding bodies and centres to contact us directly if they had experienced difficulties in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers or if they wanted to comment on any successful Assessment Strategies.

The paragraph appeared in QCA's e-briefing for awarding bodies, in SQA's newsletter, on the Learning Network website and in its newsletter, and in SSDA's 'Involve' e-briefing.

Stage 3 — interview preparation

To build up a good base of information and evidence, we interviewed a number of stakeholders, including regulatory staff and SSCs/SSBs. Regulatory staff also e-mailed suggestions on possible areas for further investigation. This included potential areas of good practice as well as areas with difficulties.

The initial focus of this stage was on identifying sectors with recruitment difficulties. This was so that initial contact could be made with awarding bodies to determine whether there were issues with the Assessment Strategy. Once the list of leads was produced, the focus moved to identifying a shortlist of contacts for the case studies.

We then produced question frameworks for the interviews with awarding bodies and centres. The interview questions were (in summary):

- ◆ How many Verifiers do you employ? Which sectors do they cover? Do they cover more than one sector? How many are part-time/full-time?
- ◆ How does your staff turnover of Verifiers in this sector compare with the turnover of Verifiers in other sectors?
- ◆ Why do Verifiers in this sector tend to leave and where do they go?
- ◆ How many Verifiers have you recruited in this sector in the last year? Did you have any difficulty recruiting these Verifiers or sub-contractors? In which roles and regions?
- ◆ What was this difficulty?
- ◆ How many vacancies did you not fill?
- ◆ What recruitment process did you use to attract potential recruits? Were some more successful than others?
- ◆ Why do you think you had difficulty recruiting these Verifiers/sub-contractors?
- ◆ Did you have to lower your requirements in order to recruit into these roles?
- ◆ Has your organisation been put off offering any qualifications because of the difficulty recruiting Verifiers?
- ◆ What are you doing to address any shortfall?
- ◆ To what extent have the criteria for Verifiers set out in the Assessment Strategy impacted on your recruitment and retention? In what way?
- ◆ To what extent do you think parts of these criteria are unnecessary? How should they be changed? How do they compare with other Assessment Strategies?
- ◆ Are there any Assessment Strategies you think are particularly useful?
- ◆ What makes some Assessment Strategies successful and others not so successful? What does a successful Assessment Strategy look like?

Stage 4 — interviews with awarding bodies and centres

The original project plan proposed interviewing up to 30 awarding bodies that had experienced recruitment difficulties for one or more NVQ/SVQs, as well as up to 30 NVQ/SVQ centres. The other objective was to cover 10 Assessment Strategies, meaning approximately six interviews for each Assessment Strategy. However, the first project

steering group meeting agreed that it would be more appropriate to interview more centres than awarding bodies.

As the project progressed, it became apparent that there were more issues in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers within centres than awarding bodies, so it made sense to continue to focus efforts on interviewing a representative range of centres.

One of the most challenging aspects of this project was being able to pinpoint the relevant contacts for telephone interviews. This was particularly an issue in the larger awarding bodies, where it was time-consuming to extract the necessary information from the organisation.

An added complication arose due to the sensitivity of the data. Understandably, some awarding bodies felt that providing detailed information might harm them commercially.

This meant that the project methodology had to be adapted. The project team contacted various departments in some of the larger awarding bodies, including speaking to regional teams. Where awarding bodies were unable to participate in telephone interviews, the team undertook desk research to identify the relevant centres so that the centres could be contacted directly.

This enabled the project team to undertake a total of 52 interviews with 51 individuals. (One interviewee from an awarding body answered questions about two different Assessment Strategies.) 31 interviewees were from centres and 20 interviewees were from awarding bodies, representing 14 different awarding bodies.

In relation to two of the Assessment Strategies, only awarding bodies were interviewed. For the Waste Management Assessment Strategy, only the awarding body was interviewed because there were no indications of any recruitment difficulties in its centres. Also, it wasn't possible to interview any centres about the Police Assessment Strategy due to security issues.

The individuals interviewed about each Assessment Strategy are listed below. Where there appeared to be problems with an Assessment Strategy, the project team attempted to interview as many individuals as possible to determine whether the problems were widespread.

NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy	Interviewee Details		
1. Passenger Transport — Goskills	AB	Philip Crisford	Edexcel
	Centre	Anne Howes	ABA training
2. Business Improvement Techniques (BITs) — SEMTA	AB	Sandy Shaw	EAL
		Anne Randall	PAA/VQSET
		Phil Asma	Skills Assurance Services Limited (SASL)
		Joe Bell	Engineering Training Council Awards Limited (ETCAL)
	Centre	Sarah Drew	Walsall College Broadway Training
		Owen Phillips	Swansea College
3. Pharmacy — Skills for Health	AB	Helen Bridgman	Edexcel
	Centre	Jane Walker	West Cheshire College
4. Plant Operations (Extractives) — Proskills	AB	Carol Pillinger	EMP Awarding Body Ltd
	Centre	Gary Milnes	Lafarge Aggregates
		Rob Sutton	WBB Minerals
		Don Glaister	SERAC
5. Accountancy Level 2 — Accountancy Occupational Standards Group (AOSG)	AB	Caroline Hall	Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)
		Sue Macfarlane	SQA
		Nicole Phillips	City & Guilds
	Centre	Margaret Gibson	MI Technologies
6. Hair and Beauty — Habia	AB	Susan B Wilson	SQA
		Stewart King	Edexcel
	Centre	Theresa Bray	Mid Kent College
		Geraldine White	West Thames College
		Ros Kellas	Moray College
		Lesley Muir	Elmwood College
		Hazel Atkinson	Darlington College
		Jane Kennard	Basingstoke College of Technology
7. Construction — Construction Skills	AB	James Westley	Awarding Body for the Built Environment (ABBE)
		Adrian Beckingham	Awarding Body for Construction
	Centre	Lance Saunders	CASL Management Training
		Andy Howes	RICS NVQ Assessment Centre

NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy	Interviewee Details		
		Louise Braybrook	Association Of Building Engineers [ABE]
		Clive Weston	Accrington and Rossendale College
		Kevin Bennett	Edmund Nuttall
		Graeme Brierley	National Construction College
		Fergus Robertson	Preston College
		Graham Bailey	Mancat
		Ron Griffin	Whitefriars Training & Development
8. Housing — Asset Skills	AB	Lorna Mullard	City & Guilds
	Centre	Annette Cattermole	Sanctuary Housing Association
9. Wood Machine and furniture — FFINTO	AB	Lynne Oliver	City & Guilds
	Centre	Peter Sissons	WEBS Training Ltd
		John Barker	North Lancs Training Group Ltd
10. Waste management	AB	Ray Burberry	WAMITAB
11. Glass — Proskills	AB	Allan Murray	Glass Qualifications Authority (GQA)
	Centre	Mike White	Internal Verification Services (IVS)
		Simon W Saffin	Solaglas Contracting Division EHS/QA
		Richard Baskerville	West Nott's College
		June Jones	ITCA
12. Sign-making — Cogent	AB	Phil Asma	Skills Assurance Services Limited (SASL)
	Centre	Andrew Evans	Walsall College
13. Police — Skills for Justice	AB	Chris Bailey	City & Guilds
		Gail Billingham	CMI

Note: AB = Awarding Body

Despite the difficulties experienced in obtaining information from some of the awarding bodies, a good range of different types and sizes of awarding bodies and centres were interviewed. Follow-up e-mail contact was established with some of the interviewees to fill in any gaps in the information provided during the interviews.

Stage 5 — development of case studies

The original project proposed to identify examples of good practice, but in reality it proved very difficult to identify good practice examples.

Some awarding bodies and centres think that an Assessment Strategy is good practice if it gives them lots of flexibility, particularly in relation to the occupational competence requirements. From the perspective of the regulators, very flexible and open Assessment Strategies could be seen as poor because they are too flexible and therefore don't add anything to the process.

Therefore, although the case studies describe practice that is generally viewed as being 'good practice', there are some elements in each case study that may not be good practice from the perspective of all stakeholders. For this reason, the case studies are 'case studies of current practice' which reflect the reality of how Assessment Strategies are developed, implemented and used.

In selecting the three case study areas, the project team drew on the interviews with stakeholders and the initial desk research stage. Efforts were made to select Assessment Strategies which had particular features potentially capable of being applied in other sectors.

The three case studies (Appendix A) are:

- ◆ Food and Drink Manufacturing Assessment Strategy (Improve)
- ◆ Health and Social Care Assessment Strategy (Skills for Care/Skills for Health)
- ◆ Retail Assessment Strategy (Skillsmart Retail)

For each case study:

- ◆ the content and presentation of each Assessment Strategy was reviewed to identify its strengths and weaknesses and features of interest
- ◆ the individual at the SSC who developed (or managed the development of) the Assessment Strategy was interviewed
- ◆ individuals involved in developing or using the Assessment Strategy, such as awarding bodies and centres, were interviewed

Stakeholders were interviewed so that the case studies had as wide a perspective as possible. This meant the comments made by the SSC/SSB representatives could be substantiated.

Strategy and policy

In undertaking this research a number of discussions took place about wider policy and strategy related to Assessment Strategies. These included discussions with stakeholders as well as discussions at the project steering group meetings. These policy discussions have been taken into account and been used to inform the findings and conclusions sections of this report.

3 Findings

This section of the report summarises the key findings from the project. This includes the findings on:

- ◆ the impact of occupational competence requirements on the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers
- ◆ issues and problems in the implementation and use of Assessment Strategies
- ◆ the case studies on current Assessment Strategy practice

Impact of occupational competence requirements on recruitment

Recruiting Assessors and Verifiers

In 27 of the 52 interviews, interviewees said they had experienced some difficulty recruiting. Of these:

- ◆ 20 centres had difficulty recruiting
- ◆ 7 awarding bodies had difficulty recruiting

This means **65% of centres had experienced difficulty recruiting Assessors and/or Internal Verifiers**. This compares with only **33% of awarding bodies** who said they had experienced difficulty recruiting External Verifiers.

Sectors experiencing the most difficulty:

- ◆ *Pharmacy* — both the awarding body and centre had difficulty recruiting.
- ◆ *Construction* — one of the two awarding bodies had difficulty recruiting, and seven of the eight centres had difficulty recruiting.
- ◆ *Hair and Beauty* - the two awarding bodies did not have a problem recruiting, but four of the six centres had difficulty.
- ◆ *Sign-making* — because this is a specialist area, the awarding body could not offer full-time work for the External Verifier, and there were not enough applicants for the centre.

Some sectors have experienced very little or no difficulty in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers. Sectors having the least difficulty include:

- ◆ *Wood Machine and Furniture* — the awarding body and two centres did not have a problem, although it was noted by a centre that ‘recruitment (and retention) is a problem to a degree across the sector, but the problem is due more to the salaries offered for these jobs’.
- ◆ *Waste Management* — the awarding body was having difficulty recruiting but explained this was not a problem for centres, as it was ‘easier to cope with Assessor and IV roles than with the EV role’.
- ◆ *Police* — the two awarding bodies had no trouble recruiting: ‘we actually have a waiting list’.

Link between Assessment Strategy and recruitment difficulties

Only three of the 27 interviewees who had difficulty recruiting directly attributed this to the Assessment Strategy. This means that **only 6% of interviewees said that the Assessment Strategy caused them to experience difficulties** when recruiting Assessors and/or Verifiers.

The relevant Assessment Strategies are Pharmacy, Hair and Beauty, and Construction. Included below are some pertinent statements from interviewees. It should be noted that some of these comments may have been made before most Assessment Strategies were revised to take account of the new Age legislation.

Pharmacy — ‘The difficulty ... is due to the requirements of the Assessment Strategy ... if the Assessment Strategy was relaxed we would have more applications ... the Assessment Strategy is too prescriptive.’

Hair and Beauty — ‘The requirement in the Assessment Strategy is five years minimum occupational experience for both Beauty and Hairdressers.’

Construction — ‘It’s the whole system that’s the problem... especially the bureaucracy and the paperwork. We have struggled to fill vacancies with plumbing, joinery and building services. This is due to a difficulty with the paperwork and the assessment they are expected to do.’

Pharmacy, Hair and Beauty, and Construction have also appeared to be the sectors that are facing the most problems in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers. It is perhaps to be expected that the Assessment Strategy is one of the reasons why these sectors have had problems in recruiting.

However, other factors have more often been cited as the cause of recruitment difficulties. The most common relates to potential Assessors and Verifiers lacking the right qualifications and experience. Other reasons include pay, not enough applicants, and applicants lacking the 'right personality' for External Verifier positions. Some of these points do, of course, link to the Assessment Strategy, but it is interesting that the interviewees did not think that the Assessment Strategy was the cause of their difficulties. This may be because a number of different factors were the cause of any recruitment difficulties.

Some interviewees did not immediately link difficulty in recruiting with the Assessment Strategy but later commented on how the criteria for Assessors and/or Verifiers set out in the **Assessment Strategy impacted on recruitment and retention** (to varying degrees). It is clear that if an Assessment Strategy impacts on recruitment and retention this does not necessarily mean that the Assessment Strategy has directly been the main cause of any recruitment difficulty.

Recruiting and training Assessors and Verifiers

These are the key points of how organisations recruit and train Assessors and Verifiers:

- ◆ Apart from advertising (in various places), 'word of mouth' and having the right contacts featured heavily as methods of recruitment.
- ◆ Nearly all awarding bodies and training providers would not lower their requirements to recruit for a role.
- ◆ The majority of awarding bodies and centres did not use consultants.
- ◆ Most awarding bodies employ full-time External Verifiers. Centres tend to employ part-time Assessors but Internal Verifiers are often employed full-time.
- ◆ Training was the main solution to address a shortfall — other solutions included allocating more hours to the existing team (in the case of small companies) or taking Assessors or Verifiers from other areas (in the case of larger companies). Two centres mentioned they had considered pooling staff with competitors, but no-one had gone as far as actually doing this.
- ◆ Many centres train their Assessors to become Verifiers. This means that if there is a problem recruiting Assessors there would be a knock-on effect on the recruitment of Verifiers.

What makes an Assessment Strategy successful?

Interviewees commented on how some Assessment Strategies should be improved, but views differed on whether Assessment Strategies should be more prescriptive or more flexible.

Where centres wanted a flexible Assessment Strategy, this was so that they could have more freedom to operate and fewer restrictions.

Where interviewees wanted a more precise and prescriptive Assessment Strategy, this was so Assessment Strategies were free of ambiguity, and not reliant on (potentially) the subjective views of the External Verifier. This was particularly the case where centres identified discrepancies in how different External Verifiers applied the Assessment Strategy.

Three interviewees argued for a balance between the need for some flexibility and sufficient direction:

- ◆ 'A successful Assessment Strategy has a certain amount of flexibility achieving a balance between being too prescriptive and too flexible ... it covers the sector needs.'
- ◆ 'Right balance between clear guidance and implementation, so that it is not over prescriptive, but does offer clarity.'
- ◆ 'A compromise between clarity and excessive depth. It shouldn't be too long, or too prescriptive.'

Other interviewees emphasised the need for Assessment Strategies to have depth and breadth. Comments included that 'the Assessment Strategy is not easy, but it is not designed to be, it has to be rigorous', and 'you need enough of everything to get an all round picture ... and a good balance between the components'.

There were also comments about the need for Assessment Strategies to be realistic and practical so that they consider the particular needs and context of the sector. One comment included the need for 'more emphasis on the vocational nature of the NVQ'. Comments of this nature might show that centres feel far removed from the process of developing the Assessment Strategy. It could also mean that centres perceive SSC/SSBs as not understanding, or taking into account, the needs of centres when developing the assessment process.

Furthermore, interviewees think how successful an Assessment Strategy is also depends on how well it is disseminated and marketed. For example, one interviewee would like to see 'stronger marketing when there is a revised strategy'. A small minority of centres indicated that they receive little support from awarding bodies in implementing and

using new Assessment Strategies. One interviewee commented that the guidance from the awarding body about what is required is ‘bewildering and confusing’. Another interviewee, also from a centre, questioned whether the awarding body is ‘relaying the correct information to the centres’.

The majority of centres were positive about the level of support they received from their awarding body. For example, one centre said that the guidance from the awarding body about assessing candidates is ‘extremely comprehensive’. In terms of support provided to centres, it is difficult to see whether the success of support relates more to the personality and experience of the External Verifier rather than the actual awarding body.

Interviewees’ comments on what makes a successful Assessment Strategy

A successful Assessment Strategy ...
is ‘unambiguous’
has ‘quality assurance and thoroughness’
stays as a strategy — ‘not too much detail’ — as discussed at AB forums
is ‘clear, not too restrictive, so the lay person can understand with no gobbledeygook’
has ‘a realistic view of how standards might be applied and evidenced’
has ‘flexibility’
‘has a certain amount of flexibility achieving a balance between being too prescriptive and too flexible ... it covers the sector needs’
is ‘user-friendly’
has ‘more emphasis on the vocational nature of the NVQ’ — writing the strategy should involve ‘sitting down with people doing the job’
has ‘stringent demands and large sampling for units’
has the ‘right balance between clear guidance and implementation, so that it is not over prescriptive, but does offer clarity’
‘covers all of the required areas and contains everything you need’
is when awarding bodies see the draft, make comments at the forums and SSCs listen and make amendments
is ‘very clear so there is less room for misreading and misinterpretation’ and ‘stronger marketing when there is a revised strategy’
is ‘a compromise between clarity and excessive depth. It shouldn’t be too long, or too prescriptive’
‘should define the qualification requirements, and the industrial requirements and all of the necessary areas. It should be very clear’
is ‘a procedure that’s the same for everyone to follow. It should follow the underpinning of the theory’

Issues and problems in using Assessment Strategies

In one sector the content of the Assessment Strategy appears to cause difficulties. The Assessment Strategy includes a requirement for enhanced verification for a particular Unit, which means that it must be **internally and externally verified for every candidate**. The individuals we interviewed felt that the Unit is not safety critical, and they therefore do not understand the need for this requirement.

One interviewee also explained that the Unit features in other NVQ/SVQs but does not have the enhanced verification requirement in the relevant Assessment Strategy. This model does seem to be highly unusual, if not unique.

Two small awarding bodies found it difficult to secure the V2 Unit for their External Verifiers. For example, one awarding body explained that it had received seven applications for the External Verifier position, but none of the applicants had the V2 Unit. This meant that the main way of recruiting for this awarding body was to provide training for the External Verifier and register them for the V2 Unit. The interviewee said that almost all of the registered awarding bodies only deliver the V2 Unit in-house or make it so difficult for other awarding bodies to register that they don't, in reality, offer it to other awarding bodies.

Related comments made by other interviewees:

- ◆ There is no difficulty at present but the interviewee expects there to be in the future, 'in a few years when the EVs retire'. This is because of the A1, V1 and V2 changes, which will mean that there will be 'three hurdles and extra cost' to become an External Verifier. On top of the travel element, this will put people off in the future.
- ◆ 'A1 and V1 guidance is not very clear about what is wanted.'
- ◆ 'You must have the Assessor award for three months before you can get the V1.'
- ◆ Other organisations commented on the expense in training Assessors and Verifiers, when previously there was government funding for this.

These comments suggest that there is some confusion at a minority of awarding bodies and centres about the qualification requirements for External Verifiers, Internal Verifiers and Assessors.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

We have included below a summary of the key issues raised in the body of the report. We also include some analysis and reflection on the development and use of Assessment Strategies and differences in practice.

Recruitment and training of Assessors and Verifiers

Difficulties

Although only 6% of interviewees said that the Assessment Strategy caused them to experience difficulties when recruiting Assessors or Verifiers, the situation is more complex than this.

A significant number of centres (66%) experienced difficulties; and 33% of awarding bodies have experienced difficulties. Some interviewees did not immediately link this with the Assessment Strategy, but later commented on how the criteria for Assessors and Internal/External Verifiers set out in the **Assessment Strategy impacted recruitment and retention** (to varying degrees).

Is the Assessment Strategy responsible?

This does not necessarily mean that the Assessment Strategy has caused the recruitment difficulty. It is probable, though, that the Assessment Strategy has contributed, particularly where interviewees said that job applicants were insufficiently qualified and experienced.

It is interesting that the majority of interviewees who have experienced difficulties have not held the Assessment Strategy responsible. This may be because these interviewees generally agree with the occupational competence requirements of the Assessment Strategy.

Qualification requirements

A small number of interviewees appeared to be confused about the qualification requirements (eg A1, V1, V2) for External Verifiers, Internal Verifiers and Assessors. This confusion particularly concerns how soon individuals must hold these particular Units and whether an External Verifier should hold all of the assessment Units. It is probably unrealistic for awarding bodies to expect a new External Verifier to hold the V2 Unit (or for centres to expect Assessors to hold the A1 Unit), so it should be *desirable* rather than *essential*. This is because the appropriate Units can be undertaken 'on the job'. Not all awarding bodies and centres are clear about how to apply these requirements.

Filling vacancies

Related to this, to ensure that awarding bodies meet these requirements and are able to fill External Verifier vacancies, it is essential that all new External Verifiers have access to the V Units. However, two interviewees said that this doesn't always happen — two small awarding bodies found it difficult to secure the V2 qualification for their External Verifiers. One of these awarding bodies explained that almost all of the awarding bodies registered to deliver V Units only deliver in-house, or make it difficult for other awarding bodies to register.

Support received

Interviewees said that some External Verifiers are very good at supporting centres in applying the Assessment Strategy and in assessing the NVQ/SVQ. But it is also clear that some interviewees are not satisfied with the level of support and guidance they receive from their External Verifier and/or awarding body. Also, the adequacy of support and guidance does seem to depend on the background and experience of the External Verifier. This inconsistency could mean that external verification is not applied uniformly and is affected by the type of person in the role.

Development and use of Assessment Strategies

What are Assessment Strategies for?

Assessment Strategies were introduced in response to the changes made to the level of detail and content requirements for National Occupational Standards (NOS). The aim of Assessment Strategies is to help awarding bodies and centres understand how the NVQ/SVQ should be assessed.

The interview findings demonstrate that there is a significant diversity of views about Assessment Strategies, and that there are differences in practice. This suggests that Assessment Strategies vary considerably from sector to sector, including the amount of input from awarding bodies. This inconsistency may in part be caused by the outdated Assessment Strategy guidance³. However, it may also be caused by SSCs/SSBs interpreting the requirements in different ways.

Clarity in SSCs/SSBs

A number of individuals working at SSCs/SSBs are relatively new to NOS and NVQ/SVQs, and this could be having an impact. For example, most SSCs/SSBs were unable to provide much clarity about whether any awarding bodies or centres in their sector experienced difficulties in recruiting Assessors or Verifiers. Furthermore, a small number of interviewees wondered whether their SSC/SSB fully understood the

³ Developing an Assessment Strategy for NVQs and SVQs, QCA, 1999.

assessment process and the implications of certain requirements in the Assessment Strategy.

Do Assessment Strategies help?

The definition we gave in section 1 says that the Assessment Strategy should help awarding bodies and centres, particularly in terms of interpreting the requirements. A minority of interviewees do not feel that the relevant Assessment Strategy is helpful, and they also feel that it has been imposed on them. This may indicate that they have not been involved in the development process, or that they feel they were unable to influence the outcome. As there is a diversity of views it could also mean that there are divisions in some sectors about the best approach.

Information and guidance

A small minority of centres are unhappy about the amount of information and guidance they receive from their awarding body. There does seem to be a significant variation in this. Some awarding bodies simply send out the Assessment Strategy, whereas others provide explanatory and supporting documents. The External Verifier usually, but not always, meets with each centre to explain the Assessment Strategy and its requirements.

Named contacts

The difficulties we experienced in extracting information from the larger awarding bodies suggest that there are significant differences in how large and small awarding bodies operate. When contacting larger awarding bodies, the project team often had to speak to a number of different individuals to find the information. This was because the individuals initially contacted were also the awarding body contacts for SSC/SSBs.

In the larger awarding bodies these individuals have very little communication with centres and are not normally involved in recruiting External Verifiers. These individuals could be far removed from what is happening in their centres, and may not know very much about the verification process.

Communication between SSCs/SSBs, awarding bodies and centres

Some awarding bodies send their External Verifiers to Awarding Body Forums where the Assessment Strategy is discussed. This is a good way for larger awarding bodies to ensure they consider the views of centres when Assessment Strategies are developed.

Some of the large awarding bodies have dedicated teams to recruit External Verifiers and to communicate with centres. This is very different to the small, niche awarding bodies, where the awarding body manager was able to answer questions about the recruitment of Assessors and

Verifiers. They were also very knowledgeable about the experiences of their centres and this indicated that they are in direct, regular contact with these centres.

This different way of working could have implications for the development/review of Assessment Strategies. For example, it could mean that the views of centres linked to large awarding bodies are not always being communicated (or being communicated correctly) to SSCs/SSBs. This in turn could impact on the Assessment Strategy development process and could lead to a development process that is not fit for purpose.

Content of Assessment Strategies

Understanding requirements

In one sector issues were identified in relation to the content of the Assessment Strategy. This Assessment Strategy includes a requirement for enhanced verification for a particular Unit — it must be **internally and externally verified for every candidate**. This model is very unusual and does not seem to be an approach which is used in other Assessment Strategies. The purpose and benefits of this approach are not immediately apparent, and this view is supported by the comments made by interviewees. The value of the approach is questionable as it is not clear why it is more appropriate than any other.

Flexibility versus clarity

There are significant differences of opinion about whether Assessment Strategies should become more prescriptive or more flexible. Both viewpoints seem valid, and it may be that different approaches are right for different sectors. However, such variations in approach may mean that SSCs/SSBs are unclear about the best approach or are uncertain about the regulatory requirements.

Some SSCs have developed generic Assessment Strategies for their sectors which absorb their previous Assessment Strategies into one Strategy for all of their NVQ/SVQs. This is a relatively new approach and it is probably too soon to determine its impact on awarding bodies and centres. However, it is likely that such an approach results in an Assessment Strategy that is more flexible and less detailed than its predecessors. A small number of interviewees expressed confusion about whether they have the latest versions of particular Assessment Strategies. This may mean that 'version control' may be inadequate in some organisations.

Occupational competence requirements

There are also other variations in how the occupational competence requirements are expressed in Assessment Strategies. For example,

some Assessment Strategies include the same occupational competence requirements for Assessors, Internal Verifiers and External Verifiers. This is surprising because Assessors are normally required to have the greatest amount of occupational competence and External Verifiers the least, with Internal Verifiers somewhere between the two. (This makes sense because the roles are very different — the External Verifier shouldn't be making decisions about whether a candidate is competent against each performance criteria and knowledge statement.) It is doubtful whether it is necessary for all of the assessment personnel to have to meet the same occupational competence requirements. Where this occurs, it may be appropriate for the qualifications regulators to question its validity.

Good practice

The case studies in Appendix A provide a useful 'snapshot' of current practice in relation to Assessment Strategies. Although they are not intended to be models of good practice, there are elements in each Strategy which have been very well received and could have a wider application in other sectors.

The findings from the interviews with awarding bodies and centres indicate that centres and awarding bodies have diverse opinions about 'good practice', and it is difficult to establish a consensus on what is good practice. However, interviewees have generally indicated a preference for clarity, brevity and specificity.

What makes a good Assessment Strategy?

Interviewees are, on the whole, keen for Assessment Strategies to be flexible, particularly in relation to how the occupational competence requirements are expressed. For example, it is likely that awarding bodies and centres would prefer qualification requirements for assessment personnel to be expressed through indicative lists of qualifications. Also, Assessment Strategies are generally well-received when they have been developed in an open and collaborative way, with early dialogue between the SSC/SSB and awarding body.

The key to a successful Assessment Strategy appears to be whether or not it has a clear purpose and adds value to the assessment process. In other words, what difference does it make? This suggests that SSCs/SSBs should not think that introducing stricter requirements necessarily means that the resultant Assessment Strategy will be better. Ultimately, the Assessment Strategy will be improved if it leads to more consistent assessment decisions across all centres.

Our difficulty in determining what 'good practice' is has partly been caused by the lack of clarity about the purpose of Assessment Strategies. It is some time since Assessment Strategies were introduced, and the

context in which they operate has changed considerably. This could explain why there appears to be some uncertainty about what Assessment Strategies are trying to achieve.

Summary and recommendations

This report is the result of a relatively small and focused project designed to explore whether there is a relationship between the occupational competence requirements expressed in Assessment Strategies and any difficulties in recruiting Assessors and Verifiers.

There is little evidence that Assessment Strategies are significantly causing widespread recruitment difficulties. Although a small number of sectors have experienced difficulties, these seem to be sector-specific. Many Assessment Strategies have been relatively well-received by awarding bodies and centres. However, a small number of minor issues related to the development and application of Assessment Strategies have been identified in this report.

We therefore recommend that:

- ◆ the regulatory guidance on developing Assessment Strategies is revised to clarify:
 - the purpose and scope of Assessment Strategies (the definition in this report may be a helpful starting point)
 - the amount of flexibility that should be provided to awarding bodies and centres
 - the different roles of Assessors, Internal Verifiers and External Verifiers and the need for different levels of occupational competence
 - the extent to which External Verifiers should be involved in the assessment process
 - how awarding bodies should be involved in the development of Assessment Strategies
- ◆ awarding bodies and centres are given updated and clear information about the qualification requirements for Assessors, Internal Verifiers and External Verifiers (this should include controlling updated versions of existing Assessment Strategies and ensuring these are adequately promoted)
- ◆ the qualifications regulators ensure that all awarding bodies have access to the V Units
- ◆ the qualifications regulators, SSDA and other key partners consider offering training to SSCs/SSBs on the assessment process, ideally including awarding bodies and centres in the design and delivery of the training

- ◆ the validity of enhanced verification is reviewed where it would appear to be excessive and particularly onerous, for example where it involves verifying the same Unit for every candidate
- ◆ the qualifications regulators review the future impact of Assessment Strategies to determine the relative quality of approaches that integrate existing in-house employer training and assessment systems into the Assessment Strategy, compared to the normal route

Appendix — Case studies

NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategies

Introduction to the case studies



Purpose of case studies

To illustrate the reality of how NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategies are developed and used, we have produced three case studies. Each case study includes a description of the Assessment Strategy, an overview of how the Assessment Strategy was developed, a summary of the impact of the Assessment Strategy, and key points of interest. Although the case studies highlight some aspects of good practice, they are designed to provide a ‘snapshot’ of current practice in relation to Assessment Strategies.

They are not intended to be models of good practice, but there are elements in each Strategy which have been very well received and could have a wider application in other sectors. The case studies also touch on some interesting issues.

Summary and review of case studies

The Food and Drink Manufacturing Assessment Strategy is interesting because it brings together Improve’s three previous Strategies to create one Strategy for all of their NVQ/SVQs. This approach is becoming more common, perhaps because SSCs are working towards implementing their Sector Qualifications Strategies. It could also be that SSCs formed by the merger of two or more organisations are now consolidating the National Occupational Standards and qualifications within their new remits. It is interesting that the awarding bodies are pleased with this new Strategy and that they think it is much clearer. Sometimes when a number of Assessment Strategies are consolidated to form one new Strategy, the resultant Assessment Strategy becomes very generic. This could then mean that it provides less of a steer to awarding bodies and centres regarding the assessment of the relevant NVQ/SVQs. It can be particularly challenging to develop one Assessment Strategy for a number of NVQ/SVQs if it cuts across a number of sub-sectors. This highlights the importance of working closely and collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure that the Strategy will help them to improve assessment practice.

Improve have a strong and well-established Awarding Body Forum and they used this group to involve the awarding bodies in the development of the Strategy. Awarding bodies had the opportunity to contribute to the development process from an early stage in the process. This is probably why Improve have managed to develop a well-received Strategy even though it replaces three previous Strategies. A feature of Improve’s Assessment Strategy is also shared by the Skillsmart Retail Assessment Strategy. Both Assessment Strategies have integrated existing in-house employer training and assessment systems

into the Assessment Strategy so that Assessors and candidates don't have to do anything twice. This is likely to become an increasingly popular approach, especially for employer-based centres where the cost and time involved in training and qualifying Assessors and Internal Verifiers could become prohibitive. It will be interesting to look at how well this approach works, not just in relation to its practical application for employers but also the relative quality of this approach compared to the normal route.

The Health and Social Care Assessment Strategy has been included as a case study because of its use of 'expert witnesses'. The way in which the Strategy was developed is also of interest because it was developed jointly by two SSCs: Skills for Care and Skills for Health. They took this approach because they are jointly responsible for the Health and Social Care National Occupational Standards which cover both of their sectors. The success of this joint approach may possibly open the door for other SSCs to consider more collaborative approaches with other SSCs which overlap their footprint.

By including the use of expert witnesses, Skills for Care and Skills for Health have formalised the role of non-assessors in the assessment process. Other SSCs, such as Skillsmart Retail, have also taken this approach. This provides flexibility where NVQ/SVQs are particularly wide-ranging (as is the case with the Health and Social Care NVQ/SVQs) and the Assessor may not have sufficient occupational competence across the range of units, particularly those covering specialist areas.

Awarding bodies were consulted on the new Assessment Strategy once a draft Strategy had been developed. They were not involved at an earlier stage in the development process. This may be a sensible approach where large numbers of awarding bodies, with differing levels of knowledge and expertise, would need to be involved. Other SSCs, such as Improve, have taken a different approach by involving awarding bodies earlier in the process. This was certainly successful in the case of Improve but would it work in all sectors? Improve had an established Awarding Body Forum which it involved throughout the development process. Where relationships are less established, it could be more challenging for SSCs to work with awarding bodies from the start of the Assessment Strategy development process.

The Retail Assessment Strategy was developed by Skillsmart Retail. It sets out key principles at the beginning of the Assessment Strategy and one awarding body found this particularly helpful. This approach could certainly have a wider application and may be particularly helpful in sectors that are substantially revising an existing Assessment Strategy as it would help to clarify the purpose of the new Strategy.

It is noticeable that the Retail Assessment Strategy contains references to the length of experience that Assessors and Verifiers are likely to need in order to be occupationally competent. These suggested minimum requirements are helpful guidelines and do not seem to be too onerous. None of the awarding bodies we spoke to have a problem with these guidelines. However, this approach may not be right in other sectors and it would certainly need to be carefully consulted on, as was the case with Skillsmart Retail. SSCs also have to be careful to comply with the new Age legislation.

The other noticeable feature of the Retail Assessment Strategy is in the description of occupational competence requirements for External Verifiers. It explains that External Verifiers need a level of occupational competence and understanding that is sufficient to enable them to 'determine whether the evidence collected for a candidate met all the Evidence Requirements'. This varies from what is specified in guidance provided by the Regulatory Authorities which emphasises that External Verifiers are responsible for quality assuring consistency and validity of assessment decisions made across a centre. This puts the emphasis on External Verifiers verifying the performance of the centre to ensure the quality and consistency of assessment. This slightly different interpretation could cause confusion for awarding bodies and centres.

Case study

Food and Drink Manufacturing Assessment Strategy

Improve



About the Strategy

Improve has developed a new NVQ/SVQ framework, which will be launched in September 2007. The new framework replaces five existing suites and provides a single Food and Drink Manufacturing qualification with a range of flexible pathways. To supplement this, Improve has produced a new single overarching Assessment Strategy for the whole Food and Drink Manufacturing sector. It aims to provide coherence and commonality in assessment practice. It builds on the good practice developed in separate assessment strategies in Food and Drink sub-sectors over the previous ten years.

Description

Improve believes one of the most important new aspects of the Assessment Strategy is that it outlines new opportunities for competence assessment. It aims to reduce duplication and bureaucracy for candidates and employers by linking NVQ/SVQ assessment to assessments that are already being undertaken in the workplace and are subject to audit to an industry recognised standard, eg British Retail Consortium Standards, Safe and Legal Supplier Approval (SALSA) or an ISO 9000 series accredited system. This was one of the issues identified by Improve's Sector Qualification Strategy, and is part of its Recognition of Achievement Model.

In addition the Strategy identifies:

- External quality control processes including:
 - a strong recommendation that all External Verifiers complete a minimum of two days Continuing Professional Development (CPD) per year, composed of training or other developmental activities relevant to the food and drink sector and approved by the awarding body
 - a Risk Rating system applied to each active approved centre operated by awarding bodies
 - on-going dialogue between Improve and awarding bodies to monitor practices, consider issues and gain feedback on the standards based units of competence

- The use of workplace performance evidence, including observation (which it states should always be carried out on-the-job), questioning, witness testimony, professional discussion, product and photographic evidence, relevant active documentation and reports. It also states that the use of a Realistic Work Environment (RWE) to assess candidates by observation is not permitted at NVQ/SVQ level 2 or above, unless units state that simulation is specifically allowed. However, an RWE can be used at these levels to collect evidence of knowledge and understanding or evidence based on professional discussion and presentations only. An RWE is defined as an off-the-job training production environment where food and drink processes, equipment, procedures and products are typical of the practices in the sector or specified part of the sector. Criteria for establishing an RWE are presented in an appendix to the Strategy.
- The development of the NVQ/SVQ framework was done in conjunction with work by awarding bodies to produce complementary VRQs. These VRQs are closely based on the National Occupational Standards. This whole suite of qualifications, then, allows providers to offer the appropriate qualification, with NVQ/SVQs being used to assess workplace competence and VRQs providing underpinning knowledge and skills. This gives candidates the potential to transfer knowledge gained off the job directly into the NVQ/SVQ assessment.
- That simulation cannot be used unless the work activities are sufficiently rare, inconvenient or costly to an employer, or dangerous or prejudicial to health and safety, as to require assessment through simulation. Simulation can also be acceptable if its exclusion would deny equality of access.
- The Assessment Strategy specifies occupational expertise and requirements for Assessors, Internal Verifiers and External Verifiers. It states that:
 - Assessors should provide current evidence of competence in the areas to be assessed; hold or be working towards the relevant assessor qualifications; and have a full understanding of the units and requirements of the qualifications being assessed. It also strongly recommends that they hold a Certificate in Food Safety for Manufacturing (if assessing levels 1 and 2) or a Certificate in Food Safety Supervision for Manufacturing (if assessing levels 3 or 4).
 - Internal Verifiers should have sufficient and current understanding of the qualifications to be internally verified; hold or be working towards the relevant Internal Verifier qualifications; and know where and when to access specialist sector advice. It also strongly recommends that they hold a Certificate in Food Safety for Manufacturing or equivalent.
 - External Verifiers need sufficient and current understanding of the sector and the qualifications; to hold or be working towards the relevant External Verifier qualifications; to have good report writing, auditing and communication skills; and to know where and when to access specialist sector advice. It is also strongly recommended that they complete a minimum of two days Continuing Professional Development (CPD) each year.

Development process

The Assessment Strategy was produced alongside the new single NVQ/SVQ framework and new VRQs. It combined existing Assessment Strategies, which covered three parts of the sector, but was also driven by the Sector Qualification Strategy's principles, which set out what employers require from vocational qualifications.

A result of this approach is that the NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy no longer allows the use of RWEs above level 1. This is because although VRQs are stand-alone qualifications, they are closely based on the NVQ/SVQs. This whole suite of qualifications allows VRQs to provide underpinning knowledge with the potential to transfer knowledge gained off the job directly into NVQ/SVQ assessment. This means RWEs are no longer required.

Improve does not set up working groups for specific projects, but makes use of industry-based standing groups as well as Training Provider Groups and an Awarding Body Forum. These comment on a range of activities including strategy and standards development. The Awarding Body Forum is a formal group with all awarding bodies represented, including those involved in VRQs and Food Safety Awards. It was involved in the development of the Assessment Strategy from the beginning, and both awarding bodies we contacted felt that it had provided adequate opportunity to comment on and discuss the Strategy. Both gave examples where the Strategy had been amended to take comments into account.

Impact of Strategy

It is too early to identify the impact of the Strategy as it is yet to be used, but it is hoped that it will help candidates and employers to make more use of existing structured in-company training and assessment.

One awarding body we interviewed thought that the new Strategy had removed a lot of the ambiguity of the previous Strategy: 'They are like night and day'.

The awarding bodies we spoke to have differing views about the impact of the competence requirements for Assessors and Verifiers. This is partly because of the differences between sub-sectors' previous assessment strategies. For example, one awarding body felt that the Assessor and Verifier requirements had been raised and that this was 'long overdue'. Another felt that the competence requirements had been reduced because they no longer required Assessors and Verifiers to have worked in that particular sub-sector for a particular number of years. (This had been removed from the Assessment Strategy to ensure that it complied with the new age discrimination legislation.) The SSC has committed to reviewing the impact of these competence requirements after the new NVQ/SVQs have bedded in.

Sharing practice

Improve feels that because the Assessment Strategy was driven by the Sector Qualification Strategy it led to a more holistic approach that was driven by issues in the sector rather than simply following a process.

The Awarding Body Forum meant that awarding bodies were kept up to date with progress and given an opportunity to discuss and comment on the Strategy. Improve felt that the Forum's wider membership resulted in the Assessment Strategy being linked to other activities. However, one awarding body was concerned that it led to organisations that would have no dealings with the Strategy, and that had little understanding of how it would be implemented, commenting on it.

Case study

Health and Social Care Assessment Strategy

Skills for Care and Skills for Health



About the Strategy

The Health and Social Care NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy was developed jointly by Skills for Health and Skills for Care. It was revised from a previous Strategy in 2004. It was identified that there needed to be more flexibility in assessing the awards, and for this reason the use of 'expert witnesses' was introduced. The opportunity was taken to update the occupational competence requirements, especially in relation to the knowledge requirements. The revision process also involved a number of new awarding bodies who had subsequently come on board. The main objective for the Strategy was greater uptake of the awards.

Description

The key features of the Assessment Strategy are the use of expert witnesses, and the clarification of the roles of the External Verifier, Internal Verifier and Assessor.

Expert witnesses were introduced because there were some scenarios where Assessors could not be present due to the need for the privacy of the service users. Also, the majority of evidence, where possible, should come from direct observation in the work place.

- The use of expert witnesses is encouraged as a contribution to the assessment of evidence of the candidate's competence, where there are no occupationally competent Assessors for occupationally-specific units. Expert witnesses must have:
 - A working knowledge of NOS.
 - Current expertise and occupational competence, either as a practitioner or manager. In due course, regulatory requirements may mean that expert witnesses will need to hold appropriate care/health qualifications.
 - Either a qualification in assessment of workplace performance, such as L20 from the learning and development suite, or a professional work role which involves evaluating the everyday practice of staff.

- The Internal Verifier is key to the quality assurance and verification of assessment. Internal Verifiers must:
 - Be occupationally knowledgeable in respect of the units.
 - Have working knowledge of the relevant health and social care settings, the regulations, legislation and codes of practice, and the national standards.
 - Occupy a position that gives them authority and resources to co-ordinate the work of Assessors, provide authoritative advice, call meetings as appropriate, visit and observe assessments.
 - Hold, or be working towards, the IV qualification.

- The External Verifier is the key link for awarding bodies in the quality assurance and verification of the assessment of candidates' performance in the workplace. External Verifiers must:
 - Have occupational knowledge gained by working in the sector.
 - Hold, or be working towards, the appropriate EV qualification.
 - Have a working knowledge of the health and social care settings, the regulations, legislation and codes of practice (where applicable) for the service, and the national standards.

Development process

The Assessment Strategy was developed by a joint team of Skills for Health and Skills for Care. Initial discussion outlined the issues to be addressed before consultation with awarding bodies.

The practitioners who were involved in the development of the Assessment Strategy were from the 'shop floor' of the health and care sectors. The awarding bodies were involved in the development of the Assessment Strategy once the first draft had been produced. There were a lot of awarding bodies involved in this process, and while the SSCs felt that they were united with each other, they commented that it was also the case that some of the awarding bodies involved had more experience and expertise than others.

The awarding body we spoke to did comment that they would have liked to have been consulted earlier: 'If we had been involved earlier, we could have effected more change and ruffled fewer feathers'. However, they felt that the consultations did work, and that informal contacts were a good channel of communication as well as the formal forum for awarding bodies.

The SSCs felt that the main challenges in developing the Strategy were around developing a shared Strategy, which meant that there had to be good teamwork and communication.

Several external factors also influenced the development of the Assessment Strategy. Skills for Health pointed to the funding streams. Skills for Care said that they had had to be mindful of both the people who would be using the services and the regional differences in

confidentiality legislation. It was vital, then, that the services were robust and grounded in work-based processes, as they formed the basis for registration of carers in those services.

Impact of Strategy

The SSCs felt that the Assessment Strategy has achieved what they wanted it to achieve. It has been welcomed in the sector because of the increased flexibility it provides, and it has improved consistency across the award and sped up assessment.

Skills for Health didn't consider the impact of the Strategy on the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers, but they were aware of the different assessment approaches and types of Assessors, such as Peripatetic Assessors. Skills for Care *were* aware of the recruitment of Assessors, and during development of the Strategy, explored whether people such as nurses and social workers who did not have 'D' Units (now 'A' Units) could be Assessors. Unfortunately this was not possible, but the recruitment of Assessors and Verifiers remains a crucial factor.

The awarding body that we spoke to said: 'The A1 qualifications always end up being a barrier. For new organisations to get started, they are having to buy-in people who have an A1. I think that the A1 standards are due for revision.'

Skills for Care commented that the evidence of completion of the NVQ/SVQ is good, although this may not be down to the Assessment Strategy alone. 'The fact that people cannot gain an NVQ/SVQ in Health and Social Care outside of the workplace is very important, as it ensures the qualification's reputation for occupational competence.'

Sharing practice

The SSCs and awarding body all felt that the most successful aspect of the Assessment Strategy is the use of expert witnesses.

They agreed that the least successful aspect of the Strategy has been in relation to training Assessors and maintaining a bank of assessment personnel. One SSC added: 'The challenge is in responding to the needs of the sector, especially where their needs conflict with the criteria and rules.'

The awarding body we spoke to felt that there had initially been some areas of ambiguity in the language used in the Assessment Strategy, where certain words were used interchangeably, despite different meanings. The awarding body said that the SSCs have since gone on to address and resolve these issues, and the awarding body added that this highlighted the importance of communicating with SSCs.

The SSCs both felt that involving awarding bodies and listening to the needs of the sector were the most important lessons they had learnt during the development of the Assessment Strategy. The awarding body backed this sentiment, stating that they wanted to negotiate with and support the SSCs and maintain a positive relationship with them.

Case study

Retail Assessment Strategy

Skillsmart



About the Strategy

The Retail NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy was revised by Skillsmart whilst it was reviewing the Retail NOS and qualifications, and was approved in April 2006. There was an incremental review in 2007 to take account of the new age discrimination legislation. Skillsmart ensures it reviews the Assessment Strategy alongside any review of the standards and qualifications.

Description

The main change to the original Assessment Strategy is the provision to allow employers to undertake their own assessment as long as the company's training for Assessors maps the content of the Assessor NVQ/SVQ Units.

The Strategy also includes:

- A set of four key principles for interpreting the Strategy. These are:
 - Evidence of competence is to be based on workplace activity.
 - Assessment should assess achievement of National Occupational Standards, but must also ensure that the methods employed are those that are most relevant for the level being assessed and sector expectations of candidates.
 - Assessment practice should contribute to the development of a skilled workforce. The choice and application of assessment methods must reflect this ideal.
 - Assessment systems for NVQs and SVQs should, where possible, be integrated with organisations' training and HR models.
- Guidance on the use of simulation. The Strategy only allows simulation for certain aspects of the Health and Safety and Security Units, and as supplementary evidence for three of the Units imported from another suite. It also states that simulation should be undertaken in a realistic working environment. It requires awarding bodies to discourage inappropriate use of NVQ/SVQs by organisations that do not assess candidates in a working environment; to establish criteria to ensure that simulation is not used as the sole form of evidence for any NVQ/SVQ Unit; and to provide clear guidance to centres to indicate that evidence towards an NVQ/SVQ should come from the workplace.

- Guidance on the role of supervisors and managers in assessment. The Strategy says that, wherever possible, assessment is conducted by colleagues, supervisors and/or managers in a workplace environment. Where the skill or capability of these individuals is inadequate, Peripatetic Assessors or Internal Verifiers may be used. However, the NVQ/SVQ should not be delivered without the involvement of the candidates' line manager or the owner/manager to confirm the candidates' competence. Line-managers who do assess or internally verify must have achieved the appropriate assessment and internal verification qualifications, or the company must demonstrate that its training and development activity for them maps 100% to the National Occupational Standards these qualifications are based on. The mapping process must be agreed by the awarding body.
- Requirements for the occupational competences of expert witnesses, Assessors and Verifiers. It states that:
 - Where specialist Assessors are used, expert witnesses must confirm the candidate's competence. Expert witnesses must be able to demonstrate practical experience and knowledge in the Unit. (One awarding body we interviewed considered the use of expert witnesses to be innovative.)
 - Assessors must be competent in the occupational requirements of the retail generic standards, and have in-depth knowledge of both the generic and specialist standards they are assessing.
 - Internal Verifiers must have a current understanding of the content, structure and occupational requirements of the standards that they are internally verifying. The level of understanding should be sufficient to allow them to make a judgement as to whether the Assessor has fully assessed candidates against all the performance and knowledge evidence requirements.
 - External Verifiers are required to have a current understanding of the occupational requirements of the standards. They should understand the requirements of the national occupational standards, and be able to determine whether the evidence collected for a candidate meets all the evidence requirements.
 - All Assessors and Verifiers, if not currently employed within a retail sector company, will need to prove they have a current working knowledge of the sector they are assessing or verifying. This can be demonstrated by maintaining records of evidence from occupational updating activities such as work experience, work shadowing or other relevant CPD activities.
- Guidance on external quality control. Awarding bodies must undertake a risk assessment of each prospective centre at the point of application for approval, and annually thereafter. The Strategy recommends a number of risk factors for each assessment.

Development process

The Assessment Strategy was reviewed alongside the review of the Retail NOS and NVQ/SVQs. An Assessment Strategy Working Group was established to oversee and discuss the Strategy. All four awarding bodies were represented on the group, although in not all cases were representatives able to make decisions without consulting with colleagues. One awarding

body we spoke to was concerned that all the meetings were held in London and this made it very time-consuming to attend. They felt this was true more widely as they were required to attend more meetings across all sectors and questioned whether more use could be made of video-conferencing.

Skillsmart believe that there is a good working relationship between, and with, the awarding bodies and that this helped the process run smoothly. An awarding body interviewed agreed that there was good co-operation between the SSC and the awarding bodies and between the awarding bodies. One awarding body reported that *‘the development of this Strategy was the most open and consultative I have been involved in, resulting in an agreement that was owned by all the parties involved’*.

Impact of Strategy

It is too early to identify the impact of the Strategy as it has been in operation for less than a year, but one awarding body reported that the Strategy has been generally well received and that some centres and External Verifiers were surprised by the simplicity of some of the processes.

The option to allow employers to undertake their own assessment has been included mainly to encourage larger retailers to make greater use of Retail NNQ/SVQs. It is currently being piloted with one large employer, and the SSC reports that this appears to be working well.

Sharing practice

Skillsmart believe that the good co-operation between and with awarding bodies is partly a result of the time they have invested over a number of years to develop and build relationships.

One awarding body felt that the principles set out at the beginning of the Assessment Strategy were useful because they showed the thinking behind the Strategy and could be used to support discussions with assessment centres where there was any ambiguity. They also felt that Skillsmart had a good version control process for their Assessment Strategy. This means the awarding body always knows that it is using the most up-to-date version of the Strategy.

Another awarding body felt that in comparison with other sector Assessment Strategies, the Retail one is clear, doesn't involve excessive bureaucracy, and allows the Assessor to judge the most appropriate assessment methods to use with the learner.